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[Can there be peace in a post-ISIS Syria?](#)



In late October, commanders of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition [announced](#) the full recapture of Raqqa, which had been the main stronghold for ISIS in Syria. This significant military breakthrough follows a similar defeat for ISIS in Iraq, where the terrorist group finally surrendered control of Mosul.

The weeks following the fall of Raqqa brought further setbacks for ISIS on the battlefield. The Syrian Army declared it had pushed ISIS out of the eastern Syrian town of Mayadin, where ISIS had attempted to establish a new capital after losing Raqqa. Kurdish militia have also made headway, recently celebrating their capture of the Al-Omar oilfields, a sore financial and strategic loss for ISIS.

This string of defeats for ISIS (or Daesh, as they are also known) has led some to believe that their demise as a political entity in Syria is nigh. Yet by no means has the global community successfully adopted a coping strategy for the ideological phenomenon of ISIS, nor an effective response to the causes that gave birth to it. Still, at first glance, in late 2017, the recent military operations in eastern Syria potentially exhaust the possibility of further conflict within the territory of Syria for the time being. This means there is now, as before, a pressing need for a nationwide dialogue involving all of the warring parties. In short, more peace talks.

Yet these have never been simple. Crafting a format that all sides see as both fair and beneficial has been a constant difficulty for the international community. In response, settlement negotiations have morphed into a confusing multi-level structure. These are characterized by an interplay of various local, regional and international interests. Officially, great hope still rests with the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and the Geneva peace talks the group initiated. According to UN Security Council resolution 2254, major political decisions on the Syrian conflict are to be arrived at within the framework of these talks. Technically, an additional round of meetings supplemented this: These were the meetings held in the Kazakh city of Astana, during which the military agenda was off the table. The stated aim of Astana was to serve as an intermediate negotiation platform, designed to optimizing the Geneva peace process. These talks serve to legitimize decisions adopted at a more local level (in Amman or Cairo) which are in turn destined to complement the Astana negotiations and bring the maximum number of parties to the table.

On one hand, local successes are envisioned especially through a potential establishment of a “regime of silence,” championed by those taking part in the [Astana process throughout 2017](#), and who see more possibilities for an advantageous peace settlement there than in Geneva. This, in turn, has repeatedly elicited claims from supporters of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, who point to a perceived inexpediency when it comes to resuming the Geneva talks.

However, the local nature of the Astana talks, their main disadvantage, are clearly visible despite their so-called success. The Astana talks are *a priori* unlikely to bring about long-lasting reconciliation between the Syrian parties; they can only facilitate the consolidation of the contemporary *status quo* over the short-term, which unquestionably plays into the hands of a victorious Bashar al-Assad and his supporters. This would eradicate any wider international credibility the negotiation process may have had.

The restructuring and formalization of a peace-driven political dialogue is one of the most pressing issues on

the Syrian agenda right now. At present, it is extremely difficult to conduct a nationwide dialogue, given that one of the parties at the negotiating table practically rules the roost over all others, and might not be content to stop there. Hence, the Syrian regime pays minimal heed to the multilateral Geneva peace talks. After all, the Assad regime in this format risks relinquishing its monopoly on power, which could end up being shared out between adversaries that Assad had partially defeated on the battlefield.

But a resolution must come at some point despite this. If not, there are two near term possibilities.

The first would be instigated by the Syrian regime making further attempts to crank up pressure on its foreign allies, such as Russia and Iran, to intensify military operations in southern Syria and the province of Idlib, the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition. The 2016 assault on Aleppo illustrated that major military and political triumphs can be achieved under the pretext of combatting internationally recognized terrorist groups such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra, while ridding territories of both Jihadists and more moderate political opponents at the same time. In this regard, the presence of an Islamist enclave in southern Syria as well as the intensification of the activities of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as al-Nusra) in Idlib over the summer yields additional leverage; the regime may well use this to coax Moscow into bolstering its military presence there. This possibility is eminently tempting for Russia in light of dwindling support for the Syrian opposition from the US, Turkey and Gulf states like Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

Washington's approach to the Syrian issue altered with arrival of the Trump Administration. The new leadership has focused exclusively on an anti-terrorist component, while the Obama administration was inclined to seek an overarching resolution to the Syrian crisis. This has markedly strengthened the position of the Kurds as the main force fighting ISIS while displacing other opposition groups. The declining role of the Gulf states and Turkey in settling the Syrian crisis can largely be explained by their shift towards domestic issues. Following the failed military coup in Turkey in the summer of 2016 and a leadership referendum which played a decisive role for Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has since been preoccupied with the resolution of domestic political and economic problems.

Similar trends can be seen in the Gulf over the last two years. The war in Yemen, the crisis engulfing Qatar and the plethora of reforms introduced by Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia are just a few matters that have turned these countries away from Syria.

Few Options Left for Syria's Opposition

The second scenario concerns Russia's plans to control the political dialogue in Syria along with its allies, having replaced the Geneva talks completely with an alternative negotiation platform. A vivid manifestation of this scenario was the [announcement](#) by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that a Congress of Syrian National Dialogue will be held in Sochi on November 18, 2017. Judging by the [statements](#) of Russia's Special Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev, political issues concerning the constitutional system and general elections will be tabled, among others.

The danger of the latter scenario lies in the fact that the national dialogue will be conducted by the Syrian regime from a position of strength. Such concerns were expressed by the Syrian opposition official spokesman Yahia al-Aridi in Astana, who warned that the congress could undo all agreements previously reached in Geneva.

Few options remain for the Syrian opposition in response. To be more precise, merely two: The opposition will either be incorporated into the Syrian political system currently being erected on Moscow's (or, in fact, Damascus') terms, or be gradually destroyed, as hinted at by Alexander Lavrentiev, who has been quoted as saying that snubbing the Sochi congress would be seen as unwillingness to "grasp at a helping hand". At the same time, should the first scenario play out, the Syrian opposition may well face the same fate as the Tajik opposition; the regime is unlikely to balk at the opportunity to destroy an unarmed, demoralised opponent.

So any impending defeat of ISIS in Syria will do little to resolve the problems that gave birth to it, nor to eradicate the causes of the 2011 Syrian Civil War. The country needs an authentic, nationwide dialogue under UN auspices. Ineffective resolutions borne out of pressure applied by a single party will favour the government of Syria, and marginalise any opponents, whatever that basis for opposition might be. The imposition of the

will of one of the parties to the conflict is destined to result in the postponement of a conflict resolution *ad infinitum*. Recent history is littered with countless examples of the latter involving Arab states in particular and catastrophic fates have befallen the very regimes which adopted such a policy.

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