

## CHAPTER 10

# THE ASTANA PROCESS AS AN INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM FOR MIDDLE EASTERN REGIONAL SECURITY: THE RUSSIAN MISSION

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with the problem of stability in Syria in the wake of the Civil War. The research underlines the main purposes of the Astana Process as being an instrument for regional security. Recent events threaten global security, especially the ones that happened in Syria make cooperations necessary to keep balance in the region. As the conflict started, the main actors were involved in a process and new forms of dialogue and cooperation appeared in international relations. The actors involved in the Syrian crisis had their own interests. According to some NGO's, the reasons for the Syrian crisis are energy sources and oil in the region. As a result of the Civil War, a prosperous country became a hostage in a world of disasters. The Syrian government is confronted by the political and military opposition and this situation has shown an immaturity, disunity and inconsistency of the government in solving problems. At the same time, it must be said that the opposition is part of the Syrian people, on which the future of the country depends. Currently, the Syrian crisis, despite the decrease in the intensity of fighting, is still far from being resolved. And the Astana process with its new stages appearing should help in resolving this conflict. The Russian Federation, Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran became key actors interested in the stabilization of regional confrontation between the government and the opposition forces. The Astana Platform became an instrument of international regional security policy.

**Keywords:** Astana process, UNSC, Syrian crisis, Syrian Government, Syrian opposition groups

## **1. The Narrative Basis Of United Nations For Syrian Crisis**

The UN Security Council is the so-called traditional instrument of the Yalta-Potsdam world order, which was based on the principle of consensus of five permanent members - Russia, Great Britain, China, the USA and France. The rules of procedure of the Council were objectively responsible for the alignment of forces in the international arena, upholding the principle of consensus of the five permanent members. The desire of the system of international relations is to become multipolar and, as a result, the objective strengthening of new centres of power, so it raises the question of the applicability of the UN Security Council methods to new conditions. In this sense, it is especially important to consider the activities of the Security Council in relation to Syria. A situation in which non-members of the UN Security Council (Iran, Turkey, KSA, Qatar, etc.) have active roles, poses the question of how much of the discussion and decisions the Council and the decisions represent the political balance of power in the international arena, and how this will affect the possibility of implementing international obligations at a domestic level.

The UN Security Council had a significant impact on stabilization and in resolving the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. Between the years 2011-2017, 22 different resolutions were adopted in the field of chemical demilitarisation of Syria; termination of hostilities; humanitarian assistance to the population; the fight against terrorism, etc.

We also need to pay attention to the briefings that are held on a regular basis at the UN Security Council, led by the UN Deputy-Secretary-General for Syria (A. Amos, S. O'Brien, M. Lowcock) on topics such as humanitarian assistance to the region. It has been considered as an attempt by the West to maintain its influence on the world stage, which was acquired during the unipolarity period, and the Council was united with human rights and humanitarian organisations.

Throughout the Syrian crisis, the Russian Federation is under all sorts of pressure. At the beginning of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, the United States and its allies were determined to obtain a legal basis to overthrow the ruling regime of Bashar Assad with the support of the UN Security Council. Thus, attempts to approve the relevant draft resolutions and a very aggressive response to the opposition from Russia led to the politicisation of the work of the UN Security Council, to the accumulation of mistrust among its members, to an insufficient analysis of the threats created, as well as the refusal to exchange information and other forms of cooperation. The hostility in the UN Security Council was caused not only by the diminishing capabilities of Western countries. First of all, Washington was unprepared to

conduct a military operation to overthrow Bashar Assad, bypassing the UN Security Council. In addition, the US experience in Iraq in 2003, when the Americans used force without the direct consent of the Council and also in Libya in which the humanitarian consequences of a broader interpretation of the United States and NATO appeared, were settled in the UN Security Council resolution 1973 (2011). In this regard, Washington and its allies continued to demand the adoption by the UN Security Council of sanctions for their actions. In the Syrian context, the task was to ensure the adoption of a Security Council resolution on Chapter VII of the UN Charter under any pretext: violation of human rights, worsening of the humanitarian situation, use of chemical weapons, need for transitional justice, etc. The next step of Western allies would be supported by the decision of the Council and by the Security Council's subsequent adoption of a new resolution on the conduct of military operations. In this context, the documents proposed by the West link the imbalance in the signals of the parties to the conflict, the unilateral criticism of the Syrian Republic authorities by the special administrative bodies and the automatic punishment of Damascus for non-compliance with the resolution provided for in the texts. The Russian initiative to adopt a UN Security Council resolution to solve the problem of Eastern Aleppo at the end of 2016, which forced the armed opposition to distance itself from Jabhat-en-Nusra (whose activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation), also did not receive support. The collective position of the Western partners in the UN Security Council was stronger than Russia's position. For example, for the United States, Great Britain and France, there was no need to veto Russian draft resolutions that did not receive the required nine votes in support. Despite the politicisation of the work of the UN Security Council and the high level of confrontation, a number of important resolutions were agreed on various aspects of the Syrian dossier: political, humanitarian, counter-terrorism, etc.

Generally, many resolutions have been adopted to resolve the conflict in Syria. Firstly, Security Council Resolutions 2042 and 2043 (April 14 and 21, 2012, respectively), consisted of six points and developed by the UN / LAS (League of Arab States) Special Envoy for Syria K. Annan are adopted. They declared about monitoring the cessation of armed violence in Syria (UNSC-R 2042, 2012). This Mission lasted 90 days. The UN Secretary General was supposed to submit a report to the UN Security Council on the result of the work, so after two weeks he could not determine what results the Mission brings about. Then, gradually, the United States began to lead the process of folding. Thus, the UN Security Council resolution 2059 (July 20, 2012) extended the UN Observation Mission for a final period of 30 days (UNSC-R 2059, 2012). Later, the United States refused to enter into the co-authors of the advisory decision, which contradicted the US line to forcefully overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Secondly, resolutions on global issues which were related to the issue of chemical weapons and also were proposed by V. Putin during a meeting at which Russian-American agreements were reached on chemical demilitarisation in Syria in Geneva on September 14, 2013. The document recorded modalities for the destruction of the chemical arsenal with the leading role of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The Syrian government and all opposition groups were fully obliged to cooperate with the OPCW and the UN, providing inspectors with access to chemical weapons storage facilities and personnel. The resolution obligated the states neighbouring Syria to prevent chemical weapons and their delivery vehicles from falling into the hands of non-state actors (UNSC-R 2118, 2013).

However, after the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 2218, the issues related to the use of chemical weapons did not leave the Council's agenda. In resolution 2209, adopted on March 6, 2015, the UN Security Council welcomed the intention of the Director General of the OPCW to include Mission reports in his monthly reports to the UN Security Council (UNSC-R 2209, 2015). The next step was the establishment of the Joint OPCW-UN Investigation Mechanism by the UN Security Council resolution 2243 on August 7, 2015 to identify organisations, groups or governments that used chemicals. The text also called for the provision of full access to all necessary points, to all persons and materials in the Syrian Republic, which were deemed relevant to control by the Joint Investigation Mechanism (UNSC-R 2235, 2015). The construction and installation's work was to coordinate the mission in the process of establishing the facts of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Resolution 2319, adopted on November 17, 2016, also included a paragraph urging the Joint Investigation Mechanism to pay attention to the identification of individuals, organisations or groups associated with ISIS or Jabhat-en-Nusra who used chemicals as weapons in the Syria, as well as obliging the countries of the region to provide the Joint Investigation Mechanism with information on the access of non-state actors to chemical weapons and their components (UNSC-R 2319, 2016).

The UN Security Council unconditionally rallied on a platform of the necessary development for effective steps to combat against the terrorist organizations in the region. At the initiative of Russia, a statement made by the Chairman of the UN Security Council declared the inadmissibility of transactions for the purchase of oil from the territories occupied by Jabhat-en-Nusra and ISIS (UNSC-R, 2014). UNSC resolutions 2170, 2178 (August, September 2014), and 2199 (February 2015), adopted at the initiative of Russia and resolution 2249 (November 2015) (UNSC-R 2249, 2015) proposed by France, outlined a number of measures to counter the spread of terrorism, including the fight against financing and the recruitment of

militants, the measures against extremist ideology, the inadmissibility of oil and oil products trade with ISIS and Jabhat-en-Nusra, the supply or transfer of weapons to them. Furthermore, the resolutions also outlined the ways of interaction between states in this scope, including extending the exchange of information. In this regard, it should be underlined that the terrorist threats faced by Western countries themselves and other states, including the attacks in Sousse, Ankara, over the Sinai Peninsula, in Beirut and Paris in 2015, which were condemned by the UN Security Council resolution 2249 had a significant role (UNSC-R 2249, 2015).

Thirdly, the Security Council is actively engaged in humanitarian issues. Russian diplomacy has managed to make progress in the humanitarian sphere. Because of the declaration of the Chairman of the Security Council (UNSC-R, 2013) and the resolutions of the Council on humanitarian assistance to the people of Syria - 2139 and 2165 (2014) that facilitated the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected population. This not only helped to save lives, but also contributed to the de-escalation of the situation - after all, during the distribution of aid, the Syrian authorities tried to negotiate a temporary ceasefire with the armed opposition. On the other hand, the UN Security Council supported such local reconciliations only after persistent demands from the Russian side.

After a period, the shortcomings of the armed opposition in Syria became more apparent especially because of the presence of jihadist groups. The counter-terrorism agenda was increasingly added to the issues of resolving the conflict in Syria. The first step in this direction was the adoption at the initiative of Russia of a statement by the chairman of the UN Security Council, which dealt with the inadmissibility of transactions for the purchase of oil from the territories “Jabhat-en-Nusra” and ISIS. Subsequently, a number of the UN Security Council resolutions in 2014 and 2015 (No. 2170, No. 2178, No. 2199, No. 2249, No. 2253) noted the seriousness of the terrorist threat in Syria. A set of measures were taken to counter the spread of the jihadist threat, including the financing and recruitment of militants, measures against extremist ideology, the inadmissibility of oil and oil products trade with the Islamic State and Jabhat-en-Nusra.

The compromises on the current problems of the Syrian conflict reached the UN Security Council site made it possible to address the main problem defined as creating the format for resolving the armed confrontation. In August 2015, a statement by the Security Council Chairman was unanimously approved, in which he supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria S. de Mistura to implement the Geneva Communiqué and, in particular, his initiative to create four Working Groups, within discussion of various aspects of the conflict resolution by the Syrians themselves should be organized. This statement was the

first unanimously approved by the UN Security Council document in which all Council members were able to prescribe a consensus to solve the Syrian crisis. This was followed by the approval in the UNSC resolution No. 2249 of two statements by the International Syrian Support Group of October 30, 2015 and November 14, 2015 that became important consensus documents of interested states and international organisations with written stages and a sequence of steps to resolve the Syrian crisis.

These documents aimed to underline the list of existing problems and the procedure for solving them. In addition, the UN Security Council resolution adopted in December 2015 with the number 2254 recorded the separation of roles of foreign intermediaries and the parties to the conflict proper. This resolution enshrined the principles of settlement (statements by the International Syria Support Group and the Geneva Communiqué), the format of consultations of all influential external players (Vienna) and the mechanisms of interaction for the preparation of inter-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy for Syria S. de Mistura. The resolution entrusted the UN Security Council with control over the implementation of the agreements reached in Vienna. In other words, a number of controversial issues were moved beyond the UN framework, which allowed the organisation to maintain neutrality and impartiality, and to continue discussions in several negotiation formats at once. As a result, a certain hierarchy of institutions of inter-Syrian settlement was formed. The function of interaction with the Syrian parties - both political organisations and groups in the region were assigned to the International Syria Support Group (“Vienna Format”), which, among others, includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Egypt. Moreover, the major powers have the opportunity to adjust and control the settlement process in the framework of the UN Security Council meetings. Thus, the sequence of Russian diplomacy allowed to postpone the most radical options for resolving the Syrian conflict and ensured the achievement of important compromises, which enabled the consolidation of the principles of the settlement of disagreements.

It is also important to remember that the system of collective measures to ensure international security, provided for by the UN Charter, includes a number of matters, such as the prohibition of the threat of force or its use in relations between states (paragraph 4 of article 2); measures for the peaceful resolution of international disputes (chap. VI); disarmament measures (arts. 11, 26, 47); measures for the use of regional security organisations (chap. VIII); temporary measures to stop the violation of peace (Article 40); compulsory security measures with and without the use of armed forces (Article 41 and Article 42). Deviation from these principles and norms is violation of international law (Chernenko, 2015).

As a result, we may consider that the UN and the platform of the UN SC became an important actor in the Syrian crisis. Discussions in the framework of UN SC did not stimulate a faster solution of the crisis but created the conditions for searching the most suitable and acceptable solution.

## **2. Astana Process As An Instrument For Political Discussions: Periods And Results**

The first round of negotiations was held in Astana on January 23-24, 2017. In addition to the government delegation of the Syrian Republic and the bloc of armed groups, the talks in Astana were attended by representatives of the Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran - the guarantor countries of the Ceasefire Agreement, as well as the UN (Vashiteh, 2018).

The second round of negotiations in Astana to resolve the Syrian conflict took place on February 15-16, 2017. The delegation was attended by the UN delegation, the delegation of guarantor countries - Russia, Iran and Turkey, the delegation of Damascus under the leadership of the Permanent Representative of Syria to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari, the opposition delegation of nine people, led by the representative of the "Jaysh al-Islam" Mohammed Allush. The representatives of the UN, USA and Jordan acted as observers.

The third round of talks in Astana on the Syrian settlement took place on March 14-15, 2017, however, this time it was without the participation of the armed opposition. Due to the lack of opposition, the planned general plenary meeting did not take place, and the parties focused on consultations in various formats. The guarantor countries reviewed the current state of the ceasefire and the situation in the areas that joined the ceasefire. The parties discussed and reached a preliminary agreement on the creation of a working group on the release of prisoners, as well as on further demarcation of the moderate opposition from terrorist groups. In addition, a discussion began on a difficult issue that is the creation of a constitutional commission, and also a completely new topic was raised on the restoration of the destroyed ancient monuments of Syria, in particular, the legendary Palmyra.

The fourth round of negotiations in Astana, held on May 3-4, 2017, was more successful. The representatives of the UN, the representatives of guarantor countries (Russia, Iran and Turkey), the Syrian government and of the opposition, as well as the representatives of the United States and Jordan participated in the negotiations. During the second day of negotiations, one of the most important documents of the Syrian negotiation process was signed - the Memorandum on the establishment of "four security zones" in Syria, which were in the province of Idlib, in parts of neighboring Latakia, Aleppo and Hama, in the north of

the province of Homs, in Eastern Ghouta, as well as “in certain areas in southern Syria, in the provinces of Deraa and Kuneitra.” (Hazem, 2020).

On July 4-5, 2017, the fifth round of talks in Astana, which was about a Syrian settlement, was held. It was preceded by a series of bilateral meetings at an expert level. The negotiations were attended by delegations of key actors; Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Syrian government and the Syrian armed opposition, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Syria Steffan de Mistura, as well as the representatives of Jordan and the United States as observers (Irhin, 2018). The main topic of the negotiations was the definition of de-escalation zones. Following the meeting, the delegations of the guarantor countries - Iran, Russia and Turkey - adopted a joint statement in which they declared their determination to strengthen the cessation of hostilities and the inadmissibility of its violation, as well as to help build confidence between the parties of the conflict. The guarantor countries welcomed the establishment of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on de-escalation and approved its regulation. The sixth round of the international meeting on Syria in Astana was held on September 14-16, 2017.

The talks were attended by delegations of the Government of Syria and the Syrian armed opposition, the guarantor countries of the cessation of hostilities, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, Staffan de Mistura, as well as high representatives of Jordan and the United States. As a result of negotiations, the creation of de-escalation zones in Syria was announced: the north of the city of Homs, in the suburbs of Damascus - in the East Guta region, on the Syrian border with Jordan - in the province of Deraa, as well as in the province of Idlib. In addition, a number decisions were taken: the rules for the operation of security bands, checkpoints and observation posts; the rules for the use of military force by units of the De-escalation Control Forces; the mandate to deploy a De-escalation Control Force; the regulations on the joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish coordination centre to consider issues related to compliance with the cessation of hostilities in de-escalation zones (Irhin, 2018).

The seventh round of the Syrian talks in Astana was held on October 30-31, 2017. The negotiators discussed the proposal of Russia to hold a Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue (CSND) in Sochi, which was initiated by the Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Valdai Forum. As stated by the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev, the decision to hold the CSND outside Syria was made and one of the reasons for this was the problem of security. According to the Astana-7 outcome document, the guarantor countries agreed to discuss the congress as part of the Geneva process under the auspices of the UN. The Joint Statement of Iran, Russia

and Turkey was adopted, which reflected issues of a comprehensive settlement of the Syrian conflict. The statement emphasizes progress in the fight against terrorism and the elimination of ISIS / Daesh, Jabhat-en-Nusra and other terrorist groups as a result of the realization of the project of de-escalation zones. It also noted the need to increase of international humanitarian assistance and the importance of expanding measures trust, such as the release of detainees, the transfer of the bodies of the dead and the search for missing persons.

According to Press-Release on UN sources on 27 January 2018, “the Secretary-General, having been fully briefed by his Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and taking into account the statement by the Russian Federation that the outcome of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue, which will be held in Sochi on 29 and 30 January, would be brought to Geneva as a contribution to the intra-Syrian talks process under the auspices of the United Nations in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), has decided to accept the invitation of the Russian Federation to send a representative to attend the Sochi Congress. The Secretary-General has designated Mr. de Mistura for that purpose (*UN*, 2018).”

On December 21-22, 2017, the eighth international meeting on Syria was held in Astana. Following it, a joint statement was adopted by Russia, Iran and Turkey, and also two other important documents about humanitarian de-mining in Syria and on the release of detainees / hostages. The countries guaranteeing compliance with the cessation of hostilities reaffirmed a firm and unchanging commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic; expressed satisfaction with the implementation of the Memorandum on the establishment of de-escalation zones in the Syrian Arab Republic on May 4, 2017; reaffirmed their determination to continue cooperation in the interests of the complete and final elimination of ISIS, Jabhat-en-Nusra (banned in the Russian Federation) and other terrorist organisations; noted the need for effective and immediate international steps to restore the unity of Syria and to achieve a political settlement of the crisis in accordance with the provisions of resolution 2254 through an inclusive, free, fair and transparent process that is led and carried out by the Syrians themselves. This process aimed at adopting a constitution that enjoys the support of the Syrian people and holding free and fair elections with the participation of all eligible Syrians under appropriate UN supervision (Hazem, 2020).

On January 25–26, 2018, the ninth round of inter-Syrian consultations was held in Vienna with the participation of representatives of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian Negotiating Committee, mediated by UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura. The discussions continued on a political settlement of the Syrian crisis in accordance with UNSC resolution 2254 and based on the agreements reached

within the framework of the inter-Syrian negotiation process. The particular emphasis was placed on the problems of constitutional reform, as well as preparations for the upcoming Congress of the Syrian national dialogue in Sochi. In the Vienna meeting between the Russian side and the UN representatives, the parties reached a mutual understanding on a number of issues. Moscow noted the high significance of the statement said by Staffan de Mistura following the results of the Vienna round, and also welcomed the decision of the UN Secretary General A. Guterres to send a special envoy for Syria to Sochi to participate in the Congress.

The tenth round of negotiations in the Astana format was held on July 30-31, 2018. For the first time, it was not in the capital of Kazakhstan, but in Sochi. During the negotiations, the formation of the constitutional commission of the SAR was discussed: on the first day of negotiations, consultations were held on the composition of candidates for the commission from civil society in Syria, on the second day the UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, presented the preliminary lists of the commission and methods for appointing its members to the guarantor countries. The discussion also focused on issues such as the extension and expansion of the ceasefire in Syria, the release of prisoners and abductees, and the situation around the province of Idlib.

The eleventh round of negotiations was held on November 28-29, 2018 as part of the Astana format. It was attended by delegations of guarantor countries of Russia, Turkey, Iran, the UN special envoy, the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition. At the talks, Astana-11 discussed the current situation in Syria. They also highlighted the importance of strengthening tripartite agreements. The guarantor countries examined the situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone in detail and confirmed their readiness to fully implement the Idlib Stabilization Memorandum. The guarantors also confirmed their determination to continue cooperation in the interests of the final elimination of ISIS, Jabhat-en-Nusra (whose activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation). The guarantor countries condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria and welcomed the successful implementation of the “pilot project” as part of a working group to release the detained hostages, transfer the bodies of the dead and search for the missing. They also discussed joint efforts to launch the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, which will enjoy the support of the Syrian parties in accordance with the decisions of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi and decided to intensify their consultations at all levels in order to complete its formation as soon as possible. The participants in the talks expressed gratitude to the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, for his efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis, as well as for constructive interaction and cooperation with the Astana format.

On April 25-26, 2019, the twelfth round of negotiations took place. Russia, Turkey and Iran adopted a joint statement following the results of the international meeting on Syria in the Astana format. They reaffirmed their continued commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. The guarantor countries appreciated the enormous contribution of the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to the launch of the Astana format and its successful work. They expressed sincere gratitude to the Kazakh authorities for hosting the twelfth International Syria Meeting in Astana in Nur Sultan.

The thirteenth meeting within the Astana format took place on August 1-2, 2019 with the participation of Russia, Turkey and Iran. Following the meeting, they agreed to take specific measures to ensure the safety of civilians in Idlib. The guarantor countries of the Astana process responded positively to the participation of the delegations of Iraq and Lebanon as new observers of the Astana format and expressed their belief that they would contribute to the establishment of peace and stability in Syria. They also discussed the completion of the formation and the launch of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva in accordance with the decisions of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi.

The fourteenth round of talks between the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran in Astana took place on December 10-11, 2019 in Nur Sultan. The participants of the meeting welcomed the start of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva and condemned attempts to create self-government and illegal initiatives in the north-east. Iriy under the pretext of combating terrorism.

The Astana format is based on the interaction of three countries - Russia, Turkey and Iran. Its strength was the presence of both a “great power” and two large regional players. This made it possible to provide an operational solution to specific problems, which contributed to the division of responsibility between members of the “triangle” for the implementation of certain agreements, and did not allow for the disunity typical of the International Syria Support Group. Moreover, in view of the multiplicity of forces that were at war in Syria, it was envisaged that other interested states should be involved in work on the Astana platform.

The launch of the Astana format by Russia, Turkey and Iran became a powerful incentive for the UN to resume the political process of the Syrian settlement: the next round of inter-Syrian negotiations was launched, which Russia has sought since April 2016.

The parallel work of the Astana and Geneva formats for the Syrian settlement made it possible over time to identify the most popular formulas for discussing various aspects of the Syrian crisis, the optimal combination of interested parties needed to resolve the conflict in modern conditions.

### **3. Russian Mission in Astana Process**

The Syrian conflict from the very beginning had the format of a regional crisis with the participation of many external actors. The first to be involved in the conflict were the United States and its allies - Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which were primarily interested in changing the current regime in the person of President Bashar al-Assad. Iran and Russia joined the settlement of the Syrian crisis in the second stage, upon the request of the Syrian government in order to support the Syrian people. The Russian approach to the Syrian crisis from the very beginning was expressed clearly as follows: conducting direct negotiations between the parties about the conflict without international intervention and regime change.

Russia's position on the Syrian crisis was expressed quite unambivalently in the work of the United Nations. In the framework of the UN Security Council, Moscow has consistently acted and advocated (Hazem, 2020) for a polycentric world order and the achievement of equal and indivisible security for all countries, with unconditional respect for sovereignty and the right of people to independently choose their development path. Moscow also advocated to the formation of a broad anti-terrorist front with the participation of all countries to the best of their ability and with the consent of the states in whose territory the fight against terrorists is conducted, with the central coordinating role of the UN and the observation of the principles and norms of international law.

Russia has pursued and is pursuing an active policy to promote a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis within the framework of the Geneva negotiations under the auspices of the UN. Russia takes side with the inter-Syrian dialogue, advocating for its inclusiveness, supports the idea that the future structure of the country should be determined by the Syrians themselves, while maintaining continuity in government and also in secular and multicultural nature of the state.

In addition to participating in the Geneva talks on Syria, the Russian Federation initiated the creation of the Astana site. The Russian Federation prevents the politicisation of the "humanitarian dossier" and the pressure on the government of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), and it opposes the creation and use of the so-called "international mechanism for conducting investigations of individuals who carry responsibility for the most serious crimes under international law committed in the SAR since March 2011." (Vahshiteh, 2018)

Russia pursues an active policy to promote a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis within the framework of the Geneva negotiations under the auspices of the UN, supports the inter-Syrian dialogue. The Russian Federation is advocating for inclusiveness of Syrian civil discussions and supports the idea that the Syrians themselves should determine the future

structure of the country, while maintaining continuity in government and also in the secular and multicultural nature of the state. Russia has managed to advance a settlement agenda based on the Russian regulatory approach: direct negotiations between the parties of the conflict without international intervention and regime change. At the Geneva-2 talks in Syria in January 2014, differences in the positions of Russia and the United States regarding the role of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the future transitional government remained, but Assad's departure, at least, was no longer a precondition for direct negotiations between the Syrian opposition and the government.

According to Salih Bıçakçı, there is an important project related to sphere of energy sources between Russia and Syria which is about 960 million USD\$. It shows the depth of Syrian-Russian relations (*BBC, 2019*). This fact was determined as a part of Russian national interests in the region but it is necessary to remember the limited financial sources of the Syrian government for humanitarian aims. Therefore, Russian-Syrian cooperation appeared as a way to investment in the economy.

According to the Turkish experts, the peace process in Astana played a huge role in reducing tensions and ensuring a ceasefire in Syria. On December 20, 2016, following the results of negotiations in Moscow, the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey adopted a Joint Statement on agreed measures aimed at revitalising the political process aiming to end the Syrian conflict.

Iran, Russia and Turkey have affirmed respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic and secular state.

The Syrian conflict has been lasting for seven years. After the victory over ISIS, achieved with the decisive role of the Russian Aerospace Forces, the prerequisites for decisive progress along the path to ending the internal conflict and political settlement of the crisis that divided Syrian society have developed. However, after the military operation, Moscow became one of the main mediators of the conflict settlement. With the Russian active participation, it became possible to make a qualitative breakthrough in the framework of the Astana negotiation platform. In Astana, at the negotiating table, both representatives of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the armed opposition met. It should be underlined that they had not been represented in the Geneva discussions before. As the permanent result of the direct dialogue in Syria, the "de-escalation zones" that significantly reduced the level of violence in the Syrian conflict were created (Kuz'min & Sokolov, 2018).

Furthermore, the loss of Syria as an ally in the Middle East could lead to the weakening of Russia's geopolitical aspirations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia has a logistics point in the Syrian port of Tartus. This strategic objective, despite its modest scale, is important in terms of the presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea, especially in light of Russia's intentions to strengthen its geopolitical role in the Middle East. In addition, since Russian foreign policy is currently gaining an ideological dimension, and also as the Russian Orthodox Church is becoming one of the Kremlin's key political allies and partners, the defence of the declining Christian minority in Syria and the Middle East as a whole seems to be turning into one of its new geopolitical interests.

In addition, Syria has been supplied by the Russian defense industry for decades. Syrian army uses Soviet and Russian weapons, and some Syrian officers have been trained in Russia (*Carnegie*, 2019). That is why Russian Mission aims to determine all the actors of the civil war and to reveal the most acceptable solution for all opposition groups and Syrian government. The Syrian opposition is divided into traditional and new. The traditional Syrian opposition includes those parties and movements that are aimed to change the political regime in the state. The new opposition is represented by all participants in the project movement directed against B. Assad. It arose spontaneously in April 2011 during the prevention of riots in the city of Deraa by army units. The events that took place in this city were marked by strong anti-government protests throughout the country, which was presented in the form of a full-scale war (Arbatov, 2018).

To take all thoughts and interests in the region into the agenda, The Russian Mission insisted on Constitutional Committee with participation of the liberal opposition groups. The creation of the Constitutional Committee required negotiations throughout the year. In Sochi on January 30, it was decided to create a constitutional committee at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress. The main condition of the peace process in Syria, which was prescribed by Security Council Resolution No. 2254, was the formation of a Constitutional Committee under the auspices of the United Nations based on constitutional reform in Syria.

De Mistura argued that the Constitutional Committee would consist of three groups of 50 people, each representing government, the opposition, and civil society.

The lists of committee members from the Syrian government and of the opposition were agreed in September. The question was about the third group, which were represented by civil society. All parties involved in this issue feared for a certain advantage by any party in the future committee. Later, on December 14, Foreign Minister S. Lavrov confirmed the

readiness of the list of representatives from civil society and said they could hand it over to De Mistura. On the eve of the Geneva meeting, Çavusoglu substantiated the confirmation of the list, despite the insistence of Damascus in representing the loyal forces of state authorities (Kulai, 2018).

## Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has been going on for the last ten years since 15 March 2011. After the successful results against ISIS troops achieved with the decisive role of the Russian Air forces, prerequisites have been formed for decisive progress towards ending the internal conflict and political settlement of the crisis that separates Syrian society.

From the very beginning, the Russian Federation took an active part in the negotiation process on Syria under the auspices of the UN. However, after the military operation, Moscow became one of the main mediators of the conflict settlement. Because of Russia's active participation, it became possible to make a qualitative breakthrough within the framework of the Astana negotiation platform.

In Astana, at the negotiating table, both representatives of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the armed opposition met with the ability to present their political positions as they had not been represented in the Geneva discussions before.

Thus, Russia, Turkey and Iran consider the Astana process as the only effective mechanism that allows them to make correct decisions. The Astana format allowed the cessation of hostilities in Syria, the creation of de-escalation zones and the restoration of normal life there.

The expansion of dialogue between the countries contributed to the creation of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms of interaction both at the governmental and expert levels, which enabled them to form a system of control over the development of the situation in the conflict zone and the implementation of agreements.

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