



Astana Talks between Rejection and Acceptance within the Lines of the Syrian Opposition

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ABSTRACT

After the fall of Aleppo into the hands of the Syrian regime, the Syrian armed factions entered the Astana path, which began as a military path to achieve the so-called de-escalation, but it was linked to the political solution path, especially after the United Nations approved the Constitutional Committee which is considered the most prominent results of the Astana process.

There seemed to be a difference between the forces of political and military opposition to the Astana process, as there appeared to be clear contradictions and differences about the path, with an apparent polarization between those who considered it a contributor to de-escalation in the Syrian regions, and those who considered it the most prominent factor in the retreat of the military opposition forces from Eastern Ghouta, Wadi Barada and the northern countryside of Homs.

The study aims at evaluating the process and the lessons learned from it, and exploring the positions of the various opposition forces from it and their justifications and analysis, and what are the local, regional and international factors and dynamics that prompted the international, regional and local actors to enter the Astana path, and who are the regional and international parties sponsoring, active and influencing the path, and what are the interests of each of them? Who is the most influential ... and what are the degrees of their influence over the local parties, and what are their motives, it will be explored who are the local parties participating in the process, whether from the regime or the opposition., and what are the participating Syrian factions, and are there factions that opposed the path? what are the motives of each party opposing the path or supporting if participating in it or not, what are the most prominent rounds of the track? what are the issues that were discussed, what was the results of each round on the ground, in addition to the opinions of the political, military and civil opposition forces on the path and its results, the positions and arguments of the opponents, and the positions and views of the supporters of the path?

The methodology used will be using the descriptive-analytical method by monitoring and analyzing information from its secondary sources (what was published about the track in terms of research, studies, and press articles), and its primary sources by interviewing politicians, and representatives of factions, and researchers

Keywords: political solution, Astana Talks, Syria, political path, military path, Syrian armed factions, Syrian regions,

After five years of the Syrian revolution and with the rise of the war tax paid by the Syrians, resulted in drought, killing, and destruction, and throughout those years, the regional and international countries worked hard to find a solution to preserve their interests, and eliminate terrorism while finding a solution to the Syrian crisis¹, which was primarily aimed at preserving its interests in the first place after Syria became an arena to settle international accounts. There were several proposals from several international envoys that began with the international envoy Kofi Annan, who came up with a glimmer of a solution embodied in six main items, and then came after him de Mestor² stressing four baskets³. The Geneva Conference, focused mostly on the existence of a transitional governing body

that ensures the transfer of power to a democratically elected authority⁴. After the armed opposition lost large areas under its control for a long time, the news of the fall of Aleppo came resoundingly in the hands of the Syrian regime.

After the fall of Aleppo and the Syrian regime's control over it, and the Russian army's intervention in supporting the Syrian regime militarily, the opposition lost many of the areas under its control.⁵ So The military solution seemed futile, after all these losses suffered by the opposition, and the regime seemed more brutal than before, especially after feeling the euphoria of victory that came under Russian cover, and desperate support from the mullahs' regime⁶, and the emergence of the American administration led by Obama as a lame duck after the decline of its role in changing the course of events in the Syrian arena,

After all this and the lack of seriousness in the application of the Geneva outputs, Ankara turned to Moscow at the end of 2016 to strengthen its relationship with it, find a solution to protect its national security, and save the remaining civilians in the north of Syria, and save the remaining armed

¹ Al-Rawashdeh, M. S. (2018). International and Regional Political Competitions in Syria" Geo-political dimensions". Journal of Political Studies, 25(1), 55-80. <https://bit.ly/2YYjmyg>.

² Kofi Annan's six points:

1-Commitment to work with Annan for a comprehensive -political process led by Syrians

2-Second, the commitment to stop all acts of armed violence, including stopping of the use of heavy weapons, withdrawal of troops and the stopping of movements of army forces towards populated areas.

3-Third: a two-hour daily truce to allow aid to be introduced from all areas affected by the fighting.

4-Fourth: Release all those arbitrarily arrested, including those detained, for peaceful political activities.

5-Fifth: Agree to ensure the freedom of movement of journalists across the country and adopt a non-discriminatory policy regarding granting them visas to enter the country.

6-Finally: agreement on the freedom to form institutions and the right to peaceful demonstration as legally guaranteed rights

³ The four baskets stressed by De Mistura

Basket 1: Issues related to the establishment of a non-sectarian government that includes everyone, with the hope that this will be agreed within six months.

Basket 2: Issues relating to setting a timetable for a new draft constitution, with the hope that it will be achieved in six months.

Basket 3: All about holding free and fair elections after a constitution is drafted, within 18 months, under the supervision of the United Nations, and includes Syrians outside their country.

Basket 4: Counter-terrorism strategy, security governance and building medium-term confidence measures.

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⁴ Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks. <https://bit.ly/3n8l3ks>

⁵ This elite branch of the Iranian military was created in 1979 to protect the changes effected by the Islamic Revolution and ensure the security of Ayatollah Khomeini. It gradually into evolved a parallel army with its own budget. <https://bit.ly/3pUW96>

⁶ Turkey's relations with Russia: warmth after tension. <https://bbc.in/3vzvE8c>.

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opposition, And to increase the Turkish influence on the Syrian issue. , Moscow received the Turkish offer positively, especially after it intended to look for a way out to reduce its military dependence and turn its military victories into political gains. It was agreed between Russia and Turkey on a ceasefire that Russia will be a guarantor of the regime side and Turkey is a guarantor of the opposition side⁷. Turkey and Russia subsequently included the Iranian side as a third party and the Astana talks were approved in January 2017.

This research is about the motives and factors that led international and regional players to enter the path of Astana, who are the regional parties and the sponsoring, active and influential states in the process, what are the interests of each of them, who is the most influential party, what is the extent of their influence over the local parties. The motives of the local parties will also be analyzed and identified, such as who are the local parties participating in the process, who are the Syrian factions participating, who opposed to the Astana path, and what are the motives of each party to oppose or support the Astana path, and the report will also focus on the most prominent rounds of the track, what issues have been established and the results of each round on the ground.

POLITICAL AND MILITARY FACTORS THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR ASTANA'S ENTRY

The fall of eastern Aleppo at the end of 2016 and the exit of opposition factions marked the biggest setbacks suffered by the factions, prompting the regional sponsorship of the Turkish mediator to play a greater role and sponsor the signing of the ceasefire agreement⁸ in Ankara on 29 December 2016 under the auspices of Turkey and Russia⁹. The agreement paved the way for Astana talks between the regime and the opposition called by Russia ahead of the signing of the ceasefire agreement during talks between Russians and the factions under Turkish auspices. Within several days from January 10, 2017, representatives of more than 31 military factions met in Ankara to discuss attending the Astana talks, which were scheduled at the end of the same month.

What was remarkable about this process is that its official and final meetings and statements are limited to the three guarantor countries: Russia, Turkey, and Iran, while the role of the opposition and Syrian government delegations is limited to coordinating with the guarantors and side meetings with them and with other delegations. The presence of the United Nations was limited to the role of observer. On 11 January 2017, most factions set their conditions for going to the talks, which focused on four points, the most important of which was to ensure a comprehensive ceasefire to include several areas, the most important of which is Wadi Barada, Muhaja in Daraa, Eastern Ghouta and others, in addition to allowing the regime 48 hours

of the ceasefire as a condition for handing over the names of the negotiating delegation, as well as requesting the deployment of observers, and the approval of the guarantor parties to the previous specific mechanism.

Although the factions went on not to attend the Astana talks at first because of the regime and its allies' failure to abide by the ceasefire agreement, Turkish pressure paid off, and by Friday morning, 20 January 2017, three days before the start of the Astana talks, almost all factions had bowed and agreed to attend those talks and expressed support for the negotiating delegation, which consisted of two sections technical and military.¹⁰ Osama Abu Zeid, the media spokesman for the opposition delegation to the negotiations, confirmed that all revolutionary Detachment agreed to go to the Conference "Astana" with a unified delegation, including "Ahrar al-Sham", which supported the delegation without participating with a representative.¹¹ In addition to the participation of "Southern Front" factions with some of the officers in the negotiating delegation¹², the delegation to Astana was led by the head of the Political Bureau of the Army of Islam, Mohammed Alloush, who resigned in May 2016 from his position as chief negotiator in the negotiating delegation to Geneva.

On January 23, 2017, talks between the regime and the Syrian opposition began in the capital of Kazakh "Astana", and lasted for two days¹³. The negotiations mainly dealt with military and technical issues, the most important of which were the consolidation of the ceasefire, the release of detainees, and the establishment of ceasefire monitors. Dozens of delegations from various Arab and foreign countries attended the talks, with the participation of the United Nations, under the auspices of Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The final statement was issued at the end of the talks on January 2nd, where he stressed the need to abide by the independence and unity of Syrian territory, as well as the conviction of all parties that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis, as well as a democratic state that embraces all, and stressed the sovereignty, independence, and unity of Syrian territory. The statement also stated that "participating delegations" insist on fighting ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra), if they are separated from the armed opposition groups¹⁴.

¹⁰ The delegation included military personnel: Major Yasser Abdul Rahim for The Aleppo Operations Room, Yaman Teljo and Mohammed Alloush for "Army of Islam", Munther Saras and Nazih al-Hakim for the "Damascus legion", Captain Saeed Naqrash brigade "Martyrs of Islam" (Darya) and Colonel Ahmed Osman for the Sultan Murad Division, Mustafa Pro Commander of the "fastakem", and the leader of the "Shami Front" Abu Yasser Along with representatives of the "Alizza Army", the Coastal 1st Division and other factions, in the next few hours.

While The political, legal and media list includes Abdul Hakim Bashar, Nazir al-Hakim, Nasr Al-Hariri, Osama Abu Zeid, Hisham Marwa, Mohammed Sabra, Khaled Shihab al-Din, Ammar Tabab and Yahya Aridi. . For More: "Last hour surprise in Ankara: All factions agree to participate in Astana. Orient News, 20 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Ho6Qea>.

¹¹ A statement issued by the Ahrar al-Sham Shura Council on 18/01/2017 regarding participation in the AstanaIn which the movement announced that it did not participate for several reasons while supporting the co-delegation, Document No. 9.

¹² Abu Zeid pointed out that the orientation of the two meetings in Ankara was initially not to go to Astana, because of the continuation of military operations on wadi Barada and linking going to the conference with stopping these operations, and after a long discussion they concluded that the implementation of the agreement is available to protect the threatened areas, especially the valley, east and south of the capital and the countryside of Homs and Al-Waer," pointing out that the Turkish side confirmed after a discussion with the Russians that the first round is only to stabilize the ceasefire.

The media spokesman of the opposition delegation for negotiations stressed that the presence of the factions for the consultations of Astana aims to achieve a ceasefire in all liberated areas and monitor it supported by political experts in full coordination with the high negotiating committee, and to cut off the way to the illegal regime and its supporters who wish to obstruct the ceasefire agreement and hold the revolutionary factions responsible internationally. Abu Zeid reiterated the opposition's assertion that any political solution begins with the departure of the regime with all its symbols and pillars and bringing them to justice according to the Geneva Statement 1, stressing that the future of the political process will not be discussed before the truce is achieved... (Previous reference).

¹³ Talukdar, I., & Anas, O. (2018). The Astana Process and the Future of Peaceful Settlement of the Syrian Crisis: A Status Note. Nova Deli: Indian Council of World Affairs.

¹⁴ To see the content of the statement, look: "Learn about the final statement of negotiations Astana "Al Jazeera Net, 24 January 2017, <https://bit.ly/2k2f5n> .

⁷ According to a senior Turkish official, when Turkey and Russia agreed to a ceasefire in Aleppo at the time, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reached out to his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, to ask him to adopt a public position in support of the agreement, but Zarif replied at the time that nothing could be supported which Iran was not part of it and has not been involved, but the issue was resolved after Lavrov confirmed that Iran would be part of the subsequent arrangements. (from a research paper issued by Al-Jazeera by a researcher who conducted an interview on January 8 .

<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2019/08/190801080648502.html>

⁸ To see the terms of the agreement, See: "Text of draft ceasefire in Syria sponsored by Turkey and Russia," Turk Press, 29 December 2016, <http://www.turkpress.co/node/29466> .

⁹ The factions that signed the agreement, according to the Russian Defense Ministry: sham legion, Ahrar al-Sham Islamic, Jaish al-Islam, Sham Revolutionaries Brigades, al-Mujahideen army, The Free Idlib Army, The Shami Front.

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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ASTANA NEGOTIATIONS

In January 2017, the first round of Astana's path began after the apparent inaction at the Geneva conferences and local parties seemed driven toward any proposal that supported a political solution and ends the conflict in Syria. Among the most important of what was mentioned in the previous rounds was the focus on the detainees' file and their release¹⁵, in addition to defining the de-escalation zones that the regime and its allies did not adhere to. The most prominent part of the first round of the Astana talks is the emphasis on a political solution in Syria, and the establishment of a mechanism between Turkey, Russia, and Iran to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire in Syria. The three countries agreed that there should be no direct negotiations between the regime and the opposition, under which the opposition called on Russia to declare a ceasefire on Syrian territory¹⁶ in the Damascus countryside. The statement of the first round of Astana stressed the need to abide by the political solution and reject any military solution to the Syrian crisis, and stressed the unity of Syrian territory, as the statement stressed to the delegations participating in the march to fight ISIS and the Front for the Liberation of Sham (formerly Al-Nusra) and not to link them to Syrian opposition groups.

At the opposition level, the Astana conference caused a separation of the armed factions participating from the political opposition, which led to a rift in the unity of the opposition, which was embodied in Riyadh1, and the factions have a stronger voice before the opposition bodies and the supreme body to negotiate even though the conference came to stabilize the recent setbacks on the ground. At the level of the military factions, participation in the Astana talks led to major differences and wide splits among their ranks, between supporters and opponents to it. Fatah al-Sham announced on The 29th of the same month that it had formed a new alliance under the name of the "Tahrir al-Sham" body after joining four important factions in the north:

Noureddine Zinki Movement, Liwa al-Haq, Ansar al-Din Front, Sunni Army, under the leadership of Hashim al-Sheikh,¹⁷ and the new alliance came from factions that rejected the Astana talks and considered it a conspiracy against the Syrian revolution.

The researcher interviewed one of the opponents of the track, "Dr. Yasser Al-Aiti", who stressed that his opposition to the path is not based on the path itself but on the outcomes of the path, since the beginning of the path until today, the rebels lost most of the areas under their control, and the doctor pointed out that the basis of the establishment of the path was military, but the Russians deviated the path to adopt the political option and adopt the path as an alternative solution to Geneva. Also, the researchers made an interview conducted with the previous French Vice-Consul in Turkey, Mr.

Fabers, speaking on behalf of his country's position on the Astana talks, stressed that France opposes any path outside Geneva and the international umbrella, and stressed that his country's position is firm in its opposition to the policy of the Assad regime and that it supports the outcomes of Geneva and decision 2254 and 2118. As for those who supported the path, the researcher held a meeting with the representative of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces Professor Riad al-Hasan, where he stressed that the coalition welcomes any initiative that contributes to ending the suffering of the Syrian people and ensures the protection of civilians.

At the level of the sponsoring countries, Turkey, and Russia's talk of confining Astana to military aspects was a diversion that the factions later realized, suggesting that the political opposition would not be marginalized. De Mistura's call for talks and talk of preparing for Geneva 4 a few days after Astana was also to suggest that what was happening under the international umbrella and its resolutions, did not reflect the reality, when Russia distributed a draft for a Syrian constitution to both sides of the negotiations, fully suggesting its purposes beyond military matters, which sought to create another reference for the UN reference.

On February 15, 2017, the second round of negotiations began, which emphasized a paper to form a tripartite working group to monitor the cessation of hostilities process¹⁸, and the formation of a mechanism concerning the exchange of detainees between the Syrian regime and the armed opposition, the armed opposition headed by the delegation of the High Negotiations Authority Mohammed Alloush stressed that no document will be agreed unless bridges of trust between the parties are built through the implementation of the ceasefire clause and the discussion of the file of detainees. In protest against the regime's and its allies' failure to abide by the ceasefire, the opposition represented by the factions participated with a limited delegation on that tour, which is a technical committee including military experts and a legal and political adviser, headed by Mohamed Alloush, head of jaish al-Islam's political bureau.

After Moscow presented a paper containing political clauses relating to the constitution and elections that were refused to be discussed, Moscow presented a protocol paper in that round that the opposition delegation refused to sign, which included several items, the most important of which is the obligation of the opposition to "fight Al-Nusra and ISIS", and not to talk about foreign militias and sectarian pro-regime in Syria¹⁹. The opposition delegation made proposals, including the withdrawal of foreign militias, the dispatch of international forces, banning flights into Syrian airspace, and the referral of the ceasefire agreement to the Security Council for adoption.²⁰ This tour ended without a final statement, and without reaching an agreement to establish the ceasefire, with Russian promises to

¹⁵ Joint letter from 11 Syrian organizations to the head of a delegation Astana For the military opposition. <https://www.facebook.com/StartPoint11/photos/a.1834704263467266.1073741827.1545890102348685/2034541166816907/?type=3&theater>

¹⁶ First day of Astana summit ends without breakthrough. <https://bit.ly/3GjzpYi>

¹⁷ Fatah al-Sham takes in four factions and forms the Alliance for the tahrir alsham, france24 • 29/1/2017. <https://bit.ly/2GYu6SO>

<https://ijbassnet.com/>

¹⁸ <https://aawsat.com/home/article/856776/> «Astana-2» - Ends - without -Final-Statement - And Russian - Promises - For the Syrian Opposition

¹⁹ For more paper items and details See: "Astana Protocol2: Fighting ISIS, Victory and Protecting Iran's Militias," Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, 16 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/2JYvBv>

²⁰ "Astana2 begins today with a limited delegation of the Syrian opposition", Al Jazeera Net, 16 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/2INN2hS>

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the opposition to stop the bombing and address humanitarian clauses. As the head of the opposition delegation, Muhammad Alloush also announced the transfer of negotiations to stabilize the ceasefire to be completed in Ankara.

There was a Russian-Turkish disagreement in that round, which in turn was reflected in the performance of the opposition delegation, which postponed the discussion of stabilizing ceasefire to Ankara, with a Turkish reservation on the Russian protocol paper, which prompted the head of the regime delegation, Bashar al-Jaafari, to accuse Turkey of being responsible for failure to sign the final statement.²¹

On March 14, 2017, the third round of the Astana talks began, with a clear boycott by the armed opposition, while Russia put a new proposal on the table for a new constitution for the country. At the end of this tour, a statement came in which it stressed the existence of committees to monitor the armistice and violations, committees to follow up on the aid file, and others to follow up on the file of prisoners and detainees.²² On May 4, 2017, the fourth round of the Astana talks began, in this round, the focus was on de-escalation zones which include the entire province of Idlib, Aleppo province, Latakia, Daraa, and Quneitra, including eastern Ghouta in Damascus countryside. A memorandum was signed for the three guarantor countries (Russia, Turkey, and Iran), which came as a proposal from Russia, which provided for the establishment of low-tension areas, and Russia confirmed that the agreement went on for six months extendable, while the opposition responded that it was not part of this memorandum.

That tour followed the U.S.-Russian rapprochement over the Syrian issue, which occurred after the U.S. strike on Shayrat airport following the chemical attack by regime forces in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017. On the eve of this tour, the U.S. and the Russian President spoke by phone for the first time after strained relations caused by the U.S. strike. The White House said the two leaders agreed that "all parties should do their best to end the violence" in Syria. The White House said in a statement: "The conversation was very good and included a discussion on safe areas, to achieve lasting peace for humanitarian purposes and many other considerations". The US State Department has sent acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs "Stuart Jones" to attend the Astana talks as an observer.²³

Astana 4 had discussed Russia's proposal to establish four "safe" areas in Syria to prevent clashes between the regime and the opposition, guaranteed by the three countries Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The sponsoring countries signed the memorandum of understanding for "de-escalation", within four regions in Syria, which are Idlib, northern Homs, eastern Ghouta, and southern Syria, with the conclusion of the fourth round. The memorandum includes the mechanism for establishing these "safe areas." The opposition delegation refused to sign the final

statement because of Iran's signature and refused for Iran to be one of the guarantor countries of the agreement²⁴.

In assessing the participation of the factions in Astana 4, we find a parallel with the international trends that supported the Russian proposal to establish safe areas, and the factions went to participate in Astana 4 despite the failure to meet the previous conditions under pressure from the supporting states directly, in addition to the fact that the topic of that tour has always been a request of the Syrian opposition, and therefore the difference was on the application and its mechanisms.

On July 4, 2017, the fifth round of the Astana talks began, and the three guarantor countries Russia, Turkey, and Iran were unable to agree on a plan to define de-escalation zones²⁵, and two sessions were scheduled in Iran from August 1 to 2, 2017, to identify de-escalation zones for the first and second regions, with reservations about the southern regions and some inquiries about the first area in Idlib province. A few days before the tour, 28 factions of the "Southern Front" announced a boycott of the talks for several reasons, considering that successive conferences could not stop the Syrian blood-spilling machine. Because of the regime's intransigence and the support of its allies²⁶, in the light of a military campaign launched by regime forces and their allies on areas in Daraa province. Also, the al-Nasr Army and the Izza Army operating in the Hama countryside, as well as²⁷ Jaish al-Islam, The Rahman Corps, and the Brigade of Islam, missed the talks.²⁸ The opposition was not satisfied with the results of its previous meetings in Astana, especially since understandings were concluded without a role for them, with the role of the Turkish side clearly emerging and discussing many issues individually with Russia and Iran. It also realized the lack of seriousness among the Russians by making a field impact that would stop the killings, which have not stopped since the signing of the ceasefire agreement and the launch of the Astana talks, at a time when the factions seemed to be a subject of criticism by public opinion and revolutionary forces for the futility of negotiations in their previous rounds.

"The occupying Iranian enemy cannot be the guarantor of any agreement or political process, nor can the Russian enemy be the sponsor of any political process," said Louay Abdul Malik, a member of the political bureau of the Syrian armed opposition movement Ahrar al-Sham. and Abdul-Malik explained that the movement "believes in the path of a military solution inherent to the political path so that this would be a pressure card on the negotiating table." He continued, "Our

²⁴ "Astana4 ends up in four safe areas despite opposition withdrawal." enab Baladi, 4 May 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/147842>.
²⁵ The agenda of "Astana 5" included "The issue of combating terrorism", "coordinating data on the memorandum of de-escalation zones, and halting military activity in those areas, including overflights, with checkpoints to be set up on the borders of these areas, in addition to the deployment of dedicated truce control centres". Astana 5 also discussed "The issue of formation of the Syrian Committee for National Reconciliation", in addition to "discussing issues related to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the reconstruction of infrastructure in Syria". For more See: "Astana5 Military Maps, Reconciliation and Power Sharing", New Arab, 4/7/2017, <https://bit.ly/2qX0OLp>.

²⁶ "Southern factions refuse to attend Astaneh" Al-Darr Al-Shami, 30 June 2017, <https://eldorar.com/node/112474>.

²⁷ The most prominent factions of Hama justify the boycott of Astana5, Enab Baladi, 6/7/2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/159790>.

²⁸ The Rahman Corps and Jaish al-Islam withdraw from the fifth round of Astana 5 Alhal Net, 5/7/2017, <https://bit.ly/2qRz1L4>.

²⁹ The boycott was reflected in the number of participants, as some were attached to their personal qualities without any military representative qualities. The opposition delegation included only 9 people: the two leaders of Faylaq al-Sham; Munther Serras, and the commander of the "Fateh Aleppo Operations Room" Major Yasser Abdel Rahim, in addition to the representative of "Ajnad al-Sham" Muhammad Fahd al-Qadi, and the leader of "Sultan Murad Division" Colonel Ahmed Othman. Likewise, the member of the National Coalition, Yasser Al-Farhan, in his personal capacity, Muhannad Junaid, who also belongs to "Al-Nasr Army" in a personal capacity, and Ayman Al-Asmy, a member of the Thirty Military Council in his personal capacity, in addition to the Chief of Staff of the Free Army, Brigadier General Ahmed Berri in his personal capacity. See "Astana 5: Disagreements between the guarantor countries and the opponents attended in a personal capacity." Almodun, 5 July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qUpYfz>.

²¹ Head of the Syrian delegation: Turkey and the opposition are trying to obstruct the Astana talks. <https://reut.rs/3pA6pFX>

²² The most prominent stations of the Astana negotiations. <https://bit.ly/3BktmTz>.

²³ Astana4 is preceded by an American-Russian rapprochement, Almodun 3/5/2017. <https://bit.ly/2HGjS9a>.



enemy understands only the language of force, so we have no problem participating in any political process, provided that the objectives of our revolution and the constants we have set are achieved and cannot be waived at all."²⁹

DE-ESCALATION AGREEMENTS AND FACTIONS' SUBMISSION TO THE RUSSIAN ARRANGEMENTS

The "de-escalation" agreements signed by the factions later had a tangible field effect in the areas they control, driven by the consensus of the guarantor countries on the one hand, and the support of the international powers for those agreements, the military operations by the regime and its allies have receded under the pressure of the Russian ally, which pushed for the strengthening of de-escalation zones to avoid the failure of its continued efforts through the Astana talks and to try to build a new path for a political settlement and push the West and regional powers to support Russian efforts in Syria.

On July 7, the U.S. and Russian presidents agreed in Hamburg on the sidelines of the G-20 summit on a ceasefire in southern Syria, to sign a ceasefire agreement in Amman the capital, between Jordan, Russia, and the United States, to include the provinces of Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda³⁰. After months of the region living the impact of the agreement, it joined the de-escalation zones agreements last November. On 22 July 2017, Jaish al-Islam signed an agreement with Russia to join the De-escalation zones in Cairo under Egyptian auspices³¹, while the Rahman Corps signed in Geneva on 61 August 2017,³² while the factions of northern Homs countryside joined on 5 August 2017 and signed the agreement with Russia in Cairo under Egyptian auspices³³. The Eastern Qalamoun factions signed on September 5, 2017.³⁴

The idea of the Russian "de-escalation" appears to have been internationally accepted because of Russian efforts to market it, which has tempted international and regional powers to participate, particularly in those areas far from the northern regions where Turkish influence is. On September 14, 2017, the sixth round of Astana talks was disappointing after the resumption of Astana negotiations after there was a clear violation of the ceasefire by the regime and its failure to adhere to the de-escalation agreement in several areas. The opposition delegation included 24 members headed by Brigadier General Ahmed Berri, and one of the most prominent participants in this process was the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, while the Syrian regime delegation was headed by Bashar al-Jaafari. Meanwhile, a delegation from the United Nations, headed by UN envoy Steven de Mistura, and a Qatari delegation participated in the capacity of observers for the first time, and a delegation from

The United States is headed by David Satterfield, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. In this round, the borders of the de-escalation zones that were announced in the previous rounds were drawn, particularly Idlib province, which was the subject of a dispute between them. This

tour included the areas of Idlib and its surroundings (the western Aleppo countryside the northern countryside of Latakia the eastern countryside of Hama) to the areas of "de-escalation", including the dispatch of troops from Turkey, Russia, and Iran to stabilize the truce points, and the ceasefire, without "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" which controls most of the area as part of the agreement, which announced its rejection of the agreement and attacked the factions that participated in the meeting to complement their previous position.³⁵

The agreements have been marred by a lot of ambiguity, and in practice, the factions have not achieved tangible results from their experience in Astana, whether in terms of their initial demands for the establishment of a ceasefire, the release of detainees, or others. Perhaps it is important to note that the factions believed that stabilizing the de-escalation agreements gives them legitimacy in their areas of control, which they did not get either internationally or popularly.³⁶ In addition, the agreements, and the calm they have produced have created the fertile ground for the internal factional fighting, particularly the swallowing up of factions and the elimination of others by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The agreements also gave Russia and the regime an important achievement in neutralizing factions, starting eastward and taking control of large areas of Syria in 2017 that were controlled by ISIS.

Regionally, the Astana talks period and what resulted from them witnessed the emergence of a clear, influential, and controlling Turkish role over the factions, and Turkey has negotiated for the factions several times, with the greatest impact on its decision.

On October 30, 2017, the seventh round was launched, delegations from the three guarantor countries attended the negotiations on behalf of the armed opposition delegation, the Syrian regime delegation, and several monitoring countries, the meetings dealt with the issues of detainees in the Syrian regime prisons, and the mechanism for monitoring violations in de-escalation areas, The Russians demanded from Turkey to impose stability in Idlib province in this tour, while the opposition delegation met with officials from France and Jordan. The file of detainees in Hom's central prisons, their strike, and the regime's attempts to mislead the Red Cross delegation that came to visit them were discussed.

On January 23 and 24, 2017, the eighth round of the Astana talks was launched, the most important thing in this round is to emphasize the solution that is based on following UN Resolution 2254, through a free, fair, and transparent process, and to Issue a constitution approved by all the people, and to hold elections with the participation of all segments of the

³⁵ " Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham " announced its rejection of the outcome of the Astana negotiations and said it would continue to confront the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and that is a day after the parties to the Syrian crisis in Astana agreed! On the deployment of troops from the guarantor countries to monitor the areas of de-escalation. Imad al-Din Mujahid, spokesman for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, said in a statement for him. Opposition factions that attended the Astana negotiations "Not authorized to do so". Expressing He was surprised that the factions accepted the statements of the Russian delegation, which he said provided for the fight against anyone fighting the regime.

³⁶ In the face of the factions' significant retreat in 2017 in front of regime forces and their supporters under the impact of Russian strikes, the factions realized that the supporting forces had abandoned them and acknowledged their inability to confront the Russian military machine. But Russia's need to create a political situation through which to invest its gains on the ground and its need to build regional understandings made it rush toward de-escalation agreements, in which the factions found a breathing opportunity and stop the collapse, observers see that the factions believed that international understandings drew internal borders preventing the advance of regime forces to their areas of control in the future, but what happened in 2018 confirmed De-escalation agreements were merely a tactic in international policies on the ground, which were based solely on the interests of those states only.

²⁹ "Astana5 military maps, reconciliation and power-sharing", Alarabi Aljaddid, a former reference.

³⁰ "U.S.-Russian ceasefire agreement in southern Syria," BBC Arabic 8/7/2017, <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-40533498>

³¹ Signing of the de-escalation agreement in Eastern Ghouta, Al-arabi Al-jadeed, 22 July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2vzkzll>

³² "Text of the de-escalation agreement between Al Rahman Corps and Russia", Al Jazeera Net, 22 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qSUxP3>

³³ "Moscow signs de-escalation agreement in northern Homs countryside under Egyptian auspices", Al-Quds al-Arabi, 5 August 2017,

³⁴ "Eastern Qalamoun in a new de-escalation zone in Syria", Al-arabi Al-jadeed, 5 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qTUaY6>.



people. The Russians and Turkey agreed to establish the Sochi conference, in which the Astana meeting paved the way for holding the Syrian National Dialogue Conference in Sochi resort, so the announcement of the date of the Sochi conference was the most prominent development in the final statement of the Astana talks, while the sponsors in their statement merely referred to a vague agreement on the formation of two working committees for detainees and abductees, exchange of prisoners and bodies, and the removal of mines

In the 11th round of Astana,³⁷ the Russians and Turks agreed to turn de-escalation zones into a permanent ceasefire agreement in opposition-controlled areas. The issue of refugees and violations of the Syrian regime for the decision to de-escalate was raised, and the file of the detainees was addressed. In the second and thirteenth round of Astana³⁸, the final statement of the two Tours came out disappointing, as it was a copy of what came before and there is nothing new, what distinguishes this round from its predecessors is the transfer of the place of negotiations from "Astana" to "Nur Sultan"

STATES' MOTIVES TO ADOPT OR REJECT THE ASTANA TALKS

Although the main objectives of establishing the Astana talks were and are still related to stabilizing the ceasefire and making progress in the political process towards the desired political solution between the opposition and Assad's regime, the motives of each of the three countries (Turkey, Russia, Iran) were not one or unified. When Turkey and Russia agreed to establish the path. As for the Russians and Iranians adopting the Astana talks, the Russians were impulsive to the Turkish proposal³⁹, agreeing to the existence of a path synonymous with Geneva under their auspices and away from international sponsorship, the main objective of which is to divert their military gains for political gains and under the cover of international recognition and drag the armed opposition to accept it by flooding them with details and winning rounds.

In the final statement of the negotiations in the eighth round of Astana, it was clear that Russian politicians are seriously seeking to rehabilitate Assad and restore his lost legitimacy, which requires them to evade the implementation of international resolutions, particularly the Geneva Statement of 2012, which confirmed the existence of a transitional governing body. And resolutions 2218 and 2254 and the attempt to marginalize the opposition and dilute its position, which was achieved in Riad 2⁴⁰, through the dissolution of the high negotiating body and the establishment of a new body includes Moscow and Cairo platforms, which does not break their orientation from the Russian position, which prompted Cairo and Moscow platforms to accept them immediately to participate in the Sochi conference that will come.

Moscow is striving today to strike the Geneva path despite their public statements about its importance, and the

Astana and Sochi tracks have been found to strike the Geneva reference and empty it of its content. The Russians and Iranians aim to take advantage of the Sochi conference to pass marginal constitutional reforms and pass parliamentary and presidential elections under the domination of the regime, under international supervision, and under the auspices of the United Nations, and thus elections under the supervision of the Assad regime to ensure its survival, especially since the Syrian regime did not care about the international observers sent by the United Nations to monitor Syrian affairs and transmit the facts.

Russia succeeded in luring the factions to their political efforts and neutralizing them for a while before they began to eliminate them, especially after what happened at the beginning of 2018 in the areas of Ghouta, Qalamoun, and Rif Homs. Despite acknowledging that there are practically no other options for the factions due to the large military imbalance and the retract in their regional and international support, which forced them to enter into de-escalation agreements despite their unsatisfactory results.

Iran, on the other part, seemed to be retreating somewhat compared to the beginning of the launch of the Astana talks due to several factors, perhaps most notably: The Russian-Israeli, Russian-American, and American-Israeli intersections, all of which are related to limiting Iranian influence in Syria, as well as Russia's need for Turkey more than it needs Iran on the political track. In this sense, the Astana talks did not allow Iran to increase its influence in the way it has allowed Russia and Turkey and has failed to maintain its progress, bearing in mind that Tehran's calculations usually focus on the long term and the long breath, so it may eventually be constrained by what is right, Tehran has failed to eliminate the armed opposition as it wanted, but through Astana, it dropped the option of overthrowing Assad militarily, as it gained in Astana's disregard for the presence of its armed militias inside Syria, and for Assad to remain in power so far and possibly for a later stage as well.

As far as Turkey is concerned, when Turkey and Russia agreed to establish the route, Ankara was seeking to stop its bleeding in the Syrian crisis, reduce its losses, prevent the dissolution of the rest of the Syrian opposition, and position to confront the new priorities and risks, notably the militia project of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Kurdish, which aims to cut off the north of Syria). U.S. envoy in charge of the Syrian file James Jeffrey warned the Turks that turkey's retreat in Idlib would release Russia's hand in the policy of gaining time and eliminating the Syrian opposition, in addition to withdrawing its latest military and political cards in Syria.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the start of the Astana talks at the beginning of 2017, the path with distinction seemed to have been found to end the Syrian issue, according to the opinions of some opposition websites⁴¹. The Syrian opposition has lost most of the

³⁷ <https://bit.ly/3087Pbn> Astana Negotiations. Turkey, Syrian opposition seek permanent ceasefire

³⁸ <https://bit.ly/2vxsM11> Round 12 between the failure of the Astana negotiations and the fate of Idlib

³⁹ After the lack of seriousness in implementing the Geneva outcomes, Ankara turned towards Moscow at the end of 2016 to strengthen its relationship with it, find a solution to protect its national security and what remained of defenseless civilians and save the rest of the armed opposition, and to allow Ankara to remain in the Syrian chess arena.

⁴⁰ <https://bit.ly/2Z9ZpT2> The most important points in Riad 2

⁴¹ <https://medaa-sy.com/researches/22> Position assessment: Will the Sochi Agreement on Idlib continue despite the failure of the Astana round of negotiations?



areas covered by the de-escalation agreement, leaving only northwestern Syria. The Syrian opposition was expelled under Russian fire pressure from southern Syria, from eastern Ghouta of Damascus, from eastern Qalamoun, from the northern countryside of Homs, and more recently, Khan Sheikhoun. For 10 rounds, the Syrian opposition tried to break through the file of detainees by the regime, but it was rejected by the regime, which fears the consequences of the release of detainees, so according to human rights sources concerned with Syrian detainees⁴² that the Syrian regime began to get rid of them in batches, although their number reaches tens of thousands, then released the lists of thousands of detainees who died under torture in an attempt to get rid of a file that the opposition hopes will be a broad entrance to hold the pillars of the regime accountable in international criminal courts

Thus, by pursuing factions' engagement with the political process of the Syrian crisis from the Geneva 1 statement till Sochi, including initiatives to unify opposition negotiating delegations, a few observations can be made:

1. There was a clear absence of political vision. There is also an absence of political vision among the factions to deal with various possibilities from the beginning, including the survival of the regime and the inability to overthrow it militarily, thus factions sharing with the political opposition, in addition to the absence of political negotiating action, where the absence of professionals of political and negotiating work is one of the negative points in the structure of the factions and the accompanying tyranny of the opinion of the leaders of arms in the policy of each faction.
2. In addition, the adoption of the option of negotiations or involvement in the political process was not an option in the strategy of factions that relied on military action and international intervention, and the decision to engage in the political process was driven by other factors such as international pressures and loss on the ground, resulting in confused political orientations. With the factions' response to the political process linked to the pressures exerted on them by the supporting and regional countries and their failures on the ground, they may determine their political activity within the influence of those countries and regional and international understandings of the Syrian war.
3. The military retreat on the ground of the factions after the Russian military intervention contributed to changing their view of the political process, after the major imbalance in the military balances occurred, which led them to increase involvement in negotiating arrangements.
4. The Russian intervention constituted a watershed stage in the factions' engagement with the political process,

and the faction's retreat on the field played a major role in pushing it to engage in negotiations.

5. The presence of Al-Nusra in the areas controlled by factions presented a real dilemma, both in terms of building international agreements and in terms of local faction activity, and the campaigns of accusations of betrayal and charges by the "Hay'at Tahrir Al-sham" (HTS) against the factions have been significantly weakened, especially in the areas of Idlib and its surroundings.
6. The study did not address the position of "Al-Nusra" in the different formations that it included, considering that its position was clear from the beginning, which is the rejection of the entire political process, but rather the accusation of treason of those who participate in this from the factions, which al-Nusra used as a pretext to eliminate many factions⁴³, but it is important here to point out that they facilitated the task of the Turkish forces to deploy the monitoring points agreed in Astana 6 in Idlib region and around it.
7. The professional political action was missed from the action of the negotiating factions, and although they went through repeated experiences in Astana and Geneva, they did not reach the status of the real negotiator, without losing sight of the regressive field factor that laid its shadow over the negotiating delegations and lost one of the most important pressure cards during the negotiations.

⁴² Perhaps it is important to highlight the duality of the position of Al-Nusra, which rejected the decisions of "Astana", but did the most important thing in it. By allowing Turkish forces to install checkpoints. Turkish intelligence began its reconnaissance of observation points by entering in coordination with Al-Nusra. Then the Turkish convoys entered from Kafr Lucin crossing, which is an area controlled by "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", and there was a "legal rooting" by some of the body's legislators for this issue, such as Abu al-Zubair al-Ghazi and others. For more look: "Turkish intervention between loyalty to the infidels and the forced to the forbidden", Aqeel Hussein, Al-Mudun, 9/10/2017, <https://bit.ly/2LeXCYt>.



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