

Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (30)

Iran's Preferred Outcome in Syria: An Open-End or a Formal Agreement?

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Introduction

Iran's security concerns drove its involvement in the Syrian crisis back in 2011. With an evolving strategy over the past nine years, Tehran has upgraded its Syria policy in accordance with the ongoing developments on the ground, moving from military training based on the Iranian Basij model, to regionalising this model (as was the case in Iraq with the Popular Mobilization Forces) and encouraging Russian military involvement. In what may be seen as the final stage, Iran is backing its Syrian ally as well as allied militias to balance against other main stakeholders. Iran is attempting to solidify military gains by continuing to back a political process that is properly representative of warring parties and ensures a smooth transition of power, and one whose outcomes will not undermine Iranian geopolitical interests in the country.

Iran's political engagement

As early as 2011, Iran was inclined to engage the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition in a political track and accordingly drafted an initial reform package, but this was unachievable as a result of a burgeoning crisis in 2011. As the crisis widened, Iran moved to offer a four-point plan for the crisis. The plan was introduced to the then UN envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi in 2014. The package came in line with the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, and included an immediate cease-fire, formation of a national unity government, constitutional protection for minorities, and supervised elections. Those four points were indeed part of UNSC resolution 2254, which endorsed the Geneva Communiqué.

In addition, immediately after signing the nuclear deal (widely known by its acronym JCPOA) with the P5 + Germany in 2015, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, took part in the "Vienna Peace Talks for Syria". A year later, on 23–24 January 2017, Iran together with Russia and Turkey established the Astana process, which, compared to the Geneva process, proved to be much more effective both politically—obvious in the many rounds of talks between warring parties and the ceasefire agreements that were reached—and in shaping developments on the ground. Besides its four-point plan, the Astana process has remained Iran's main focus for political solutions for the past four years.

Merging the Geneva and Astana processes

The Geneva process was an encouraging move away from relentless armed conflict to the negotiating table. It had the backing of the international community, with many world powers and the UN supporting the process. However, in Iran, Geneva was viewed through the prism of the Astana process and if and how it can add to the Astana's rounds of talks. Debates in Tehran indicate that the Geneva process was too broad and vague, and produced general statements, rendering it

unpractical to produce effective mechanisms for resolving the Syrian conflict. The main issues discussed in the initial rounds in Geneva included the principles of the transitional period and terrorism, but even the agenda remained vague and contested. In addition, at the height of the Syrian conflict before the start of the Astana process, each round of the Geneva process took almost two years to convene. Nevertheless, after the adoption of UNSC resolution 2254 and especially after the start of the Astana process resulted in major developments on the ground, the Geneva process gained traction with many rounds of discussion held. Iranian delegates also suggest that Syrian opposition delegates that were present in Geneva did not really represent the opposition on the ground, who were later included in the Astana process.

Iranians do not see Geneva as a successful process at all. Beyond Geneva's shortcomings, the general view in Tehran suggests it should be combined with the Astana process. In other words, the main regional and international supporters of Syrian parties should play a more assertive role based on agreed-upon principles outlined in the 2254 resolution and the Astana process, and in line with the four baskets outlined in Geneva 4 (2017). In addition, Geneva and Astana do not need to remain separate processes. As far as containing the crisis and advancing the political process is concerned, any step in accordance with 2254 should be welcomed and it does not matter whether it is achieved within Geneva or Astana or even beyond either framework. Therefore, the broad view in Tehran does not focus on Geneva per se where the expediency of finding a political solution is the driving variable that can be furthered beyond Geneva – though not against it.

The Astana process, on the other hand, in Tehran's view, was more successful and, as such, has been leading the Syrian reconciliation/political settlement and indirectly setting the tone and agenda for parallel negotiations, including that of Geneva. Tehran focused the bulk of its political efforts on advancing the political settlement within the Astana framework. This was due to four main reasons.

- First, the framework was established by foreign parties that have been directly involved in the crisis and had a lot at stake. Even though their level of interest in a settlement and priorities differed, they still had a much closer outlook and much more interest in a political settlement compared to parties backing the Geneva process.
- Second, because the process included the most effective non-Syrian parties on the ground, they could put pressure on Syrian parties not to stick to their zero-sum calculus and make concessions when necessary to evade the collapse of the talks.
- Third, Astana focused on the main international principles outlined in resolution 2254 as they are also parts of the Iranian four-point plan.

- Fourth, Astana brought in the main opposition parties on the ground, though the most powerful Kurdish forces remain excluded.

Besides the aforementioned pros, there are cons involved as well. The widening gap between Russia and Turkey over different regional situations, including Libya, the Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict, as well as Idlib in northwest Syria, can reduce the chances of Astana moving further. Both parties have shown pragmatism in settling their differences; however, the more the gap widens, the more likely confrontation becomes. Idlib, which is witnessing a stand-off between Russia, Iran, and Damascus, on the one hand, and Ankara, on the other, continues to have the potential to serve as a testing ground used by either camp and, furthermore, to be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. There have been ongoing talks to evade such a scenario, but it remains a serious threat, among others. Another challenge is the lack of comprehensive Kurdish representation in the process. An all-inclusive solution for the crisis cannot easily move ahead without including a main party that enjoys foreign support. The Geneva process can be used to expand the spectrum of Syrians involved in the Astana, and the UN can play a supervising/mediating role in this context.

Finally, debates in Tehran suggest that a no-agreement scenario is problematic as it keeps the war-torn country in an unstable and chaotic situation in which reconstruction is practically impossible. In addition, no agreement would mean continued costs with little prospect of solution. In such a scenario, Syria could serve as a wild card in the Iran–US tension and/or in the Iran–Israel stand-off, throwing up surprises that could spiral into full-scale conflict. Although this has been avoided in the past decade, there are no guarantees of continued restraint in the future. Also important is the fact that, absent an agreement, Syria will find it hard to establish normal ties with the international community – which is essential in order to normalise its place in the international arena and reconstruct its economy.

Conclusion

Tehran prefers an agreement scenario over a no-agreement one. Nevertheless, a strong view in Tehran suggests that, after failing to overthrow the Syrian government, Western parties and regional supporters of the opposition may try to use the political arena to accomplish that same job. That is why Iran has reiterated time and again its opposition to any sort of pre-conditions, suggesting that the future of Syria should be decided through the political process by Syrian parties and people alone. Within this vein, a Kurdish representation is also important because it can lead the Kurds distancing themselves from foreign powers (the US) to reap the fruits of the Astana and be part of the political outcome and eventually lead to the reintegration of the Syrian territory.

Iran's support for a political settlement is to continue unless it perceives the settlement as another means to the same goal of the past nine years, toppling its ally and bringing up an anti-Iran and anti-resistance regime instead.