

# Will Astana Displace Geneva in the Syrian Peace Process?

by [Fabrice Balanche \(/experts/fabrice-balanche\)](/experts/fabrice-balanche)

Jan 20, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hl-thl-alastant-mhl-jnyf-fy-mlyt-alslam-alswryt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/hl-thl-alastant-mhl-jnyf-fy-mlyt-alslam-alswryt)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Fabrice Balanche \(/experts/fabrice-balanche\)](/experts/fabrice-balanche)

Fabrice Balanche, an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

---

**The circumstances of the Russian-sponsored peace conference raise several concerns, but failure to participate could signal acquiescence to Moscow's plans in Syria and further U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East.**

**O**n January 23, Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, will host a conference on Syria sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey. The meeting's timing, locale, invite list, and geopolitical context point to potentially crucial shifts in the international effort to end the war, likely forcing Washington to make pressing decisions about its place at the table.

## WHO WILL BE THERE?

**S**everal Arab countries have been invited to Astana: Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq. China has also announced its participation. An invitation of sorts was sent to the United States as well -- but directly to President-elect Donald Trump's team, not to Obama administration officials at the State Department.

As for the Syrian players, Damascus will be represented by Bashar Jaafari, the Assad regime's ambassador to the UN. Across the table will be representatives of armed rebel groups headed by Mohammed Alloush, leader of the pro-Saudi coalition Jaish al-Islam. The Syrian National Coalition (SNC), a Turkey-based political opposition faction that is more widely recognized abroad but ignored by the regime, will not participate. Other local players were not invited: Ankara made sure that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) was excluded, while al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS, aka Jabhat al-Nusra) and the Islamic State were never considered.

## DELIBERATE TIMING

**T**he choice of start date for the negotiations is significant. Three days after Trump's inauguration, President Vladimir Putin intends to start the post-Obama chapter in Syria on his terms, confronting the new American

administration with the fait accompli of regime victory in Aleppo. On the diplomatic front, the new Turkey-Russia-Iran alliance threatens to marginalize other outside actors. The Astana conference begins before the next international dialogue in Geneva, scheduled for February 8, in which the SNC will likely try to stave off its diminishing influence on the ground.

The January 23 meeting is the culmination of an initially unpromising Kazakh initiative launched in spring 2015. That May, several Syrian players who leaned toward Russia but had no popular support in their own country met in Astana at the invitation of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, a great friend of Putin. After this timid launch, Nazarbayev organized a "committee of wise men" to oversee his "Astana initiative," including former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei, former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, and former Israeli president Shimon Peres. Yet this group met only once, in September 2015.

Meanwhile, Putin created his own coalition of Syrian political opposition groups to compete with the SNC. In October 2015, this "Moscow opposition" held another meeting in Astana, not so much to formulate demands on Damascus as to prepare for undercutting the SNC at the third round of Geneva talks held in early 2016.

## **THE NEW GENEVA IN THE CENTER OF EURASIA**

In addition to its direct diplomatic implications, the choice of Astana serves as a highly symbolic contrast with Geneva. In September 1920 -- five months after negotiators in the old-world capital of Geneva granted the historic Near East Mandates to France and Britain -- Soviet Russia organized the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, Azerbaijan, with the aim of combating Western imperialism and spreading Moscow's influence. Much like Baku in 1920, modern Astana is a crossroads between Russia and the East that has prospered greatly from hydrocarbon resources. The question is whether Putin is returning to the old Soviet objectives of spreading Russian influence and excluding the West from the Middle East.

Beyond Astana's symbolic value, the former Soviet republic has mostly remained a close ally of Moscow while simultaneously cultivating good relations with Western countries and Iran. Its oil, natural gas, and uranium riches give it the means to host international conferences in immense congressional palaces. And this new international direction is quite literally charted by the pipelines that stretch out of its territory toward the East and West, and by the planned Chinese-financed Eurasian railway that will rehabilitate the old Silk Road. Turkey is one of several players eager to become a link in this intercontinental axis, anticipating major business opportunities.

## **MILITARY AGREEMENTS TAKE PRIORITY OVER POLITICS**

The Astana meeting's objective is of course to find a solution to the war. But unlike in Geneva, where Westerners insist that the solution must be political rather than military, Astana's three sponsors are bringing armed groups together in order to forge a military agreement that results in a political accord. This is why the political opposition was not invited -- Moscow wants to avoid embarrassing itself with empty resolutions akin to those made at past Western-sponsored conferences.

In another departure from last year's Geneva talks, the main non-jihadist rebel brigades will be represented in Astana. It took five days of preliminary negotiations in Ankara to convince them to attend, but between mounting Turkish and Russian pressure, they had little choice. Not surprisingly, the prominent Salafist coalition Ahrar al-Sham has refused to participate, just as it skipped the last Geneva round. The group continues to struggle with internal debates between radicals who want to merge with JFS and others who want to join the negotiations; for now, the former camp seems to be prevailing.

## **MISTRUST BETWEEN MOSCOW AND ANKARA**

**T**urkey helps finance Ahrar al-Sham and might have pushed harder for the group's participation. Yet Ankara may instead be trying to preserve the coalition as its ace in the hole in case the Astana process goes badly or the tentative Turkish-Russian alliance falls apart -- much like Moscow has protected the PYD as a lever against Ankara. Turkey's recent drift toward Russia is mainly a result of the PYD's U.S.-supported expansion in northern Syria, so Moscow sees the Kurdish group as more useful half-alive than dead. In other words, the Russo-Turkish alliance in Syria is not strategic but tactical.

Now that Aleppo has fallen, the focus of these tensions **has shifted northeast**

**(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-al-bab-is-bringing-u.s.-turkish-tensions-to-a-head>)** to the city of al-Bab. Turkey holds the United States responsible for delays in the campaign to seize al-Bab, citing Washington's refusal to provide air support. In contrast, Putin has been quick to strike Islamic State targets around the city in recent days, making good on the January 12 Russian-Turkish pact to cooperate against radical jihadist groups. For now, though, the Russian bombing has mainly allowed the Syrian army to advance south of al-Bab and secure the strategic Kuweires air base; it has done little to directly support the Turkish army's advance into the city.

## **A PAX RUSSIA COMPARABLE TO CHECHNYA**

**T**he current Syrian ceasefire also fits in the "tactical, not strategic" category, allowing the regime to consolidate its territorial gains and further divide the rebels. In that sense, it may be too early to attempt serious peace negotiations in Astana. More likely, Russia will try to use the meeting to present the rebels with a stark choice: assimilation or destruction. Those who choose the first option would be integrated into the Assad regime's political system and have the opportunity to profit from the money and power it has accumulated during the war. Those who continue to resist will be destroyed unceremoniously, in a replica of the method Russia used in Chechnya.

## **TRUMP'S HARD CHOICE**

**O**fficially, Astana is designed to complement rather than replace the Geneva process. In the end, however, the parties may have to favor one process over the other depending on who holds the most leverage on the battlefield. Under these circumstances, does the United States have an interest in attending the Astana conference? To be sure, the Trump administration is just taking office, the next Geneva conference will start soon, and the official status of Washington's invitation remains unclear, so U.S. officials have cause to skip the meeting in theory. Yet the empty-chair approach is rarely effective, and both the ceasefire and the Astana conference were the subjects of a unanimously approved UN Security Council resolution, so boycotting the meeting may do more harm than good.

The question, then, is what role should the United States play at Astana? The choices are not good. But failure to act could be perceived as acquiescence to Russia's plan, and a signal that the Trump administration will further reduce the U.S. role in the Middle East.

*Fabrice Balanche, an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖*

---

## **RECOMMENDED**

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)

