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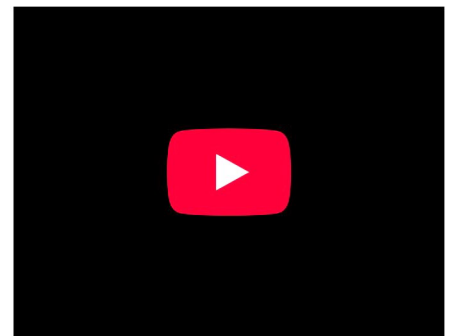
Syrian Opposition Meeting in Astana Makes Tentative Headway in Finding Way Forward for Peace Process

BY MALIKA ORAZGALIYEVA in INTERNATIONAL on 29 MAY 2015

ASTANA – The majority of 30 Syrian opposition figures who met in Astana on May 25-27 issued a joint statement on May 28, in which they appealed for a continued search for political solutions to the lasting conflict in their country. They also thanked the Kazakh government for providing a favourable setting for the latest round of negotiations and expressed hope that the platform in Astana could develop into a permanent and effective mechanism in the process of elaborating a political solution for Syria.



The meeting of Syrian opposition groups was called in Astana following Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's acceptance of



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their proposal from earlier this spring that the country help in mediating talks on the civil war in Syria. Following intense and complicated negotiations, which were held at Rixos President Astana Hotel, their participants issued a joint statement in Arabic on May 28 titled “Astana Declaration for a Political Solution in Syria.”



The document, among other things, named the Geneva-I principles formulated at the conference in Switzerland on June 30, 2012, as the “basis for any political settlement,” while stressing that the results of two rounds of negotiations in Moscow must be “taken into account.” The document specifically mentions the need for “a gradual political transition of power through a provisional government of national accord,” and deplors all forms of violence against civilians and “all kinds of terrorist activities practiced by extremist groups.” It also highlights the need to bring to responsibility all those guilty of war crimes in the ongoing combat.

“The participants in negotiations confirm their aspirations, shared by all Syrians, to create of a state of national unity, which is based on freedom and equality of citizens,” the document said. “They expressed a view that Syria would become a state of all the Syrian people without any division and discrimination on religious or ethnic basis, and that loyalty to the state is a basic prerequisite for building fair society for all Syrians. To allow Syria to remain a unified nation-state, radical change is needed to decentralise power and increase democratic pluralism, without favouring any religious or ethnic group.”

“The participants expressed the need for the withdrawal of all foreign

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insurgents involved in the conflict and the restoration of the army in accordance with the principles of the defence of the country," the

documents further said. "They underlined the need for the fulfillment of all international resolutions on the termination of funding and support for terrorism."

The participants further called for the release of all political prisoners and abductees. "On the issue of refugees they agreed on the need for specific regulatory steps for their return to the country and the presence of civil society organisations and international organisations in the affected areas to provide immediate humanitarian aid," the statement noted.

Three prominent delegates held a joint press conference to present the document to the media and to share their assessments of the talks. These included Syrian activist and human rights defender Ammar Abdulhamid, President of the Movement for a Pluralistic Society Randa Kassis and senior representative of the Syrian Kurds community Sarbast Nabi.

The speakers commended the discussions in Astana as fruitful and praised the agreement, reached by about two thirds majority of the participants of the talks, on particular principles of settlement of the Syrian conflict.

“For the first time, we reached concrete agreements and agreed on a number of principles in search of peace in Syria,” Nabi told about 50 reporters assembled for the press conference at Rixos.

According to Abdulhamid, “this meeting may evolve into a wider platform [for dialogue]. In the future, we want to engage other opposition groups in this dialogue.” He characterised the talks in Astana as “an attempt at coordinating the stances of the opposition.”

“If we have the consent of Kazakhstan [and] President [Nursultan] Nazarbayev invites us once again, we would like to return to Astana and expand the ranks of opposition to gather here,” Kassis said, opening the door for agreeing on conditions for continuing the intra-Syrian dialogue in the Kazakh capital.

Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov held a press conference in the same room immediately following the one by the Syrians, where he welcomed the effort by the Syrian opposition groups to search for a common ground. He said that before the talks, Kazakh diplomats had established contact with all potential participants of the talks, including the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces led by Khaled Khoja, arguably the largest alliance of secular opponents to the government of Bashar al-Assad.

“Our platform was not closed to anyone. We have been in direct contact with Syrian authorities, and I personally talked with the Syrian foreign minister, Mr Muallim,” Idrissov said.

He further stressed that he would discuss the outcomes of talks in Astana with the United Nations special envoy on Syria Staffan de Mistura. He added that he personally and other Kazakh diplomats had consulted on issues related to the talks with their Russian, U.S., Saudi, Turkish and Jordanian counterparts and will do so again following the talks.

Earlier, Kassis reportedly hailed Kazakhstan’s good relations with all external stakeholder-states in the Syrian crisis, along with its lack of direct interest in particular aspects of a potential peaceful settlement in Syria, as important factors in choosing Astana as a site for the opposition talks.

“We are not so naïve as to believe that one or two or even three meetings in Astana will solve the most complicated conflict. It is a small contribution to common efforts,” Idrissov said. He agreed that the talks in Geneva and Moscow are key dialogue platforms in the ongoing international debate on Syria.

“Today, the whole world is anxiously watching the events taking place in the Middle East,” the Kazakh Foreign Ministry said in its announcement before the talks. “The situation in Syria has become one of the most serious crises in the world and has gone beyond a regional problem. In order to resolve the situation in the country, efforts must be consolidated. Kazakhstan supports the ongoing efforts of all interested parties inside and outside Syria under the auspices of the United Nations which are aimed at the early ending of violence and bloodshed, overcoming the acute humanitarian disaster, as well as determining the political future of the country through dialogue and reconciliation.”

According to the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, it agreed to host the meeting out of “concerns over humanitarian situation [in Syria, and] a firm position that a resolution to the conflict is only possible through peaceful means and only by the Syrians themselves.”

“The very fact of holding Syrian opposition talks in Astana demonstrates the level of trust that Kazakhstan enjoys as a neutral state interested in a peaceful settlement in Syria,” said Timur Shaimerzhanov, deputy director of the Astana-based Library of the First President – Leader of the Nation, in a May 25 comment to this newspaper. “Being four years old now, the conflict in that country

does not seem any closer to the end. Evidently, the key problem lies in the lack of understanding and the resulting fight within the Syrian elites. This favours long-term destabilisation and the exploitation of the conflict by third parties,” he argued.

According to the Kazakh analyst, “Today, it is important that there is an understanding between the Syrian elites that reaching peace in their land is squarely in their own hands. ... Let us hope that the successful experience of the talks over Iran’s nuclear programme in Kazakhstan two years ago can serve as inspiration for the beginning of a proper intra-Syrian dialogue.”

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