



Astana Talks to Help Restore 'Profound Peace' in Syria: Belgian Analyst

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TEHRAN (Tasnim) – A Belgian political analyst and writer described the upcoming peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana on the Syrian crisis as an opportunity to start “profound peace process” in the crisis-hit Arab country.

“The Astana talks, which led to a large number of ceasefires all over Syria, but are foremost a preparation for the Geneva talks, are an opportunity to start a profound peace process. At least theoretically speaking. This is the Russian view and standpoint. Russia and also Iran are trying to accomplish what they wanted to do since a long time ago,” Kris Janssen, head of a Belgium-based Syrian Friendship Association, told the Tasnim News Agency.

Following is the full text of the interview.

Tasnim: As you know, on January 23-24, Astana hosted a round of Syria peace talks organized by Iran, Russia, and Turkey, with the participation of representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups. At the end of the talks, Tehran, Moscow, and Ankara agreed on the establishment of a trilateral mechanism to support the ceasefire in Syria. A new round of the talks will be held in the Kazakh capital on February 16-17. Also, Syria’s warring sides will resume their talks in the Swiss city of Geneva on February 20. The upcoming negotiations will be held under United Nations auspices. The Geneva talks were originally planned to take place on February 8, but the United Nations Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said he had rescheduled them to take further advantage of the fruits of the Astana discussions. What is your take on the meetings? Do you believe the ongoing crisis in the Arab country can be resolved through a political process? Will the peace talks really be able to end the suffering of the Syrian people?

Janssen: The Astana talks, which led to a large number of ceasefires all over Syria, but are foremost a preparation for the Geneva talks, are an opportunity to start a profound peace process. At least theoretically speaking. This is the Russian view and standpoint. Russia and Iran are trying to accomplish what they wanted to do since a long time ago. Splitting the extremist terrorist organizations, being ISIS (Daesh) and the former Nusra Front, which is calling themselves now Jabhat Fath al-Sham, from the so-called moderate opposition. This is a theoretical approach. But there are a number of factors we have to take into consideration. The Astana talks have 4 main actors. First of all Syria but besides Russia and Iran (and) also Turkey. Turkey is an unknown factor. And is this moderate opposition really a moderate opposition? We have seen the atrocities carried out by these moderate groups. The massive barbaric killings and destruction. Let me forward a question. Has the real Syrian moderate opposition not already taken the initiative years ago to respond to the invitation of the Syrian government to start a process of deep political reforms and reconciliation? Did the Syrian government, together with the real sincere moderate opposition, which is a true Syrian opposition not led by the interests of foreign powers, achieve nothing? Is the Syria we know today the same as Syria of 6 years ago in political and democratic terms? My point is that the sincere Syrian opposition has been, for many years, and still is taking part in the political reform process which has been going on parallel with the war imposed on Syria by foreign powers and their proxy terrorist armies who have nothing to do with the true political peaceful reform process. Their only goal is to topple the legitimate Syrian government and destroy the country due to geopolitical reasons. The fact is that Israel, enjoying good relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar is delighted to watch Syria being destroyed, a country which is a historic member of the axis of resistance.

Tasnim: What concessions may the government of Syria and representatives of armed opposition offer in order to restore peace and calm in the country? How do you see Turkey's role in the upcoming talks as a previous backer of the rebels in Syria?

Janssen: The Syrian government has already gone far in its concessions. As already mentioned, you cannot compare Syria today politically with the Syria of 6 years ago speaking in democratic terms and political reforms. But what do these armed opposition groups really want? Let's be honest and not naive. Their goal is to replace the Syrian government. No way of working together to build a new better Syria. The real goal is the total destruction of the Syrian State and to sell it out. Replacing the Syrian government by a puppet government to serve the interests of their foreign masters. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey connected to this also serving the interests of Israel and the United States.

You cannot disconnect one from another. Obviously, Syria does not trust Turkey and this is for good reasons. For the last 6 years, Turkey, together with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has been one of the main supporters and sponsors of terrorist organizations in Syria. President Erdogan has made it clear that for him the legitimate government of President al-Assad has to go. The list of terrorist groups supported by Turkey during the last 6 years is long. The former al-Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), Turkmen Brigades, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Fath (Army of Conquest) ... Now the Erdogan government is turning around. Not because Turkey has sincerely changed its position but because they are forced to change tactics because of huge changes on the battleground both politically and militarily. We had the coup d'etat in Turkey followed by a huge purge within the Turkish military, weakening it. But, even more important, the Syrian army in cooperation with the Iranian military advisers, Russian massive air support and the huge sacrifices of the Hezbollah resistance has never been in a better military situation for years. From being almost on the brink of collapse, the Syrian military has taken the initiative in most parts of the country which were before beyond reach. These terrorist groups, also the ones supported by Turkey, are forced on the defensive and are losing ground day after day. Third, there is the Kurdish factor. It looks as this has put Turkey in a kind of panic mode. The (Kurdish) Syrian Democratic Forces, allied to the United States, have also achieved a number of successful military campaigns. Turkey is terrified to see some form of autonomous or self-governing Kurdish political entity on its borders with the risk of spilling over to her own Kurdish ethnic territories. So a lot of factors has led Turkey to change its position because of tactical reasons. But has Turkey really changed? Did it honestly see its mistakes and sincerely regret its past wrong policies? Or is it only a tactical maneuver forced by changed conditions in the field?

Tasnim: Measures taken by Washington up to now indicate that it has been seeking to destabilize the Arab country by arming the terrorists there and provoking them to mount operations in the country. Washington is, in fact, orchestrating plots against the successful anti-terror cooperation among Tehran, Moscow, and Damascus. What is your take on that? Don't you think that Washington's support for Takfiri groups in Syria is the reason behind the exclusion of the US in the upcoming peace talks in Kazakhstan?

Janssen: Let's be clear. Fact 1: the United States consists of 51 states. 50 states on the American continent and one state in the Middle East. Israel. The Zionist lobby in the United States is extremely powerful. Fact 2: the real historical axis of resistance against the Zionist aggression and crimes in the region are the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Hezbollah liberation movement in Lebanon. It is not a coincidence

that the United States designates Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah as members of what the US calls the axis of evil. The United States has been trying to sabotage Iran since its (Islamic Republic) establishment in 1979 when their puppet government of the Shah was ousted by popular force after tyranny, corruption, and poverty. After the Islamic Revolution, the United States supported the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in its eight-year-long aggression and imposed war on the young Islamic Republic. Washington was hoping for the Islamic Republic's collapse but Iran's popular will and force of the Iranian people led to the defeat of the Saddam regime as well as the United States. The popular Hezbollah resistance movement in Lebanon is the second element in the axis of resistance. The Zionist regime, Israel, has unleashed numerous wars and military aggressions on its small Arab neighbor Lebanon, which has some longstanding political problems of its own, but Israel never succeeded because of the steadfastness of the Lebanese resistance movement. Although Israel succeeded in destroying the Lebanese infrastructure and causing massive human losses, killing innocent civilians, the Zionist regime never achieved military victory because of the resistance of the popular Hezbollah movement. The third member of the axis of resistance is the Syrian Arab Republic. The Syrian society has during history always been characterized by its diversity, religiously and ethnically, but at the same time also by the peaceful cohabitation of its different demographic groups. Above all religious and ethical differences, it was and still is the strong identity of being Syrian which unites the people. This has always been the strength of the Syrian Nation. The unique combination of diversity and unity living together in peace since ages. Besides this unique feature, Syria is also a militarily powerful State and, not least, bordering Israel. Israel experienced a military defeat during the war of 1973 and has since then always been revengeful. Although Israel experienced this military defeat, the Zionist State is still occupying Syrian territory, the Golan lands. And in addition to all this, Syria and its allies Iran and Hezbollah, have always supported the Palestinian people in its struggle to liberate Palestine and offered protection against the terror and crimes of the Zionist occupation. Reasons enough for Israel and the United States to try everything possible to destroy Syria. Not only destroying its military but carrying out a genocide. Destroying the State and society and erasing its history and its culture. Burning Syria and the Syrian people to ashes. Even when this leads to irrational decisions as supporting and working together with Takfiri movements, which will for sure, come back to them as a boomerang. We have seen this tactic and its results before in the Afghanistan war where the United States supported the Taliban and later al-Qaeda against the Soviet Union only to receive the full slash-back with the attacks on September 11, 2001. In its drive to accomplish its goals, the United States again and again turns towards irrational decisions. Also in Syria by supporting the Takfiri groups. Is it in this context logical that the United States has been excluded from the peace talks in Kazakhstan?

Tasnim: What is your comment about the stances of US President Donald Trump on the Syrian crisis and the future of US-Russia relations under his presidency?

Janssen: Before and during the presidential elections in the United States a lot of people were hopeful. I have to mention here that the situation was unique. The winner was Trump or Hillary Clinton as, because of bad judgment on the part of the Democrats, Bernie Sanders had no chance for a breakthrough. And we know who Hillary Clinton is and what she stands for representing the establishment. Spouse of President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State under the Obama administration from 2009 to 2013. We know the disasters and trace of destruction and death she left behind. We know her dirty dealings with the main sponsors of terrorism Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This led me to think that the election of Hillary Clinton as president of the United States would for sure lead to ultimate disaster. On the other hand, Donald Trump came not from the traditional political establishment. No doubt that he is a right wing capitalist bringing trouble for millions of poor Americans and minorities but maybe, I thought, he would be more pragmatic in his foreign policy. Maybe he would understand that starting another war in the Middle East does not serve his domestic American policy plans and would cost America dearly financially and politically. Based on what he declared during his campaign, it would have been possible that this pragmatism would lead to a "deal" with Russia even maybe personal between him and President Putin to clean up the mess that decades of American foreign policy in the Middle East left behind. But, unfortunately, once he became the 45th President of the United States immediately changed his language and tone. Was everything he had declared during his election campaign lies and disinformation? Should his spontaneous close, warm and cordial approach towards Israel and Netanyahu have surprised us?? And this story concerning his immigration ban? How (does he) have the guts to place 7 countries on this famous list calling them "sources of terror" while these countries- including Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Iraq- are the biggest victims of terrorism while, at the same time, excluding the biggest sponsors of terrorism, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, from that list. Isn't this a farce? Maybe Russia can work together with the United States in a very limited (way) when certain interests overlap. But who can have real trust in the United States under the presidency of Trump? And if there is no trust, is lasting cooperation possible at all?

Tasnim: How do you see Iran's role in Syria's future?

Janssen: Iran, since the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979, has always been the closest ally of Syria. We are now 38 years later and the bond between Iran and Syria is stronger than ever. How can a bond be so strong that it lasts 38 years and will continue without doubt indefinitely in the future? Because the relationship between Iran and Syria is

based on mutual respect, friendship, sincerity and common interests, not on domination. As I explained before, Syria and Iran together with Hezbollah form the resistance against the Zionist occupation and in support of the Palestinian people but also more broadly against any form of Western imperialism. (Not only) political imperialism but also economic imperialism. While a lot of countries in this region capitulated and subdued themselves to the American hegemony, neither Iran nor Syria did (so). This bond resulted in a platform of encompassing cooperation. Politically, economically, militarily, culturally and so on. During the last 6 years of horrible war and terror, Syria and the Syrian people learned who are really their friends. And once the war is over and terrorism defeated, who will logically deserve Syria's gratitude and trust and also come to the aid in the reconstruction process? And who will be viewed by Syria as a trusted partner for its future security policies? Who stood by the Syrian people in the darkest period of its history? If there is one result coming out of this war, it will be that the brotherly bond between Iran and Syria will only be stronger than ever before. And this is a result which will leave the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel and every country who had a finger in this historic crime which is taking place in Syria frustrated and bitter.

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