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## The Iran-Turkey-Russia alignment: The devil is in the details

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*The decision of the Kurdistan Regional Government to proceed with the independence bid on September 25, precipitated a serious crisis in the region. Seemingly, one important question to be addressed is the consequences the Kurdish referendum engenders to the recently shaped Iran-Turkey-Russia axis, particularly on the Syrian issue. Whereas Iran and Turkey often find themselves at loggerheads over regional issues, their shared concern in preventing Kurdish statehood, seems to provide the necessary fuel towards cooperation, if not alliance-building. Russia, in the meanwhile, has adopted a “wait-and-see” policy on the matter. Still, the extent to this cooperation can be much constrained by their own diverging interests in the region.*

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Although Syria's bloody war might be far from over, President Bashar al-Assad seems to be on the winning side.<sup>1</sup>

Having secured his control on key cities such as Homs and Damascus, the President's forces regained control of rebel-held parts of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and reached the eastern city of Deir al-Zor during the past month.<sup>2</sup> The fall of Aleppo, which came just after President Trump's election, was largely perceived as another "nail in the coffin" for the Syrian opposition. And while it might be true that many of Assad's advances rely on Russian and Iranian support, no less important is "the slackening of international support for the Syrian opposition".<sup>3</sup> Whereas during Spring and Summer of 2011 the United States and its European allies imposed sanctions and called for Assad to resign, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia moved a step further by delivering, as one report included, more than 160 military flights shipping military equipment to Syria from January 2012 to March 2013;<sup>4</sup> the Qatari regime allegedly donated approximately three billion dollars between 2011 and 2013,<sup>5</sup> while President Obama in 2013 initiated a program -the costs of which approached \$1 billion dollars by 2015- raising critics as "one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A".<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, President Bashar al-Assad secured his grip in most of Syria's provinces and by 2015 and 2016, when Russia intervened militarily, aspirations for a regime change in Damascus faded away.

Turkey, for having invested so much in the Syrian opposition and for not wanting to be on the losing trajectory of the history, moved forward with a radical shift in regard to its Syria policies. Paramount pressure was also to be delivered from the long term management of issues that arose in the aftermath of the war; namely, the refugee crisis, the jihadis and what appeared to be a strategic disaster for Turkey, the support the United States offered to the People's Protection Units (YPG) –a Syrian affiliate to the Kurdistan Workers' Party(PKK)- when fighting the Islamic State in Syria between September 2014 and February 2015.

On September 15, in a joint statement during the sixth round of talks in Astana, Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to set up four de-escalation zones in Syria for an initial six-month period. The zones include, fully or partly, Eastern Ghouta and the provinces of Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, and Idlib, according to a statement issued on September 15th. These de-escalation zones constitute mainly opposition-held areas that are planned to be reintegrated into the country's present administration; Russia, Turkey and Iran will act as guarantors and thus agree on the first plan to put in place armed foreign monitors on the ground in Syria (presumably each will send 500 troops). The deferred battle for Idlib, according to Turkey's pro-government Yeni Safak newspaper, will divide the region in three; primarily, Turkish forces and opposition fighters to be placed in the northwest region boarding Turkey while Iranian and Syrian army forces would be deployed to the southwest. Russian forces are to be meandered between those zones.<sup>7</sup> As Fehim Tastekin notes, for Turkey, "the Idlib deployment is driven by two objectives: having a say in the political negotiations that will shape Syria's future and besieging Efrin, the western part of the Kurdish corridor".<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, in recent times, diplomatic traffic between Ankara and Tehran seems to have rather intensified. The impact of the Astana talks -reluctantly, but ineluctably- most likely will also signify a de-escalation in regard to the tensions which the two countries have experienced on a bilateral level after the Syrian crisis especially. Less than two months after Iran's Chief of General Staff Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri visited Ankara, his Turkish counterpart, Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar, visited Tehran on October 2 to meet with high-ranking Iranian officials. Particularly, Akar's visit to Iran came two days before Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's scheduled a visit on October 4th. Although the meeting in Ankara focused more on finding common ground regarding the Syrian question, their last encounter was overshadowed by the independence referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25.<sup>9</sup>

Landlocked, Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG) remains at the mercy of its neighbours. Each having their own sizable Kurdish populations hardened their position in the referendum's aftermath. Both Turkey's and

Iran's hitherto contribution included the suspension of commercial flight to Erbil and Sulaimaniyah at the behest of Baghdad. Moreover, Erdogan pledged his support to Iraq's central government in Baghdad and said it would continue to export Kirkuk oil, but now for Baghdad instead of the KRG in Erbil.<sup>10</sup> By the same token, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, emphasized on the maintenance of the Tehran-Baghdad-Ankara axis in the long run. In the end, it was Abadi who acted first. On October 16, Iraqi federal forces launched a drive toward Kirkuk city aimed to retake oil fields, an air base, the airport and federal installations lost in June 2014 when the Iraqi army collapsed in the face of the Islamic State. With the upcoming election in 2018, Abadi could not afford to appear weak while Kurdish forces held control of Kirkuk oil fields.<sup>11</sup>

On the other side, Russia's biggest oil company, Rosneft, nevertheless agreed to take control of Iraqi Kurdistan's main oil pipeline, boosting its investment in the autonomous region to \$3.5 billion despite Baghdad's military action.<sup>12</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin moved and adapted rather quickly in the new circumstances driven by his efforts to boost Moscow's Middle Eastern political and economic influence, while seeking to limit any fallout with Iran both in Iraq and Syria.

Whether intended or not, the decision of Iraqi Kurds to proceed with the referendum brought to the surface a number of shared concerns between Turkey and Iran.

For the most part, the struggle of establishing a post-Arab regional order has generated a great deal of anxiety both in Tehran and Ankara. They both envision the post-ISIL futures of Iraq and Syria without questioning any of the borders created after World War I and its subsequent treaties. They both emphasise the territorial integrity of the countries as a vital issue. Any Kurdish aspiration for independence can only be condemned, particularly if Israel is the only country to publicly endorse it.

Russia, in any case, has found new opportunities to bolster its foothold in the region; Notwithstanding Rosneft's energy deal with KRG, Moscow is tactfully shifting towards the Iran-Turkey alignment with a view to lessen its exposure in northern Iraq and refrain from alienating Baghdad. In Syria, now that victory favours the regime, Moscow's goals are two-fold; firstly, securing and expanding its bases, and secondly keeping Assad in power and assisting him in regaining control of lost territory.

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