

# How Did Syria Become a Victim of Regional and International Conflicts?

Radwan Ziadeh

June 19, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

On June 17, the United Nations' special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced that he would host a new round of peace talks in Geneva in July. The upcoming round will be the seventh one. Neither de Mistura himself nor any of the parties involved are optimistic about the talks since there is no change in the political scene and the battle against ISIL in Syria continues to intensify. In the meantime, regional and international actors have conflicting agendas in Syria, with the Syrian opposition and Syrian civilians ultimately paying the price.

### **Where is the United States?**

According to Mr. de Mistura, as he mentioned in one of his press conferences, the absence of American diplomatic engagement in the talks had influenced the weak outcome of the Geneva peace process. US strikes against the Asad regime following its use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun raised the hope that Washington would move from a passive to a more active role in the Syria crisis—since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017—to reach a resolution to end the political and humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding in the country since 2011.

However, the hopes have not been met with a serious plan beyond the air strikes. Many former officials and members of the US Congress criticized the Trump Administration for not developing a strategy; a one-time strike, they said, had very little impact on the war in

Syria. The administration continued to disengage from the Astana and Geneva talks, and this left a vacuum that was filled by Russia. Indeed, the Russians have felt emboldened especially after their military intervention in the country since September 2015.

Additionally, during his campaign, Trump used the term “safe zones” in Syria and promised that these zones would stop the flow of Syrian refugees and end the civil war. He then reiterated this promise many times in public rallies: that these safe areas in Syria—whose construction would be underwritten by the Gulf states—would serve as a refuge for refugees so that the United States would not have to host them. But President Trump did not offer any tangible political, legal, or military clarity on what he meant by these safe zones in Syria.

With the all that is going on inside the Trump Administration, from the Russia probe to the everyday threat of North Korea and the historic budget cuts of the State Department, President Trump's position is not strong. It is, therefore, unlikely that he will be interested or able to develop a Syria strategy anytime soon. Arguably, this may be the reason why he barely mentioned Syria in his last trip to the Middle East, which would have been an opportunity for him to bring all active Middle East players to focus on a strategy for Syria in which Washington would play a leading role. As none of these steps were taken by the United States, the Syrian crisis was left in Moscow's hands.

## Russia's Proactive Policy in Syria

In May 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran signed an agreement to establish "de-escalation zones" in Syria. Considered the broker of this deal, Russia emphasized that the four declared zones in Syria are not actually "safe zones" but "de-escalation zones"—in a further step to distinguish itself from the concept of safe zones, which had been flooding the conversations about Syria for some time.

This move by Russia is not incidental. There is no legal definition of such "de-escalation zones" in international law. Such terms are used more readily from a military perspective rather than a legal one, making these terms vague and prone to differing definitions and interpretations. This legal ambiguity serves the interests of Russia, which has already been accused by international organizations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria.

The May agreement and its contents fall in line with Russia's agenda in pushing the Astana talks. Moscow tried hard to push Astana as the venue to discuss the peace process in Syria, thus attempting to delegitimize any UN efforts in Geneva and, more importantly, for allowing Russia to select the type of Syrian opposition groups it would like to deal with. Russia, especially after the battle of Aleppo, claimed to focus on imposing the ceasefire all over Syria. Thus, along with Turkey and Iran, it created the Astana negotiations track as a means to enforce the ceasefire since the agreement between Turkey and Russia in 2016.

What is interesting about this ceasefire is that it was not only violated daily by the Asad regime's air force in eastern Ghota and other areas controlled by the opposition, but the entire population of Syrians in the Waer neighborhood in Homs and four other towns—Madaya, Zabadani, Foua, and Kefraya—were forced to leave their homes due to attacks by the Asad government and its use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun and Idlib. The question here is: If chemical weapons are used in a "ceasefire time," what can be expected in a "non-ceasefire time"? This situation likely decreases the parties' respect for such a deal. Russia, however, denied the reality of the collapse of such a ceasefire and moved to discuss "de-escalation zones" in the last round of the talks in Astana in May 2017.

As for the United States, the US Department of State was critical of the new agreement because of the involvement of Iran as a so-called "guarantor." The statement of the State Department added: "Iran's activities in Syria have only contributed to the violence, not stopped it, and Iran's unquestioning support for the Assad regime has perpetuated the misery of ordinary Syrians." The statement, however, did not mention the concept of "de-escalation zones" in Syria. It was critical of Iran's role but welcomed anything that could help in de-escalating the violence in Syria today.

Despite the fact that the Astana talks were postponed several times in May, Moscow announced that they will be soon resumed,

albeit without providing a clear outlook regarding the participation of the Syrian opposition—they had boycotted the last round of talks due to the Syrian regime's violation of the agreement. With that and the passive engagement by the United States, Russia remains at the forefront of developments in Syrian.

### **The US-Russia Confrontation in Syria**

Recent events on the ground have clearly demonstrated the conflicting agendas of the United States and Russia in Syria. For example, there were a number of military incidents that occurred over the last month in the fight against ISIL. The United States shot down a Syrian fighter jet and, earlier, targeted the Syrian Army and pro-regime forces to protect the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from an attack led by the Syrian government. Russia reacted very quickly and considered such an attack as “an act of aggression” by the US government.

It is clear that the United States is very serious about protecting its forces on the ground; it wants to be able to end the Raqqa battle and put an end to ISIL in Syria, with the aim of reaching the headquarters of ISIL in Syria before the Russian troops do so. Moscow, on the other hand, has more advantages in Syria over Washington. It already had troops on the ground and currently operates at least three military bases. Therefore, any confrontation or escalation would play in Russia's favor and make the US position much weaker.

Russia has provided the Syrian regime with the S400 system, an advanced air defense missile framework that could threaten the US Air Force if it were deployed over Syria. Beyond that, Russia announced just after the declaration of the “de-escalation zones” at the Astana talks that the United States was banned from flying over such zones. This can be viewed as a sign of escalation by Russia, but there is no indication whether it is a serious measure or an empty threat.

President Trump still believes that he will be able to pursue Russia regarding Syria, succeeding in what his predecessors Obama and Kerry repeatedly failed to do. The gap between the two positions is still wide, as is the possibility of reconciliation between the two views. On the one hand, Russia's approach is more focused on the security dimension and level of violence, with no appetite for discussing the issue of transition and the future of Asad. The United States, on the other hand, is more interested in eliminating ISIL first then exploring what the future transition would look like.

These two different points of view in Syria hide the more complicated pictures of two international powers that have the ambition to restore order in Syria according to their own terms. It is evident that Syria's civilians do not have a horse in this race.

## **The Regional Players and the New Alliances**

In addition to the United States and Russia, several regional actors have a stake in Syria. The current Gulf crisis, which erupted from allegations against Qatar made by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, further complicates the Syrian picture. It looks as though Saudi Arabia added one more crisis to its list to manage, as it already had been grappling with Iran and Syria and the situation in Yemen, which is becoming harder to manage from military and humanitarian perspectives.

As Turkey took Qatar's side in the current impasse, the regional coordination between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar to support the Syrian armed opposition will be weakened. A similar series of events took place in 2014, when the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia recalled their ambassadors from Doha in opposition to Qatar's policy toward Egypt. As a result of this disagreement, the Syrian armed opposition lost territories it controlled, but more importantly, the regional conflict was reflected on the ground in the form of infighting between the different armed groups who were backed and supported by Qatar or Saudi Arabia. With that, the possibility of unifying the armed opposition under one controlled command leadership ended.

Now, the rift between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition is much deeper and harder to bridge. It even assumed an inhumane face with the imposition of a blockade against Qatar since June 5th. As such, any means of cooperation in

Syria – as well as humanitarian assistance to the country – will be severely affected and may well end altogether.

As for Turkey, it had already modified its priorities from regime change in Damascus to the prevention, at any cost, of any kind of self-autonomy for territories controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the Syrian version of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey considers a terrorist organization. To be sure, the change of priorities in the regional camp is reflected on the ground, where Syrian regime forces moved from being on the defensive side in 2014 and 2015 to the offensive one, resulting in the advancement of government troops in Aleppo and Homs, and most likely in Daraa, in the next months.

The Syrian opposition is paying the price of this conflicting agenda caused by the rift between the Gulf states. The longer this crisis continues, the more the opposition will suffer. In addition, the preliminary coordination that began in 2016 between these regional powers will probably disappear, which is what happened after the 2014 crisis.

## **The Need for US Leadership**

Since Trump took office in January 2017, his administration was almost absent from the Syrian crisis until the Assad regime triggered a US response after it used chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun and the United States struck the al-Shayrat military airfield with 59 Tomahawk missiles. The Trump

Administration received cheers and applause for its leadership, in comparison to the inaction of the previous Obama Administration in August 2013 when the Asad government used chemical weapons in eastern Ghota.

Several observers and analysts have emphasized the need for a US strategy in Syria and not one-time actions. Unfortunately, however, the US administration continues to ignore the importance of such an approach and focuses only on the aim of defeating ISIL in Syria. Further, the administration has decided to disregard all calls from the Syrian opposition and from Turkey, its ally in NATO, to depend on the Free Syrian Army to defeat ISIL, instead of relying on the SDF. Such a policy will ultimately empower the separatist Kurds in

Syria, which will embolden proposals and efforts to partition the country as the end goal. As has been discussed elsewhere, the federal system the PYD is supporting in Syria is not realistic and may prolong the civil war after the defeat of ISIL and trigger more infighting between the Kurds and the tribes in Syria.

By ignoring these calls, the United States will complicate the peace process over the transition in Syria. To balance Russia's influence in Syria today, the United States should engage with the peace process and invest more diplomatic efforts and resources to be able to link the fight against ISIL with the transition in Syria. This will pave the way for Syrians to see the light at the end of a dark and difficult tunnel.

---

**For more analysis visit [arabcenterdc.org](http://arabcenterdc.org)**