

Syria War, Sochi Peace

In a well choreographed Sochi summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin defines a peaceful future for Syria after the liberation of the country from militants

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The main take away of the trilateral, two hour-long Russia-Iran-Turkey summit in Sochi on the future of Syria was expressed by Russian President Vladimir Putin:

“The presidents of Iran and Turkey supported the initiative to convene an All-Syrian Congress for national dialogue in Syria. We agreed to hold this important event at the proper level and ensure the participation of representatives of different sectors of Syrian society.”

In practice, that means Russian, Iranian and Turkish foreign ministries and defense departments are tasked to “gather delegates from various political parties, internal and external opposition, ethnic and confessional groups at the negotiating table.”

Putin stressed that “in our common opinion, the success on the battlefield that brings closer the liberation of the whole of Syrian territory from the militants paves the way for a qualitatively new stage in the settlement of the crisis. I’m talking about the real prospects of achieving a long-term, comprehensive normalization in Syria, political adjustment in the post-conflict period.”



So many red lines

Diplomatic sources confirmed to Asia Times much of the discussions in Sochi involved Putin laying out to Iran President Hassan Rouhani and Turkey President Recep Erdogan how a new configuration may play out in a constantly evolving chessboard.

Behind diplomatic niceties, tensions fester. And that’s how the current Astana peace negotiations between Russia-Iran-Turkey interconnect with the recent APEC summit in Danang.

In Danang, Putin and Trump may not have held a crucial bilateral. But Sergey Lavrov and Rex Tillerson did issue a joint statement on Syria - without, crucially, mentioning Astana; instead, the emphasis was on the slow-moving UN Geneva process (a new round of talks is scheduled for next week).

An extremely divisive issue - not exactly admitted by both parties - is the presence of foreign forces in Syria. From Washington’s perspective, Russian, Iranian and Turkish forces

must all leave.

But then there's the Pentagon, which is in Syria without a UN resolution (Russia and Iran were invited by Damascus).

There's no evidence the Pentagon plans to relinquish military bases set up in territory recaptured by the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), contiguous to Syrian oil and gas fields. Defense Secretary James Mattis insists US forces will remain in Syria to "prevent the appearance of ISIS 2.0." For Damascus, that's a red line.

Then there are Ankara's red lines. For Erdogan, it's all about the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG), who lead the SDF. Erdogan's spokesman [Ibrahim Kalin](#) takes no prisoners;

"The question of the PYD-YPG remains a red line for Turkey."

Unlike Ankara, Moscow does not consider the PYD/YPG as "terrorist organizations." The PYD will certainly be invited to Sochi. And there's not much Ankara - which is under tremendous economic pressure - can do about it.

On the Iranian front, what Tehran wants in Syria is not exactly what Moscow-Washington may be bargaining about.

Lavrov has strenuously denied there has been a US-Russia deal to expel Iranian-supported forces from southwestern Syria - stressing they were legally invited by Damascus. Since July the official position of the Iranian Foreign Ministry is that the current cease-fires should be [extended to the whole nation](#), but "taking the realities on the ground into account." No word on Iranian forces leaving Syria.

A well-timed affair

The Sochi summit was choreographed to the millimeter. Previously, Putin held detailed phone calls with both Trump and Saudi King Salman (not MBS); the emir of Qatar; Egypt's Sisi; and Israel's Netanyahu. Parallel to a meeting of Syria-Russia military top brass, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad dropped in; a non-surprise surprise Sochi visit to tell Putin in person that without Russia's military campaign Syria would not have survived as a sovereign state.

The facts on the ground are stark; the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) - fully expanded, retrained, re-equipped and re-motivated - recaptured Aleppo, Palmyra, Deir Ezzor and almost the whole southeast; borders with both Iraq and Lebanon are open and secured; cease-fires are in effect in over 2,500 towns; Turkey desisted from years of weaponizing and supporting "moderate rebels" and is now part of the solution; ISIS/Daesh is on the run, now no more than a minor rural/desert insurgency.

Daesh is almost dead - although there could always be a Return of the Walking Dead, with some obscure neo-al-Baghdadi posing as Caliph-in-exile. Iranian President Rouhani has declared the end of Daesh. Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi was more realistic, saying Daesh has been defeated militarily but he will only declare final victory after jihadi goons are conclusively routed in the desert.

The final showdown will be the Battle of Idlib – where thousands of Jabhat al-Nusra remnants/cohorts are holed up. Turkey has troops in idlib. Putin and Erdogan have certainly negotiated Ankara’s stance. So it’s up to the Turkish Ministry of Defense to convince opposition outfits not allied with the Nusra nebulae to be sitting on the table in Sochi.

On an operational level, as I ascertained in Baghdad earlier this month, this is what’s happening; IRGC advisers; the Iraqi Army; Hashd al-Shaabi, known as the People Mobilization Units (PMUs); the SAA; and Hezbollah have been working in synch, as part of the “4+1” mechanism (Russia, Syria, Iran, Iraq, plus Hezbollah). Their counter-terrorism HQ is located in Baghdad.

Pipelineistan all over again

Putin told Rouhani and Erdogan in Sochi about the “commitment of the Syrian leadership to the principles of peaceful settlement of the political crisis, its readiness to carry out constitutional reform and stage a free, UN-supervised election.”

This tall order will be open to vast scrutiny. And that brings us to the key opposing party; the House of Saud, and more specifically MBS’s stance.

The so-called High Negotiations Committee (HNC) – which is essentially the Syrian opposition factions regimented by the House of Saud – is in disarray. Its leader, Royad Hijab, was recently [fired](#) in murky circumstances. These factions met again in Riyadh, parallel to Sochi, with the Saudis basically reduced to screaming “Assad must go.”

MBS’s war on Yemen is a disaster – not to mention creating a horrendous humanitarian crisis. The blockade of Qatar degenerated into farce. The blatant interference in Lebanon via the Hariri-as- hostage saga also degenerated into farce. Saudi Arabia lost in both Iraq and Syria. MBS’s next foreign policy moves are wildly unpredictable.

Capping it all up, a key dossier apparently was not discussed in Sochi; who’s going to finance the rebuilding of Syria’s economy/infrastructure.

Turkey and Iran can’t afford it. Russia might help only marginally. China has made it clear it wants Syria as a Levantine hub in the New Silk Roads, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – but that’s not a priority compared to Pakistan or Iran. The EU is focused on its massive internal psychodrama. And the Gulf – essentially Saudi Arabia and the UAE – are fiercely anti-4+1.

With Sochi in mind, a further joker in the pack is how a Trump-Putin possible entente will be regarded by the Pentagon, the CIA and Capitol Hill – which will always refuse the notion of a Putin-led peace process and no “Assad must go” to boot.

Most of what lies ahead hinges on who will control Syria’s oil and gas fields. It’s Pipelineistan all over again; all wars are energy wars. Damascus simply won’t accept an energy bonanza for the US-supported SDF, actually led by the YPG.

And neither would Russia. Apart from Moscow holding on to a strategic eastern Mediterranean base, eventually Gazprom wants to be an investment partner/operator in a newly feasible Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline, whose main customer will be the EU. Beyond Sochi, the real – Pipelineistan – war has only just begun.

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