

Face to Face

Syria regime, rebels set for first meeting

Astana

Syria's government and rebel fighters will on Monday sit down at the negotiating table for the first time in nearly six years of war, the latest diplomatic push to end the hostilities.

Hosted in the Kazakh capital Astana, the talks will see an opposition delegation composed exclusively of rebel groups negotiating with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in an initiative sponsored by rebel backer Turkey and regime allies Russia and Iran.

Though the talks have been welcomed by all parties in the conflict, delegates from both sides are heading to Kazakhstan with apparently opposing ideas about the goals, with Assad insisting Thursday that rebels lay down their arms in exchange for an

amnesty deal.

Although Assad said the talks would prioritise reaching a ceasefire, Damascus has insisted it will seek a "comprehensive" political solution to the conflict that has killed more than 300,000 and displaced over half of the country's population.

The rebels meanwhile say they will focus solely on reinforcing a frail nationwide truce brokered by Moscow and Ankara last month.

Who is attending?

Moscow said this week that the objective was to "consolidate" the ceasefire and involve rebel field commanders in the "political process" to end the bloodshed, creating a basis for a new round of UN-hosted negotiations in Geneva next month. Syria's UN ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari,

an experienced negotiator involved in past failed talks in Geneva, will head the regime delegation in Astana.

The United Nations' peace envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, will also attend, alongside representatives of Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Mohammad Alloush of the Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) rebel group -- whose commander cousin Zahran Alloush was killed in an air strike claimed by the regime in December 2015 -- will lead a "military delegation" of around eight people.

They will be backed by nine legal and political advisors from the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) umbrella group.

But key rebel group Ahrar al-Sham said it would snub the Astana talks over ceasefire violations and ongoing

Russian air strikes on the country.

Ahrar al-Sham nonetheless said it would support decisions

taken by other rebel groups represented at the talks if they were "in the interest of the nation".

The talks, which could last days, come a month after the Syrian regime, bolstered by its allies, took full control of second city Aleppo from rebels in its biggest victory in more than four years of fighting.

With stakes high and outcomes unclear, the Syrian opposition is wary that the regime could use the rebel groups' inexperience in political talks to its advantage in Astana, a European diplomatic source said.

US represented

The United States under new President Donald Trump will also be represented -- with the US ambassador to Astana taking part.

A key negotiator in previous ceasefire agreements, Washington was last month sidelined from sponsoring the nationwide truce brokered by

Russia and Turkey.

After overcoming a rift in relations following Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane in Syria in November 2015, the two countries this week conducted their first joint strikes against Islamic State group targets in an operation Moscow hailed as "highly effective".

The talks to be hosted in Astana is backed by Turkey, Russia and Iran

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in an interview aired Saturday on Russian state television that deals

that could help end the conflict in Syria were "unlikely" to be struck in Astana because "too many parties are involved in the process."

Iran, the talks' third sponsor, will be represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Jaber Ansari, the country's Isna news agency reported.

France, Britain and the European Union will also send their ambassadors as representatives at the talks. (AFP)

Top French jihadist held after return from Syria

Paris

A high-profile French jihadist was charged with terrorist offences and remanded in custody yesterday, a day after being transferred to France from Turkey, where he had turned himself in to authorities.

Kevin Guiavarch, a 24-year-old who converted to Islam 10 years ago, was one of the UN's most wanted jihadists and had been placed on a blacklist in 2014.

Suspected as being one of the major Islamic State group recruiters attracting young French people to join the jihadist cause in Syria and Iraq, Guiavarch rubbed

shoulders with some of the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks while living in Raqqa, IS's de facto capital.

The former church choirboy, who was raised by a single mother in Brittany, now claims to be "reformed" -- though he has also told French author David Thomson, who wrote a book about returning jihadists, that he left IS because he was afraid of dying.

He spent four years in Syria amongst jihadists, first with former Al-Qaeda affiliate the Fateh al-Sham Front, and then IS.

He quit Syria in June 2016 with his four French wives

and six children, and went to Turkey where they were all arrested.

All four wives had already been deported to France.

Guiavarch, who had been the subject of an international arrest warrant, arrived in the French capital on Friday night before on Saturday being charged with association of a criminal terrorist organisation and financing terrorism, the Paris prosecutor said.

French authorities will now try to determine whether Guiavarch is truly reformed or part of a sleeper cell aiming to carry out attacks in France at a later date. (AFP)

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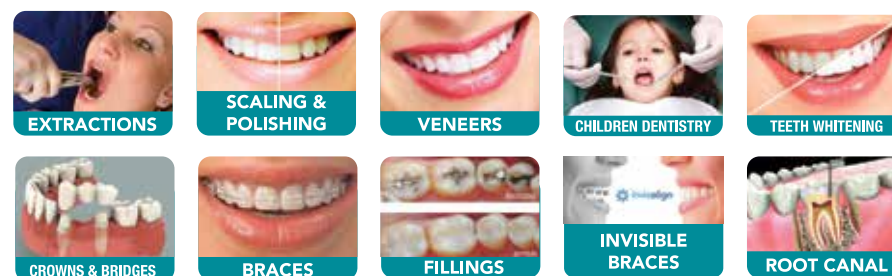


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