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Russia, Turkey, Iran meet on Syria at Sochi Summit

Yesterday, the presidents of Turkey, Russia and Iran met at a summit in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi to discuss the future of Syria, as a military victory against the Islamic State (IS) and other Islamic forces is imminent.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani issued a joint statement calling on “representatives of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition to constructively participate in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress.” The three presidents also restated their commitment to protecting “the national sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.”

Describing the talks as “constructive and businesslike,” Putin said the presidents “discussed in detail the basic aspects of the Syrian settlement and agreed to continue taking the most active efforts to solve the main task: to establish peace and stability in that country, preserve its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.”

About “the idea of convening a pan-Syrian forum—a Syrian National Dialogue Congress,” Putin said: “It has been agreed to arrange for this most important event at the proper level and to ensure participation in it of the wide strata of Syrian society. The foreign ministries, special services and defense ministries were instructed to work on a date and composition of the Congress to be held here in Sochi.”

Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani welcomed the proposed Syrian National Dialogue Congress, saying, “The congress will become a new step towards peace and stability in Syria and towards free elections in Syria on the basis of a new constitution.”

While seeming to share the satisfaction of his Russian and Iranian counterparts, Turkish President Erdogan sounded a skeptical note. In his speech, he emphasized that the “success of their efforts depends on the attitude of the parties, first of all the regime and opposition.” This means, he added, that “continuation of the sense of respect and consensus for mutual sensitivity” of the three guarantors –i.e. Ankara, Moscow and Tehran—that would “play a critical role in this process.”

He raised a central point of conflict, the Kurdish issue: “In this regard, political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and exclusion of the terrorist elements, which threaten the national security of our country, will continue to be among our priorities. No one should expect us to be together under the same roof, to share the same platform with a terror organization. If we express our commitment to the territorial integrity and political unity of Syria, we cannot regard a bloody gang as a legitimate actor.”

Ankara has long considered Syria’s Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a terrorist group and stressed that its militia, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), should withdraw from Afrin, a multi-ethnic region in northern Syria bordering Turkey, where Russian troops are also stationed. Erdogan repeatedly asked Putin to withdraw Russian troops from the region, so that the Turkish army could take its “own measures to secure the borders.” Recently, the Turkish army deployed additional troops near Afrin.

It is not only Ankara that opposes Kurdish autonomy in Syria for fear of provoking separatist moods within its own Kurdish population. For decades, Iran also fought Kurdish separatist groups.

The policy of Ankara and Tehran towards Kurdish people is utterly reactionary, both at home and in Syria and Iraq. They have bloodily oppressed their Kurdish population and deprived them of political and cultural rights for decades, and threatened the Kurds of neighbouring countries–i.e., Iraq and Syria—with military intervention. They initiated and joined in the Astana talks, along with Russia, not to establish “peace and stability” in Syria and in the Middle East, but based on their own domestic and regional interests, amid the ongoing imperialist carve-up of the region.

This applies to the policy of Moscow, as well. Under pressure from its two regional partners, the Russian government, which supports PYD participation in the projected Syrian National Dialogue Congress, may well take a step back. This, however, does not exclude the possibility of a Russian-US agreement over talks with the Syrian Kurds for a political settlement against the wishes of Ankara and Tehran.

Beyond the conflicts over how to handle the Kurdish issue, the essential contradiction underlying the Sochi talks is the deep hostility of the NATO imperialist powers, particularly Washington. As NATO proxy forces retreated in Syria, US President Donald Trump traveled to Saudi Arabia in May for talks and issued a blank check to Saudi Arabia for military escalation against Iran. The NATO powers do not intend to tolerate a defeat in the Middle East, and are doubtless preparing their next escalation, amid explosive war tensions with Russia in Eastern Europe.

Under these conditions, Moscow is clearly seeking to balance between its partners at the Sochi conference and the more openly pro-US regimes in the region. On Tuesday, the eve of the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin held an hour-long phone call with Trump, in which Syria, where both the US and Russian military are deployed, was a principal point of discussion. He also called the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel to discuss recent developments in Syria and cooperation on various projects, including in the security and energy sectors, according to a Kremlin statement.

Citing the statement, Sputnik news reported that Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “expressed interest in the further expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation in various areas, including contacts between security services ... A substantive exchange of views was held on the prospects for the development of the situation in the Middle East region, primarily in the context of the final stage of the fight against international terrorism in Syria.”

Putin’s press service added that the Russian president had informed the Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah Sisi “in detail about Russian assessments of the latest developments in the situation in Syria in the context of the final stages of the military operation to destroy terrorists in that country and discussed the results of the recent talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad.”

In their phone call on Tuesday, Putin and Saudi King Salman “continued the exchange of views on the situation in the Middle East region and discussed issues related to the prospects for a long-term settlement of the Syrian conflict in light of recent successes in the fight against terrorist groups there,” the statement continued.

There seems to be little hope, however, of reconciling the Russian and Saudi positions amid escalating Saudi-Iranian tensions and the Saudi offensive against Yemen. Indeed, Saudi officials wasted no time in making clear their basic hostility to the proposals being made in Sochi.

While the Russian, Iranian and Turkish governments tried to further “their own solution” to the Syrian war in Sochi, a Saudi-sponsored Syrian opposition conference took place on the same day in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. It decided to stick to the demand for Assad’s withdrawal from power as a precondition for any political solution. About 140 opposition members took part in the conference to discuss the formation of a single delegation and agree on a common position in upcoming peace talks in Geneva, on November 28.

Quoting from an official from the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition, the Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency reported on Tuesday that the US and Saudi-sponsored opposition “called on Arab countries to form a coalition against interference by Iran in the region.”