



After Aleppo: The Political and Regional Implications of the New Middle East "Troika"

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December 28, 2016

Since August 2016, new regional power dynamics have been emerging in the wars in Syria. The trend has manifested itself in the fall of Aleppo and the December 20 meeting between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which formally launched a “troika” format to propel a settlement of the Syrian conflict. Yet, this untested trilateral alliance might only go so far.

The pictures of the Iranian regime’s al-Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani roaming around Aleppo were a reminder of how the fall of the city became possible: a military division of labor between Russians in the air and Iranians on the ground to support the overstretched and increasingly weaker Syrian Army. However, the most significant game changer in recent months has been the tacit understanding between Moscow and Ankara.

The August 24 Turkish intervention in northern Syria occurred without reservations from Moscow, in return for muted Turkish criticism of the Russian bombing of Aleppo. Furthermore, Ankara dropped the demand for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to step down and worked on a difficult deal with Russia in early December to evacuate civilians and rebels from Aleppo. The willingness to divide the Syrian pie signals Turkey’s recognition that Moscow is now calling the shots; it is also a tactic to evade Washington’s support for Kurdish armed groups. This policy shift in Ankara is perhaps one of the most decisive factors behind the fall of Aleppo.

The December 19 assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara, Andrey Karlov, can be considered not only as retaliation against Moscow’s air campaign in Aleppo but also against the Turkish-Russian rapprochement. Turkish officials rushed to appease their counterparts and avoid any backlash equivalent to the November 2015 Turkish Air Force downing of a Russian Sukhoi military aircraft over Syria. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin considered the attack an attempt to undermine the political resolution of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, one day later on December 20, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran met in Moscow. The new “troika,” as they called themselves, agreed in the “Moscow Declaration” on expanding the ceasefire in Syria, allowing free movement of humanitarian aid and civilians, and brokering talks between the regime and the rebels in Kazakhstan in January 2017.

While no new substantive proposal came out of the meeting, the common denominator among the participants was their resentment, or rather exasperation, toward the United States as well as their concerns about territorial gains by Kurdish groups. Some politicians in Turkey were pointing fingers at Washington for plotting the assassination of the Russian ambassador, while Moscow stated that previous attempts to enforce a ceasefire failed because Washington did not exert enough influence on the rebels.

The three major players aim to become “the guarantors” of a potential agreement by pressuring the principal Syrian factions to abide by it. This new format will temporarily replace the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), a working group seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Syria and previously co-chaired by Moscow and Washington.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Policy Challenges

Four policy challenges stand in the way of a lasting effectiveness of this “troika”:

1. Risks of confrontation between Turkey and Iran. The gesture and look of the Iranian body guard, standing behind Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif, toward his Turkish counterpart during the Moscow meeting on December 20 illustrated the distrust between the two countries. On November 24, a Syrian government aircraft targeted and killed three Turkish soldiers, an act which represented one of a few direct confrontations that occurred since the Turkish operation began in northern Syria. After three weeks of suspended operations, the Turkish Air Force resumed sorties over Syrian airspace, hence Turkish planes became once again subject to Syrian missile threats. Until now, both sides have been restrained by Russian and Iranian pressure; however, further Turkish involvement in Syria could potentially lead to confrontation with the Iranian regime and its active proxies in Syria. Another major point of disagreement is Hezbollah. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu explicitly stated that Hezbollah should be excluded from the ceasefire agreement along with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, Moscow and Tehran responded that the Shiite group is present in Syria on the invitation of the Syrian regime.

2. Sidelining Saudi Arabia. After launching a diplomatic and military offensive against Iran in the past two years, decision makers in Riyadh seem to have realized that projecting power is a costly and risky business, especially if done without a willing US partner. The pragmatic Saudi approach has been visible in Yemen, Lebanon, and most importantly Syria, where Riyadh has recently taken a clear step back. Yet, Saudi silence should not be mistaken for consent. If the Russian government and the Syrian regime were to decide to seize control of the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib, Riyadh would have more leeway because of its support for Jaysh al-Fateh, the joint command center of Islamist factions in control of most of the province. Separating al-Nusra from Syrian opposition armed groups in Idlib is more challenging than in Aleppo. Like previous formats that excluded Iran, any settlement of the Syrian conflict will be fragile without the participation of Riyadh. For this format to succeed Saudi Arabia needs to join along with Turkey to tilt the balance with Russia and Iran. While skeptical of the Russian initiative, the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition (HNC) said it will attend the talks in Kazakhstan; however, Riyadh will likely weigh its options and not rush into a deal anytime soon.

3. The Trump factor. Most of the decisions recently taken by external players in Syria are either a reaction to the policies of President Barack Obama’s Administration or an attempt to explore the

transitional period in American politics. With President-elect Donald Trump's Administration taking over January 20, Washington will likely become overtly open to the idea of keeping Assad in power to prioritize the fight against ISIL. However, an increasingly anti-Iranian regime circle of advisers around Trump might compel Washington and Moscow to differ on the role of Iran. On the other hand, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offered in a December 24 speech to join efforts with the Trump Administration against ISIL in Raqqa on the condition of blocking Kurdish groups from taking part in the operation. "We will not allow the formation of a new state in northern Syria. We will declare a safe zone cleared from terrorism in northern Syria," Erdoğan [noted](#). While his team has no clear approach to Syria yet, Trump has talked during the presidential campaign about establishing a safe zone along the Syrian border with funding from Gulf states as well as cutting US aid to Syrian rebels. However, until the Trump Administration is in place, the current "troika" format could be subject to change after January 20.

4. The Kurdish dilemma. Since their operation against ISIL in the city of Raqqa on November 6, 2016, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been slowly advancing toward Raqqa after seizing villages in the western and rural parts of the Raqqa province. Their next goal is to control the strategic Tabqa Dam that supplies electricity and irrigation water to northern Syria. However, the operation to liberate Raqqa is not imminent and requires significant US air power and resources beyond the 200 special forces recently deployed. Turkey, on the other hand, is deploying weaponry on the Syrian border to capture al-Bab on the way to capturing Manbij and, ultimately, Raqqa. US Ambassador to Turkey John Bass sought to assure Ankara on December 23, affirming that Washington does not support linking together the three Kurdish cantons of Afrin, Kobane, and Cizre along the Turkish-Syrian border. The Trump Administration is keen on improving relations with Turkey, yet there are no indications that it will slow or end support for Kurdish groups. A clear US policy to balance the relations with both Turkey and the SDF is crucial for the success of any settlement in Syria.

Moving Forward: Confrontations, Fragile Ceasefire Agreements, Peace Talks

Turkey, Russia, and Iran are set to meet in Astana next month to advance a ceasefire plan and broker unofficial talks between the Syrian regime and opposition groups, paving the way for the United Nations-sponsored peace talks in Geneva on February 8, 2017. Russian and Turkish intelligence services are currently working on a draft ceasefire agreement that enlists the approval of Syrian Army commanders as well as representatives of Syrian rebel groups.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime may seek to continue the military confrontation with options to either move to Idlib (clashing with Saudi-supported Islamist factions), al-Bab (where Turkish forces are battling ISIL on the way to Manbij/Raqqa), or Palmyra (to open a corridor to the Syrian border with Iraq). Any attack on Idlib will further test Turkey's commitment to the "troika" and

might raise questions about its ability to exert influence on Syrian rebels—hence will likely end up dissolving the “troika” format. Opening the al-Bab front simply means preparing the stage for the looming confrontation between Turkish troops and the SDF. Regaining control of Palmyra might be the most plausible option. However, Russia and Iran might differ on whether the priority should be to maintain the status quo and seek a political resolution or continue the fight across the country. No desire in Moscow to have an open ended armed intervention while Iran is likely to be interested in opening a secured route across the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Most importantly, like in any civil war, the Syrian parties of the conflict have become out of touch with reality. In a desperate attempt to project lost power, Asad recently came out to claim publicly that the fall of Aleppo is a transformative development in the manner of dating events “before and after the birth of Jesus.” To be sure, the human cost of taking over Aleppo was too high to justify another round of battles elsewhere in Syria. Syrian rebels, who were boasting in recent months how Aleppo will become a replica of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, are now debating how they can open multiple fronts against the regime. Syrian rebels are yet to address the shortcomings of their command structure and the expectations of their military narrative as well as the civil-military disconnect in the relation between the armed groups on the ground and the political opposition in exile.

The fall of Aleppo and the emergence of the “troika” are a turning point, but they are not a culmination of the Syrian conflict. More battles and failed peace talks are yet to come before the war ultimately concludes. This critical juncture allows all the internal and external players to take stock of their positions nearly six years after the Syrian crisis began.