
THE STABLE STATE OF NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV'S KAZAKHSTAN

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Kazakhstan has found its way into the Western news with Syrian peace talks in the capital, Astana. Since little news comes out of the landlocked Central Asian nation, it is worth looking at the reasons why Kazakhstans capital and leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, are symbols of the stability that Russia, Turkey and Iran would like to forge in Syria.

Kazakhstan bills itself as a Eurasian nation, one in which the U.S., Russia, Turkey, China and Iran have great interest. Nazarbayev, the former Soviet nations first and only leader, has ruled since 1989. Perhaps the most influential, little-known world leader, he has used a Machiavellian combination of cunning, ruthlessness, diplomatic acumen and public works to consolidate his domestic political power.

Ruling the ninth-biggest country in the world, Nazarbayev has also adroitly used Kazakhstan's geostrategic location between Russia, China and the stans of former Soviet Central Asia and its vast oil and gas deposits in the Caspian Sea to play larger economic and military powers off each other. For example, in support of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Nazarbayev allowed the U.S. Air Force flyover rights; Kazakhstan is a charter member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a group that includes Russia and China and focuses much of its attention on counterterrorism and intelligence sharing; and the center of the country still houses the Russian Cosmodrome at Baikonur.

No stranger to national collapse or nation building, Nazarbayev stood by Gorbachev and Yeltsin during the August 1991 Communist hardline coup that threatened Gorbachev's reforms. Since then, Nazarbayev has been the longest-serving and, arguably, most effective leader in the former Soviet Union. His administration has been able to contain the ethnic, religious and economic strife that has led to the rise of Islamic extremism in other Central Asian republics. In addition, Nazarbayev successfully moved the capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997, in part to stifle a nascent Russian separatist movement. In a move roundly applauded in the West, Nazarbayev voluntarily dismantled all nuclear missiles inherited from the Soviet Union, making Kazakhstan a nuclear-free state. Astana, a former dusty provincial town, which came to some prominence during Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign of the 1950s, lagged behind the cultural and economic capital, Almaty, until the late 1990s. Previously known by its Russian name, Tselinograd, and Kazakh, Aq-Mola, the city was christened with the unoriginal name Astana (capital in Kazakh) in 1998. Currently, Nazarbayev's birthday and the day of the city are the same, July 6. Despite a grotesque monument in Astana called the Baiterek Tower (locals call it the lollypop) where one can ascend to the top level and place a hand in the mold of the guiding hand of the president, Nazarbayev has been careful to restrain his cult of personality.

But Astana and the president are inextricably linked, and it is likely that one day the city will bear his name. After all, it is the Kazakh St. Petersburg, raised out of the steppe rather than the swamp. From the Central Concert Hall shaped like the national instrument, the dombra, to Khan Shatyr mall built to resemble a nomadic yurt, the city captures the desires of a leader and people trying to construct a national heritage from the ruins of a nomadic and Soviet past.

However, maybe the greatest significance of holding Syrian peace talks in Nazarbayev's Astana is the power and resilience the city and the man symbolize. Nazarbayev has dealt with foreign and domestic threats swiftly and mercilessly, using political intrigue and murder when necessary. In 1999, the Kazakh Parliament called for early elections that gave Nazarbayev 80% of the vote. In the 2005 election, the main opposition leader, Zamanbek Nurkadilov, was killed one month before Kazakhs went to the polls. Shortly after the election, Altynbek Sarsenbayev, a former Nazarbayev ally who questioned the elections' legitimacy, was found shot to death along with his body guards in what appeared to be a political assassination. In 2009, noted Kazakh human rights advocate Yevgeniy Zhovtis was sentenced to a four-year prison term for what the government determined was vehicular manslaughter. Human rights groups suspected the verdict was a convenient way to silence Zhovtis, who was eventually granted amnesty in 2012. Nazarbayev has also maintained firm control of Kazakhstan's western oil and gas deposits. When oil workers went on strike in 2011, 16 people were shot dead by Kazakh security forces in an event known as the Zhanaozen Massacre. In the wake of the massacre, Nazarbayev used the incident to arrest prominent opposition leaders who were connected to the strikers and charged with inciting social hatred. But the most interesting example of Nazarbayev's ruthlessness in consolidating power involves his

former son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev. Aliyev served as deputy head of the Secret Services and ambassador to Austria before falling from grace in 2008 and being charged with kidnapping, treason and coup plotting. He sought and received asylum in Vienna. In 2009, Aliyev published a book titled Godfather-in-Law, criticizing Nazarbayev for corruption and murder. The book covers features Nazarbayev in military fatigues and pointing a pistol. In June 2014, Aliyev was jailed by Austrian authorities on suspicion of murder and then found dead in his cell in February 2015 in what authorities determined was a suicide by hanging. Aliyev's lawyers claim he was killed.

Thus, there is a brief but rich history in this young nation holding the peace talks. Its leader has mastered managed democracy and made Kazakhstan an indispensable partner of America, Russia and China. Astana sits at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, and legitimate and authoritarian rule. It appears to be the ideal spot to convene a meeting to determine the fate of Syria, a nation that has succumbed to many of the same challenges that Nazarbayev has thus far been able to tame.

Kaynak/Source: