Syria talks restart in Astana as fighting continues

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Talks to resolve the Syrian conflict organized by Russia, Turkey and Iran are set to begin today in the Kazakh capital, Astana. The second round of discussions has been overshadowed by renewed tensions between Russia and Turkey, and the possibility that an opposition delegation could refuse to attend.

An announcement was made Tuesday by the Kazakh government that the meetings would take place behind closed doors.

The initiative to reach a peace agreement to end the civil war was taken by Russia and Turkey after US-backed rebels suffered a disastrous defeat in eastern Aleppo at the end of last year. The retaking of the country's second major city by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, with the support of Russian air strikes and Iranian fighters, was a severe setback to Washington's six-year-long war for regime change in Damascus. Washington has been left sidelined in the Astana talks, although Moscow and Ankara extended an invitation for the US to attend as an observer.

US President Donald Trump ordered senior military personnel January 28 to propose plans for the US intervention in Syria, giving them a one-month deadline. The administration has continued a brutal air war in collaboration with an international coalition, which is ostensibly targeting ISIS positions. According to the latest statistics, US air strikes in January killed over 250 civilians.

Over 400,000 Syrians have lost their lives since the outbreak of the conflict and at least 11 million, around half of the country's population, have been forced to flee their homes.

In contrast to the Obama administration, whose Syria strategy of backing Islamist rebels dominated by the al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Nusra Front suffered a debacle in December with the fall of Aleppo, Trump has indicated his readiness to consider "safe zones" in the north of the country. This policy would aim to keep the millions who have been forced from their homes within the country and would at the same time serve as the pretext for a vast escalation of US military personnel in the country. It has already been pointed out by several commentators that defending such zones would entail a far larger US military commitment.

There is little prospect that the peace talks over the coming days can avert a further escalation of tensions in the region. After the two-day meeting in Astana, the parties will reconvene next week under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva, where the United States and other Western powers are expected to participate.

Over the weekend, Turkey continued to advance on the ISIS-controlled town of al-Bab and currently has approximately 40 percent of it under its control. The offensive came following a telephone call last week between Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a visit to Ankara by new CIA head Mike Pompeo.

The seizure of al-Bab heightens the risk of renewed clashes between Turkish and Kurdish forces organized in the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is at present engaged in operations to retake Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS territory, but control over al-Bab would increase Turkish influence on the military offensive. Erdogan even suggested last week that Turkish troops could move east to attack the ISIS stronghold. Trump, who initially expressed the hope that Turkish and Kurdish forces could be persuaded to collaborate in combatting ISIS, appears to have abandoned this position in the face of stiff opposition from Erdogan, who opposes any expansion of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria for fear that it will

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encourage separatist sentiments across the border in the Kurdish-majority areas of southeast Turkey.

Turkish-Kurdish hostilities could yet trigger frictions between Ankara and Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov invited representatives of the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), the political arm of the YPG, to Moscow for a briefing on the last round of talks in Astana. Turkey has not criticized this move so far, but it rejects any cooperation with the PYD, which it denounces as terrorists and being linked to the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). While Moscow has spoken out in favor of a federal settlement for Syria, this is rejected by Turkey.

The Turkish push further into Syrian territory also threatens to trigger clashes between Turkish-aligned Syrian militia and Assad's forces, which are advancing on al-Bab from the south with Russian support.

An Amnesty International report released last week, "Human Slaughterhouse: mass hangings and exterminations at Saydnaya prison," documented the brutal repression employed by the Assad regime against political opponents. The yearlong investigation uncovered a systematic program of extrajudicial killings under which groups of up to 50 prisoners were taken to the basement of the jail and hung without prior notice, let alone legal proceedings. This practice went on between 2011 and 2015, and Amnesty noted that there is strong evidence to suggest it still continues.

The report went on to detail how prisoners were systematically abused from the moment they entered Saydnaya prison, with frequent beatings or so-called "parties" organized by the prison guards.

Predictably enough, the US media, led by the *New York Times*, seized on the findings of the Amnesty report to renew its campaign for confrontation with Russia over Syria and an intensification of the war for regime change fomented by the United States in 2011. The *Times* followed up its coverage of the report with a lengthy article on Sunday drawing on research carried out for the Atlantic Council by the US government-funded Bellingcat research group in the UK. The report provided information on Russian air strikes in Aleppo that targeted civilians and hospitals.

There is no doubt about the brutality of the Assad regime, or the fact that the months-long bombing campaign conducted by Damascus and Moscow to retake Aleppo claimed many civilian lives.

However, the task of overthrowing such dictatorships and putting an end to the scourge of imperialist war, which has devastated Syria and the entire region, cannot be outsourced to the United States and the European major powers. US imperialism and its allies have been responsible for death and destruction on a much broader scale, as the one million civilian lives ended by the intervention in Iraq, the tens of thousands killed in the brutal NATO air war in Libya in 2011 and the hundreds of thousands who have died in the US-instigated Syrian conflict tragically testify. Only by constructing an international antiwar movement, based on a socialist program to unite workers in the advanced capitalist countries with their brothers and sisters in Syria and throughout the entire Middle East, can an end be put to the wars and dictatorships that have ravaged the region.

The chief responsibility for the atrocities that have been committed in Syria lies squarely with Washington. The destabilization of the country and the entire Middle East region, including the incitement of sectarian violence, is the product of more than 25 years of virtually uninterrupted military conflicts led by the United States and its European imperialist allies, beginning with the first Gulf War in 1990.

For his part, Assad used an interview last Friday with Yahoo News to appeal to the Trump administration for support in his government's efforts to regain control of territory held by the Islamic State.

Referring to Trump's repeated pledges to focus on fighting "terrorism" and eliminating ISIS, Assad commented, "We agree about this priority. That's our position. In Syria, it is to fight terrorism."

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