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Trump's First Foreign Policy Win Could Be in Syria

by [David Pollock](#)

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Brief Analysis

The incoming Trump team has a quick shot at averting worse disasters in Syria, with its new Russian gambit.

In the week after his inauguration, President Trump will have an unusual opportunity to put his new diplomatic designs to the test in, of all places, Astana, the remote capital of Kazakhstan. If this sounds like a Borat joke, it isn't. Astana is where Russia is convening a deadly serious new round of Syrian peace talks, to which it ostentatiously invited the incoming administration.

The Trump team has not yet publicly responded to this invitation, but it should seize the chance to work with Russia and others on the intractable Syria problem, in a way that long eluded the Obama team. If the Astana conference is too soon for serious input from Washington, a follow-up, UN-sponsored February 8 meeting in Geneva will provide a perfect second chance.

There is nothing new, or necessarily bad, about trying to work with Russia on Syria. President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry tried that for the past four years. They failed, with the limited exception of the 2013 deal to rid the Assad regime of most (though not all) of its chemical weapons. For President Trump to renew this effort would make eminent good sense -- provided that this time it offers a realistic prospect of achieving positive American objectives, rather than simply buying time for the negative Russian one of keeping Assad in power at any price (see "[Trump and the Middle East: Between Hope and Apprehension](#)," Fikra Forum).

That prospect exists if new realities on the ground, and new diplomatic approaches, are properly exploited. There is reason to believe that Trump intends to do exactly that, based on a careful reading of his [enigmatic January 16](#)

[interview](#) in the *Times* of London and Germany's *Bild* newspaper. There, he proposed a deal on Russia sanctions in which "a lot of people are gonna benefit." He mentioned that nuclear arms reductions would be "a part of it," but also referred to the "terrible humanitarian situation" in Syria.

Alleviating this humanitarian catastrophe should be the first objective of a new U.S. approach. And that means going to Astana with three clear, urgent priorities: shoring up the promising but still shaky Syrian ceasefire; ensuring better, more impartial delivery of emergency humanitarian relief; and insisting on protection for the remaining areas held by the relatively moderate opposition, primarily in the northern province of Idlib and the southern province of Deraa. This would prevent those areas from becoming, in the words of one senior Western humanitarian aid official, "the great new killing fields of the region" -- and precipitating a new, uncontrollable flood of desperate refugees into Jordan, Turkey, Europe, and perhaps beyond.

The second U.S. objective should be to coordinate a faster but more precise offensive against Islamic State and al-Qaeda terrorists inside Syria. This could mean much more than just an isolated Russian airstrike. Rather, it could include an agreement to deconflict all forces arrayed against these designated terrorist groups: not just Americans and Russians, but also regime and Free Syrian Army rebel units, Turkish and Kurdish forces, and more. That, in turn, could facilitate two major U.S. objectives: liberating the Islamic State's self-declared capital in Raqqa sooner rather than later, and preempting direct clashes between Washington's Kurdish and Turkish friends, at least on Syrian soil.

A third, longer-term objective in Astana should be to at least begin the process of distinguishing legitimate actors and interests in Syria from Iranian, Hezbollah, and other foreign sectarian militias there (see "[Preventing the Radicalization of Syria](#)," Fikra Forum). The United States should urge conference participants to demand the eventual withdrawal of the latter actors, perhaps keeping open an option for international peacekeepers by common consent. Even if such a declaration has no immediate practical effect, it would help reassure American friends inside Syria and beyond, and possibly set the stage for future steps to separate Russian and regime interests from those of Iran and its dangerous proxies.

Why would Russia accept any of this? For one thing, Trump is prepared to offer the sweetener of selective sanctions relief. Crucially, though, he wouldn't need to offer very much, because Russia has additional reasons to compromise. First, this deal would defer action against the Assad regime -- which is too weak to retake control of the whole country without outside military support anyway. Second, Russia really does want to rid Syria of terrorists, which it sees as a threat to its own security. And third, a realistic compromise on Syria would serve Moscow's ability to balance among rival regional players: Sunnis and Shiites, Turks and Kurds, even Arabs and Israelis.

Notably, some Arab players on opposite sides of the war are newly aware of this last important point. On January 9, the pro-regime Syrian daily *al-Watan* published an op-ed with the sensational headline "Are Iran and Russia Really Selling Syria to Turkey?" -- before concluding with the sensible observation that Moscow "knows it must have a relationship not only with its allies but also with its adversaries." Four days later, the independent Jordanian daily *al-Ghad* put the case more bluntly: Russia, it opined, now wants "to change its image as the superpower that stood against the Sunnis."

Coming full circle, the Astana venue and participants symbolize this new combination of Russian confidence and potential concessions. Kazakhstan is a pro-Russian but Turkic-majority country, and a predominantly Muslim one that nevertheless just hosted an official visit by none other than Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. And the conference will include Iranians, Arabs, Turks, and even a few Kurds, who all continue to voice disparate views on Syria, plus the Assad regime and much of the mainstream opposition, which just rescinded a boycott warning.

And this time, unlike the earlier, equally diverse Geneva conferences on Syria, the United States may come with a

realistic proposal that could bring Russia on board. If the Trump administration manages to eke out greater success in this key arena, it should be applauded by all Americans, regardless of political affiliation.

David Pollock, the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum, just returned from a trip to the Middle East, where he consulted with leading experts and officials on Syria. Prior to joining the Institute, he served on the State Department Policy Planning Staff from 1996 to 2001, among other posts. ❖



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