

Kazakhstan to Host Syria Talks

Is the Central Asian nation an ideal mediator for international disputes?



By [Catherine Putz](#)

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Kazakhstan will host talks on the Syrian crisis later this month, according to a report from [Tengrinews](#) citing RIA Novosti, the Russian state news agency. The talks, *Tengrinews* says, will occur in Astana from May 25 to 27.

In early April, Randa Kassis, an opposition figure, said at the Syria talks in Moscow that some of the opposition would reach out to explore the possibility of Astana's participation in the Syrian conflict. [By late April](#), Kazakhstan's foreign ministry was saying that a number of Syrian opposition groups — which it did not name — had asked the Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to host talks and a [group visited Astana](#) on April 27 to further explore the possibility.



This series of events seems to have built to actually scheduling talks, but it's not time to celebrate yet. Not only have Syrian peace talks to-date yielded little tangible results, but Kazakhstan has scheduled talks on other disputes in recent months that have be postponed.

The Moscow and Geneva Syria peace talks have made little progress and Kazakhstan's foreign minister, Erlan Idrissov, insisted that the country had no "intention to substitute the existing platforms."

The April Moscow talks ended on a sour note—characterized by infighting between the various opposition groups. Russia is widely categorized as an ally of the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad, something that certainly impacts the appeal of talks in Moscow. Some of the Syrian conflict's major players neglected to attend the meetings, such as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which Washington has recognized as "a legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, but not a "government in exile." The UN special envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura also declined to attend the Moscow meetings, though he did attend the first set of meetings in Moscow in January. The January meeting, however, only resulted in the parties agreeing to meet again.

The Islamic State, a critical piece of the Syrian puzzle, has declined to participate in any peace talks.

Kazakhstan doesn't have delusions about the talks solving the crisis in Syria. Neither does Kassis, who said that the Astana meetings will discuss humanitarian aid and an action plan to settle the

conflict. According to [Tengrinews](#), she also commented that “we will never be able to find a way out of the situation or achieve an agreement with the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra. But there are several disbanded officers that have agreed to visit Astana.”

So what’s in it for Kazakhstan? This isn’t the country’s first attempt to raise its diplomatic profile. It is the act of hosting — not final resolution of conflicts under consideration — that matters at this juncture.

In 2010, Astana hosted the OSCE summit. But the summit ended poorly and consensus was difficult to achieve — the then-recent WikiLeaks scandal and disagreements over language referring to a number of frozen conflicts within the OSCE’s zone postponed the closing news conference by half a day. After midnight Nazarbayev [said to reporters](#) that “the fact that I am talking to you at 01:00 Astana time probably tells you that it was not easy to achieve consensus.”

In 2013, Kazakhstan hosted nuclear talks between the [P5+1 and Iran](#) in the old capital, Almaty. While the talks served to [boost Kazakhstan’s diplomatic clout](#) the impact on the still-ongoing negotiations is indeterminate.

Earlier this year, Kazakhstan was scheduled to host negotiations on the Ukraine crisis, but the peace talks were [postponed](#) due to reports, on both sides, of mobilization. Reports in February said that the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France [remained interested](#) in talks in Astana, but nothing has been announced.

Kazakhstan has cultivated a neutral image, “so it is not surprising that when conflicts arise in the post-

Soviet space and beyond, Kazakhstan emerges as a kind of a moderator,” Dosym Satpayev, a Kazakh political analyst commented. Kazakhstan has good relations with Russia, China, the United States, and a number of European countries, making it an attractive option for diplomacy in some ways. And although it may still lack the profile of other venues — such as Geneva — it is most certainly gaining diplomatic ground.

Rustam Burnashev, another analyst quoted by [Tengrinews](#), said that Kazakhstan’s previous hosting of the OSCE summit and Iran talks “was not about peacemaking, but nevertheless, it propelled the status of the country.” The scheduled Syria talks, no matter how they impact that conflict, fit into this theme.

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