Situation Assessment | 26 July 2022

Tehran Summit:
No Agreement on Syria

Unit for Political Studies
Tehran Summit: No Agreement on Syria

Series: Situation Assessment

26 July 2022

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studies draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports.

Copyright © 2022 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities - to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies
Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat
Al-Dayaen, Qatar
PO Box 10277, Doha
+974 4035 4111
www.dohainstitute.org
# Table of Contents

The Syrian Crisis .................................................................................................................. 1

Bilateral Relations for the Parties to the Summit ................................................................. 2
  Iranian-Russian Relations ................................................................................................. 3
  Turkish-Iranian Relations ............................................................................................... 4
  Russia and Turkey and the Agreement to Export Grain from Ukraine ............................. 4

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 5
On 19 July, the seventh summit of the leaders of the Astana process countries was hosted in the Iranian capital, Tehran. The Astana process was established following a Russian-Turkish agreement, leading to the end of the battle of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and the evacuation of the opposition factions. Iran joined this agreement later. Although the meeting was devoted to discussing the Syrian issue, the leaders of the three countries took advantage of the occasion to discuss bilateral relations, and the most pressing regional and international issues such as the Ukraine war and the food and energy crisis.

The Syrian Crisis

News of the Turkish military operation in northern Syria dominated the course of the Tehran summit, as Turkey had been preparing for weeks to establish a safe zone 30 km deep into northern Syria. The idea of establishing a safe zone in northern Syria dates back to 2012, but it has become more urgent for Ankara in recent months. With the worsening economic crisis and the fast-approaching June 2023 parliamentary elections, the question of Syrian refugees has become a major topic for public contention. The Turkish opposition has been using this issue to weaken the position of the ruling Justice and Development Party and sway voters. The Turkish government says that if a safe zone is established in northern Syria, about 1 million Syrian refugees out of the 3.7 million currently residing in Turkey could be resettled. Turkey further justifies its military operation with the need to keep the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) away from the Turkish borders. The SDF is composed mostly of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) – the military wing of the Democratic Union Party, which Ankara considers to be the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which has been waging a guerrilla war against Turkey since 1983. Founded in late 2014, the SDF has become Washington’s main partner on the ground in Syria in the fight against the Islamic State Organization (ISIS) and currently controls most of the Syrian lands east of the Euphrates River (constituting about 30 percent of the total area of Syria) in addition to maintaining isolated pockets in areas west of the Euphrates, the most important of which are Manbij, Tal Rifaat and some peripheral neighbourhoods of Aleppo city.

Between 2016 and 2019, Turkey made three major incursions into northern Syria, the first being “Operation Euphrates Shield” in 2016, during which Turkish forces and allied Syrian opposition factions took control of the Jarabulus-Al-Bab-Azaz triangle, and the second was Operation “Olive Branch”, which allowed Turkey to expel the YPG Forces from and control the Afrin region. The third operation, “Peace Spring”, took place in October 2019 in the areas east of the Euphrates, where Turkey took control of a strip 30 km deep and 100 km long between Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad. All of these operations took place with Turkish-American or Turkish-Russian consensus to prevent frictions on the ground between these international parties.

Ankara sought to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the Tehran summit to persuade its partners in the Astana process not to object to its planned military operation but was unsuccessful in this endeavour. But while Russia and Iran strongly oppose any Turkish military operation in the areas west of the Euphrates, the United States also opposes such an operation in the areas east of the Euphrates. The Turkish focus on the areas of Tal Rifaat and Manbij, which are controlled by the SDF, has also become clear. Turkey accuses the SDF of using the two areas to target areas under Turkish control in northern Syria with attacks that have led to casualties, especially in Afrin. Meanwhile, the Russian bombing of the Turkish-backed opposition areas in Idlib has increased, and the reinforcements sent by the Syrian regime and allied Iranian militias to the region, are a clear indication of opposition to any Turkish military action.

In addition to the dispute over the possible Turkish military operation in northern Syria, the Astana process is suffering from political paralysis after exhausting all available methods to solve the issues it was created to solve, the most important of which being the marginalization of the political process based on Security Council resolutions 2118 and 2254. The constitutional process is facing a state of complete impasse after failing to make any progress during eight rounds of negotiations, given that the regime participates in these negotiations only formally, and only “to shift the blame.” The UN envoy, Geir Pedersen, recently announced the postponement of the meetings of the ninth round, which were scheduled for 25 - 29 July, due to the regime delegation's refusal to go to the Swiss city of Geneva, after Russia demanded that negotiations be moved to another country under the pretext of Switzerland no longer maintaining its neutrality in the Ukraine crisis through its commitment to European sanctions against Russia. The discussions in Tehran also included the dispute between the partners of the Astana process over the mechanism for the delivery of United Nations aid to northern Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey, which was extended for just six months earlier this month due to Russian opposition in the Security Council.

Bilateral Relations for the Parties to the Summit

The summit served as an occasion for the leaders of the three countries to discuss ways to develop their bilateral relations and coordinate positions on specific regional and international issues affecting their interests.

---

Iranian-Russian Relations

During his stay in Tehran, the Russian president sought to make a qualitative shift in his country’s relations with Tehran. The two countries are facing increasing US pressure and are subject to severe sanctions. Russia because of the war in Ukraine, and Iran because of its nuclear program. Despite division in Iran regarding its relationship with Russia, some Iranian circles accuse Russia of using Iran as a negotiating card in the relationship with the West, and of turning a blind eye to the repeated Israeli targeting of Iranian sites in Syria. In addition, there is a conflict of interest in the international energy market, where Russian oil has started to compete with Iranian oil in the Chinese and Indian markets as a result of huge discounts offered by Russia in an attempt to offset Western sanctions. The two countries are in the process of upgrading their political and economic relations as a result of the worsening relationship with the West.

The trade exchange between Russia and Iran has increased in recent years, especially after the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran in late 2018; growing from $1.74 billion in 2018 to about $4 billion in 2021. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the ensuing Western sanctions against Russia, and the waning prospects of reviving the Iranian nuclear agreement have created new opportunities for bilateral relations. At the Tehran summit, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding through which the Russian company Gazprom will invest 40 billion dollars in Iranian oil and gas fields, considered the largest deal of its kind in the history of the Iranian oil industry.

This memorandum includes the development of the North Pars gas field, Kish and six other oil fields, and the Russian company Gazprom will invest 10 billion dollars to develop these fields, as well as investing 15 billion dollars to increase production in the South Pars field, exchanging gas and petroleum products and investing in the completion of Iran’s liquefied natural gas project (Iran LNG). Regarding their banking and financial relationship, Russian President Vladimir Putin said during his meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi that his country has managed to increase trade exchange with Iran by 40 percent. It plans to increase total trade exchange to 10 billion dollars in the coming years.

In a meeting with the Iranian leader, the Russian president said that his country and Iran are in the process of replacing the dollar in their trade relations with national currencies, adding that the two countries are planning to find mechanisms and methods in this regard. Iran has announced the start of financial transactions between the two countries using the Russian rouble and the Iranian toman in bilateral trade, so that Iranian exporters can sell the rouble they get in the Iranian market at consensual prices for suppliers to buy in order to supply Russian goods to Iran.

---

4 Alex Vatanka, “Russia, Iran, and Economic Integration on the Caspian,” Middle East Institute, 17/8/2020, accessed on 21/7/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3RPrNCr.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Turkish-Iranian Relations

These two countries are embroiled in a huge conflict of interests in Syria and differ on other regional and international issues such as Iraq and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite this, trade relations between Turkey and Iran have not been affected. At the height of the conflict in Syria in 2012, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries doubled, reaching $22 billion. During the period of sanctions imposed by Barack Obama’s administration on Iran (2010-2015), Turkey represented Iran’s economic window and its main financial lung when Iran was cut off from the global banking system and dollar transfers. In 2015, the two parties signed an agreement for preferential commercial transactions under which they removed customs duties on about 300 commercial goods in an effort to raise the volume of intra-trade. In 2017, the two countries signed an agreement to use the national currency in their trade exchange.

During the last five years, Iranian investments in Turkey have witnessed significant growth; According to the Turkish Statistical Center report issued in January 2022, Iranians have become the largest real estate investors in Turkey, and have registered more businesses in Turkey than any other nationality, having previously established 1,019 companies in 2018, and 978 companies in 2019. Turkey is also the most popular holiday destination for Iranian tourists. In 2019, before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Iranian tourists in Turkey outnumbered pilgrims to the Shi’i shrines in Najaf and Karbala.

During President Erdogan’s visit to Tehran to attend the Astana summit, he signed eight bilateral agreements for cooperation in various political, economic, security, cultural and sports fields, foremost of which is the strengthening of the Memorandum of Preferential Trade Agreement signed, in 2015, between the Turkish Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Support and Development Institutions and Iran’s Small Industries and Industrial Parks Organization. These require the reduction of import tariffs, the establishment of joint factories and complexes, building technology parks, and developing the transportation, agriculture and energy sectors, and the expansion of the gas transportation agreement for a period of 25 years. According to the Iranian and Turkish presidents, they decided at the Tehran summit to raise the annual trade volume between the two countries to $30 billion.

Russia and Turkey and the Agreement to Export Grain from Ukraine

The Tehran summit also presented the opportunity to hold the first Russian-Turkish meeting since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Although the two countries are on opposite sides in the Ukrainian war (Turkey supports the Kyiv government and supplies it with weapons,

---

10 Ibid.
11 “Turkey and Iran Sign 8 Bilateral Agreements,” Anadolu Agency, 19/7/2022, accessed on 21/7/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3zmRPWA.
12 “Iran bypasses the West and Plans to Exchange $70 Billion with Russia and Turkey,” Fars News Agency, 20/7/2022, accessed on 21/7/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3B6QAvL
especially the Bayraktar drones, which played an important role in slowing the Russian advance in the early days of the war) Turkey has refused to abide by Western sanctions against Russia, and successfully separated trade relations with Russia from its position in the Ukrainian war. As a result, Russia agreed that Turkey will host grain export negotiations with Ukraine and to consider it, along with the United Nations, a guarantor of the agreement that both sides seem to have reached during the Tehran meeting between Presidents Putin and Erdogan. Two days after the Tehran summit, Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement in Istanbul, sponsored by the United Nations and Turkey, allowing Ukraine to reopen its Black Sea ports for the export of grain. This agreement, despite being expected to falter from time to time, was considered a great success for Turkish diplomacy in light of the deepening global food crisis, with Ukraine - which is the fifth largest wheat exporter in the world – unable to export.

**Conclusion**

The Tehran summit failed to make progress on a resolution to the Syrian issue; The partners of the Astana process adhered to their well-known positions regarding the political and field conditions in Syria, despite their consensus over the negative US role. However, the summit saw the development of bilateral relations between the Astana partners, especially in the economic field, and the resultant agreements are likely to strengthen economic relations between the three countries, especially as they all face major economic crises. Two of these three countries face severe Western sanctions, while the relationship of Turkey to the West is complex. It seems that the Astana process, which was established to manage the conflict in Syria, has turned into a platform for managing the relations of the three countries with each other on broader issues starting with trade and extending to politics, energy, and food security.