
THE MESSAGE FROM SYRIA SUMMIT: RUSSIA WANTS A SOLUTION IN ITS NAME

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25.01.2017

Guardian, 24 Jan 2017

Russia and Turkey had much on the line at the Astana peace talks, but at the end of the two-day summit on Syria, their returns were □ at face value □ modest. The gathering culminated in a predictable communique, endorsed by Iran, which aims to strengthen a nominal ceasefire in place since 30 December.

But other, more enduring, themes emerged from the gathering. First, Russia, one of the six-year wars main protagonists, is serious about negotiating an end to the conflict and is prepared to do more than ever to achieve that. Second, although the Assad regime is winning on the battlefield with the robust backing of Moscow and Iran, it has a relatively weak diplomatic hand.

The long predicted moment when Russia will need to declare its intentions towards Bashar al-Assad is closer than ever. So too is a reckoning for the Syrian leader with his other patron, Iran, against whom Russia and Turkey have increasingly sided since Iranian-backed forces led the recapture of Aleppo.

For the first time, Russia broke ranks with the Assad regime at Astana, chiding it for claiming that al-Qaida was leading an assault on the Wadi Barada area near Damascus, and suggesting that Iranian and Syrian forces, not the opposition, were breaching the ceasefire. It also overtly legitimised two groups that Syrian officials had long labelled as terrorists, the conservative Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, both significant components of the armed opposition.

Ahead of the talks, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, was unusually forthright about Russias intervention, claiming Damascus was three weeks from falling when Vladimir Putin sent his air force to save Assad in September 2015.

The collective messaging is clear: having secured the country and bombed the opposition to the negotiating table, Putin now wants a result that he can trumpet. Negotiating an end to the 21st centurys most intractable conflict would be hugely significant for a Russian leader intent on shaping a new global order. And to do that when the US had tried and failed would be doubly satisfying.

Russian officials believe Donald Trump will frame his Middle East policy solely through the lens of protecting Israel and defeating Isis, the latter of which he is likely to do in partnership with Putin and others. They also calculate that Trump has little interest in what drove the conflict originally and has sustained it since, leaving a resurgent Russia to impose its terms.

Russias repaired relationship with Turkey continued to strengthen in Astana, with both sides

increasingly allied on what steps should follow from here. The Turks were central to Moscows new tone towards the opposition, particularly Ahrar al-Sham, which it has backed throughout the war.

They also kept the Kurds away and gave ground on Assad, saying his immediate removal was not central to a solution. This is a view that Russia still holds, despite its wavering language of late, the thrust of which was to put him on notice that he is dispensable if he wholeheartedly sides with Iran, which has a very different view of what postwar Syria should look like.

Turkish officials have spoken repeatedly of their frustrations with a deeply ideological Iran in recent weeks and fear that a new faultline could soon open unless a political solution is soon thrashed out. Iran, in return, continues to accuse Turkey of fuelling the fighting and of supporting jihadis who have taken a central role in much of northern Syria.

The optics of these talks were important to everyone involved. This was the first get-together for the warring parties in more than two years and, more importantly, the first time Syrian officials and opposition leaders have sat across the table from each other. The choice of venue was also instructive, away from the ordered calm of Nato-aligned western Europe and deep in the heart of the former Soviet bloc.

The communique is largely aimed at the ongoing Wadi Barada fighting, which is taking place in an area that supplies water to Damascus. A trilateral mechanism, led by Turkey, Iran and Russia, is supposed to secure the ceasefire. The opposition and the regime refused to sign, but that matters less than its backers having done so.

After an 18-month battering there is little fight left in the opposition and even less will among its backers to continue to support a conflict that is losing intensity. Russias transition from belligerent to diplomatic force is central to that. The opposition knows its bid to control Syria has failed. And Assad is on notice that having led efforts to save him, Russia now wants a solution in its name.

Kaynak/Source: