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## The Turkish-Russian road map for Syria peace

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Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's statement on Dec. 28 that expanding the cease-fire to evacuate Aleppo across Syria was "at hand" thanks to talks with Russia has raised hopes and questions in equal measure.

How could Russia and Turkey work together on ending the civil war in Syria after supporting opposing fighting parties? Were countries like the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Kingdom, for example, included in such a deal? What about the Russia, Turkey, Iran talks on the future of Syria to be held in Astana hosted by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, as declared by Russian President Vladimir Putin and seconded by Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan?

According to diplomatic sources in Ankara, the picture resembles a road map and is not as complicated as it seems, which doesn't mean that it will be possible to achieve it easily.

The suggested process can be divided into three stages in such a way that if an earlier stage fails, the remaining ones will not succeed.

1- The truce: This is the current stage. If the fighting parties in Syria, forces loyal to the Bashar al-Assad regime and the opposition forces, excluding the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and al-Nusra, agree to a truce in which Russia and Turkey act not like sides but guarantors, every fighting party would agree to freeze at the points they hold. No air raids or artillery attacks would be made against each other, excluding the forces which are designated as terrorists by all sides, ISIL and al-Qaeda affiliated groups, mainly al-Nusra.

2- The talks: If that truce is achieved, the Syrian representatives of forces loyal to the regime and opposition will be invited to the Kazakh capital of Astana, where Russia, Turkey and Iran will again act as guarantors, not negotiating parties and facilitators. Turkey wants the United Nations to be present at the Astana talks as observers and facilitate them if necessary.

3- The commitment: If the negotiating parties in Astana agree to continue the truce, spread it across Syria and extend it to a political solution, then Turkey and Russia (as is being discussed for the time being) will take it to a Geneva conference under the auspices of the U.N. sometime in February 2017 as complementary to those talks for a lasting peace in Syria, not as an alternative plan.

Ankara has already contacted the U.N. for the Astana talks, while providing information about the ongoing process. Çavuşoğlu has contacted the U.N. special envoy for the Syria crisis, Staffan de Mistura, along with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. Lavrov is reported to be in contact with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and De Mistura on the issue. The Turkish Foreign Ministry has been in contact with a number of countries with heavy involvement in the Syria crisis, including the U.S., the U.K., Saudi Arabia and Qatar through their ambassadors to Ankara.

“This is a peace effort we thought we have to give a try,” a ranking Turkish official who asked not to be named told the Hürriyet Daily News. “When Russia and the U.S. had announced the cessation of hostilities agreement without telling a word to us, Turkey immediately announced its support with the hope that it could end the bloodshed in Syria. This is an effort in support of the U.N. initiative, and let’s hope that this time it works.”

The next few days will have key importance regarding the future of a cease-fire and perhaps an end to the nearly six-year-old civil war in Syria.