Ethical Issues and Controversies in the Astana Process
Questioning Representation and Ownership

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Executive Summary

The Astana process became central to the peace efforts regarding the Syria conflict after 2017, but it has been heavily influenced by the interests and positions of its three sponsors or guarantor powers: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. As the scope of the process became wider, encompassing political and constitutional aspects, some of its shortcomings in the areas of representation and ownership became more salient. It has thus been questionable the extent to which Astana contributes to peace in Syria or reinforces a status quo and legitimizes foreign involvement, against the country’s unity and political transition to a post-conflict future.

Brief Points

- Astana emerged as a parallel process to the UN-led talks, complicating the international and local dynamics of the Syria conflict.

- Representation and ownership are two of the most weak aspects of the Astana process. They have been affected by the power politics of and relations between the three sponsors of the process: Russia, Turkey, and Iran,

- The scope of the Astana process has evolved over time, from the limited aims of ceasefire and de-escalation to the objectives of political and constitutional transition. It has thus become more necessary for the process to become more inclusive and representative of Syrian interests.
The Syria conflict broke out in 2011 in the context of the Arab uprisings that swept the broader Middle East. Although it started as a civil war, it soon became more complex, encompassing multiple non-state and violent non-state actors. These groups opposed each other as well as the external actors that became involved in the conflict, either on the side of the Bashar al Assad regime or different factions of the armed oppositions. The Astana process brought together the three key external actors in the war – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – and is only one of the many initiatives that were taken in the course of the war.\(^1\) In the context of what can be called the Syrian peace process, various initiatives were also undertaken by actors such as the United Nations (UN) and the Arab League, as well as individual states.

Astana emerged as a parallel diplomatic process in January 2017, after the UN Geneva talks froze for a year and failed to produce results. Unlike the UN’s efforts for a comprehensive political solution, the Astana process, a Russian initiative that brought Turkey and Iran\(^2\) to the negotiating table, was more limited in scope and, at least at the beginning, aimed at achieving a ceasefire and establishing conflict de-escalation zones and mechanisms.\(^3\) The antagonistic logic of the process vis-à-vis the UN-led talks is in itself interesting and provides an idea about some of the incentives behind the initiative. However, it must be acknowledged that the Astana process produced tangible results insofar as it achieved a ceasefire and a cessation of hostilities at the time. These results were, however, somewhat controversial, for example in terms of implementation and the question over the mediators’ ulterior motives. It could even be argued that it was a more practical process compared to the Geneva negotiations, given that the participating countries are militarily active on the ground.\(^4\) From this perspective, the Astana process, although conceived as the continuation of the Syrian peace talks, began as an effort for a ceasefire agreement in 2016. It did subsequently acquire a more political role, following the first round of talks in January 2017. With Russia proposing a new constitution at the first round, Astana did aspire to push for a comprehensive political settlement. At the same time, it affected – and even undermined, as will be explained below – the efforts for a political transition significantly, even though the efforts of Astana and Geneva increasingly overlapped after 2018 concerning the redrafting of the Syrian constitution.\(^5\)

For several reasons, the Astana process has received much criticism. For example, the fact that Russia, Turkey, and Iran are directly involved in the conflict has turned the Astana process into a negotiation among the trio that became Syria’s so-called guarantor powers. Thereby, the process has become greatly susceptible to power politics and has transformed the Syrian crisis from a local problem to an international one that, at least in the context of Astana, involves only Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Against this background, and contrary to the conventional type of UN mediation, the Astana process can be “best viewed as a process of sponsored negotiation, where the sponsors are also parties to the conflict”.\(^6\) Moreover, it has been instrumentalized to both prevent Western diplomatic involvement and bypass the implementation of UN resolutions, even though the Astana parties do in fact invoke UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution
Overall, the Astana process has had a significant impact on the efforts for a negotiated settlement. It has shifted attention away from the initial, and fundamental, call of the Syrian opposition to remove President Bashar al-Assad from power, and has launched a process of consultation among the armed groups backed by Turkey, Iran, and the Assad regime. As a result, Syrian armed groups were detached from the Syrian opposition political actors and their long-problematic relationship was severed.⁷

Focusing on the 2017 rounds of negotiation, a number of ethical issues and controversies can be identified regarding the role of Astana as a “peace process” and a forum of negotiations on the Syria conflict. This brief elaborates on two main and interlinked issues: representation and ownership. It also reflects to a certain degree on a third aspect as well, namely, the legitimacy of the process.
Questioning Representation, Ownership, and Legitimacy

As in many peace processes, one fundamental issue with the Astana process is that of representation. Also not uncommonly, the process has been externally sponsored and highly exclusive of local actors – that is, Syrians – despite aspiring to contribute to peacemaking and settlement efforts. How can Astana be conducive to peace if key Syrian parties are not included in the process?

The Astana process did try to be more inclusive than the UN-led talks, by adopting a more bottom-up approach and attempting to engage regional players and domestic actors. However, significant representation and legitimacy weaknesses persisted. Turkey and Iran became Russia’s primary talking partners and domestic Syrian groups involved in the conflict were invited as well. The rebel factions represented in Astana included Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Al-Sham Army, and the Central Division. The issue here is not only with who is excluded, but also with who is included. These groups were invited because they were considered “moderate” and representative of the Syrian opposition. However, there is a question over how “moderate” these groups actually were, given that, in some cases, it would be difficult to distinguish them ideologically from the Syrian branch of Islamist-Salafist groups, notably the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the Islamic State (IS). Both these groups were excluded from the talks.

Without doubt, accepting the participation of HTS and IS in the process would be very difficult, both politically and ethically, as they are considered terrorist groups. Russia, Turkey, and Iran all agree on this regarding HTS and IS; their exclusion is, after all, stipulated in the UNSC 2254. But, at the same time, the inclusion of ideologically similar groups was possible for political reasons, not least the groups’ relationship with Turkey. It is well established that Turkey has been supporting groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Sultan Murad Division, Jays al-Tahrir, Al-Mutasim Brigade, the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement, the Salahaddin Brigade, and the Hamza Division (it is worth noting that divisions between these groups are quite fluid and not clear cut). It seems, therefore, that some of these groups became involved in the process with, and due to, Turkey’s support. Moreover, although Russia considers Jaish al-Islam – another Turkey-backed group – a terrorist organization, it was eventually allowed to take part in the process. Also interesting is that while Turkey supported the participation of certain rebel groups, it convinced Russia to exclude the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, even though they have played a major role in the conflict and control most of eastern Syria. In summary, the participants were decided by the sponsors of the process based on political criteria and preferences, and with regard to UNSC 2254.

Beyond the belligerent actors, the Astana process failed to include a wide spectrum of other domestic parties such as women, youth, and civil society organizations more broadly. This had some effect on the legitimacy of the process. For example, a 2020 large-scale survey by the European Union that received input from more than 1,400 organizations or individuals, highlighted the deteriorating situation in Syria on all levels of social and economic life, the need for gender mainstreaming, the need to empower locally led peace initiatives,
and the need for better engagement between international policymakers and civil society. Moreover, according to UN Women, women remain largely unrepresented in Syrian peace initiatives. As an example, Syrian women made up only 15% of the participants in the fourth round of the Geneva peace talks, and none were present at the Astana process. In this sense, the legitimacy of the process is therefore questionable. Lastly, at the international level, it has been argued that, although difficult because of significant geopolitical constraints, “an inclusive collective security system requires the participation of not only Arab, but also non-Arab states”, including Israel. The absence of this is another limitation of the Astana process.

The question of regional, international, and, above all, domestic participation and representation in the Astana process is perhaps the most fundamental issue, for it has implications for a number of other areas of the peace process and the conflict. Although the Astana process has been somewhat more inclusive than previous initiatives, given that it included actors that were excluded from the Geneva process, the issue of representation and participation is about more than just the number of participants. Particularly in the Astana case, the issue is very much about the political motives, affinities, and interests of foreign powers and whether the process provides a truly democratic forum for the achievement of peacemaking and conflict resolution or whether it in fact reproduces the dynamics of conflict. If representation is not inclusive and Syrians have no meaningful ownership of the process; if transparency about the workings of the Astana process is limited, especially when it comes to the Russia–Turkey–Iran negotiations; and if there is no accountability about the consequences of the process, then what – and whose – are the objectives served through it and how legitimate are they? What are the chances for a lasting peace?

It is clear that Astana is not a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process as the UNSC Resolution 2254 intended. It was initiated by Russia and included Turkey and Iran as co-sponsors or guarantors. The process is therefore “owned” by the said trio, which cherry-picks third party international and local participants according to their own diplomatic and geopolitical strategy or interests. It is thus fair to question whether the objectives of the Astana process were defined with the best interests of Syria (and Syrians) – interest which go beyond mere conflict management and de-escalation – at heart and wonder if Astana has become merely a forum that seeks to legitimize the otherwise illegitimate ulterior motives of its sponsors.

The fact that Astana has often functioned as a competitive process to the US-supported UN talks, as opposed to contributing constructively to such international efforts, seems to render it an instrument in or a manifestation of the international and proxy antagonisms on the ground. It also points to the Astana sponsors’ different vision regarding the international order; an order in which the US – and the West more generally – is retreating and rising powers will have a greater role. In other words, the Astana agenda is not reflective of the political imperatives of the Syrian people, but it rather prioritizes different strategic objectives. It furthermore goes against the UNSC Resolution 2254 on various accounts, including...
transparency, inclusivity, accountability, ownership, and political transition. On the very fundamental issue of Syrian sovereignty, the Astana process has not yet contributed to the restoration of the country’s territorial unity but rather reinforced various externally controlled territorial zones (i.e., spheres of influence) that, on occasion, have been introduced as de-escalation zones. The latter is particularly true in northwestern Syria’s Idlib province, the stronghold of the HTS, where Russia, Turkey, and Iran have allocated among themselves areas of control for the purpose of conflict prevention and crisis de-escalation.

In addition, Turkey has since 2017 intervened militarily in Syria three times through its local proxies, with multiple humanitarian and other consequences, and without the Astana forum preventing it.18 These interventions have created new zones of control on the Turkish–Syrian border (in Idlib, Afrin, and northeastern Syria), where Turkey is pursuing demographic, economic, security, and other policies, thus contributing to the emergence of de facto autonomous zones that are politically anti-regime. Iran maintains its own presence throughout the country, not least through Shiite proxies, military bases, and installations, while Russia wants to ensure its military presence in western and coastal Syria in the long run.

As mentioned earlier, the Astana process has evolved and taken various forms since 2018. In 2021 specifically, the three guarantors of the Astana format also tried to support the efforts of the Syrian Constitutional Committee meeting in Sochi as a part of the UN-led Geneva process.19 But since 2018, the negotiating
dynamics within the process has also had an impact on the Russia–Turkey relationship. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held bilateral talks in Sochi and took joint decisions. The September 2018 Sochi talks took place against the background of an imminent Syrian offensive against the rebel forces in Idlib that would create a major humanitarian crisis and refugee waves.\(^{40}\) The two leaders agreed on the creation of a buffer zone in Idlib – for conflict prevention purposes – that increased the Russian and Turkish military presence on the ground. This 2018 agreement, which was reached in Sochi, and another agreement in 2019 on northeast Syria were bilateral Turkey–Russia agreements that circumvented all other actors. These examples further add to the concern that the Astana process is, at best, susceptible to geopolitical struggles; at worst, not genuinely aimed at sustainable peace when compared to what a more inclusive, representative, and legitimate process could produce regarding the country’s future.

It is important to clarify that when it comes to limited objectives of Astana – for example, ceasefires – the parties were often successful, even though there were representation and ownership issues that were not emphasized at the time. But as the process evolved and became more pivotal for the management of the conflict as well as the political and constitutional future of Syria, the aspects of representation and ownership became much more important. Is Astana really helping the future of Syria if it has evolved into a means of legitimizing external involvement and intervention, or regulating and managing the spheres of influence of different external powers? How does the consolidation of de facto territorial division and external presence serve the interests of Syrians and the objective of a united post-conflict country? These are some of the issues that remain open as the conflict persists.
Conclusions

As mentioned, it should be acknowledged that the Astana process has achieved some positive things, such as crisis and conflict de-escalation as well as a political dialogue that is relatively more inclusive of local and regional actors than the UN-led talks. However, the bigger picture demonstrates that the process is neither truly inclusive, given that the “inclusivity” is often ad hoc and selective based on the sponsors’ political preferences, nor does it pursue objectives conducive to peacemaking and a political transition according to the UNSC Resolution 2254. Therefore, Astana not only remains largely unfair to the future of Syria and the interests of various Syrian groups, but also frequently hinders the efforts for Syrian unity, independence, and peace. As one author put it, “The current reality in Syria is that Russia, with all its allies, is capable of winning the war, but not peace.” It is evident that external actors have had a catalytic role in the course of the conflict since its early stages and have become even more involved and engaged as the war progressed. The Astana process is a testament to that reality and to how international interests have become intertwined with local interests and developments. And even though it seems that the solution to the Syria conflict lies at least partly in less external interference and more Syrian ownership, it is difficult to imagine that foreign intervention will disentangle from local engagement any time soon, given that the problem has been trying to present itself as the solution.

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Notes

1. Among a long list of initiatives are the Friends of Syria Group (2012), the Kofi Annan Peace Plan (2012), the Geneva Process (multiple rounds since 2012), the Vienna Process (2015), and the Lausanne Talks (2016).

2. Iran joined in the third round.


4. The Assad regime, with Russia’s support, is still fighting to take back territories that are under the control of opposition forces, while Turkey has become a rival of Assad by supporting violent non-state actors and conducting military operations within Syria. Early in 2020, the Syrian and Turkish armies clashed in Idlib, a rebel stronghold in northwestern Syria. Once again, Astana served as a forum of conflict management and de-escalation.

   Available at: ssrn.com/abstract=3507785.


   Available at: www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=12497.

   Available at: www.aljazeera.com/


10. Al Jazeera (2017) ‘Syrian war: All you need to know about the Astana talks’.

    Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-rebels-idUSKCN1M71CO.

12. This is an umbrella organization supported by the US. The two main participating parties are the (Kurdish) Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing People’s Defense Units (YPG).


14. In the context of the survey, one NGO Coalition has also called for the end of the monopoly of Astana on the conversation about detainees. See, Okur, Pinar et al. (2020) Civil Society in the Syria Crisis, Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region – Brussels IV Conference June 2020, European Union.

    Moreover, according to the Council on Foreign


17. See for example Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s vision of a reformed UN that will reflect “multiculturalism” and “multipolarism”; a notion that alludes to the transition towards a multipolar and post-American world order. See Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2021) A Fairer World is Possible. Istanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap.

18. In fact, Turkey has intervened four times since 2016.


See also United Nations (n.d.) ‘Constitutional Committee’. Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, United Nations. Available at: specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/constitutional-committee-0.

20. Tsvetkova, Maria (2018) ‘Russia and Turkey agree to create buffer zone in Syria’s Idlib’. Reuters. 17 September. Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-