

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



January 30, 2017

## Astana Talks – Grist for the Mill

It is feared that the Syrian peace talks will come to a stalemate and civilian casualties will continue. It is estimated that more than 310,000 people have been killed in Syria since 2011. Syrians suffered severely under the deadly wars and had one of the largest numbers of refugees around the world. They bore the brunt of militancy carried out by the self-styled Islamic State (IS) group. Streams of blood were shed and scores of women and girls were dishonored, mainly by the IS fighters.

The unmitigated insurgency brought nothing for Syrians other than loss and destructions. It was believed that negotiation would put an end to the violence and bloodshed. Subsequently, delegations representing a group of the freedom-fighters attended peace talks in Astana, the Kazakh capital. The UN-hosted negotiations on the conflict planned for February 8 in Geneva have been, reportedly, postponed until the end of that month. However, the UN said it could not confirm the delay of the next round of talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. Representatives from armed opposition groups and Damascus were expected to hold their first face-to-face talks in Astana. But the rebels refused, citing truce violations, and mediators were forced to shuttle between the two sides. Key players Russia, Turkey and Iran backed the talks and the main result was an agreement by the three sides to try to shore up a shaky ceasefire on the ground in the war-torn country.

The delegations of Iran, Russia and Turkey, along with UN Security Council, made a joint statement in Moscow, on December 20, 2016. The statement said, "There is no military solution to the Syrian conflict and that it can only be solved through a political process based on the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 2254 in its entirety". It further added that they "will seek, through concrete steps and using their influence over the parties, consolidation of the ceasefire regime established pursuant to the arrangements signed on December 29, 2016 and supported by the UN Security Council resolution 2336 (2016), contribution to minimizing violations, reducing violence, building confidence...."

However, the delegations attended the talks did not represent all freedom-fighters. Perhaps one of the biggest examples of the disconnect between Syrians inside Syria and Syrians sitting at the negotiating table in Astana this week is seen in a video produced by Shaam News Network, in which several residents of the besieged al-Waar district in northern Homs, when asked about the negotiations, responded, "What talks?" Regarding the talks held in Astana, Osama Abu Zeid, who is the legal adviser to the Free Syrian Army and was an instrumental member of the negotiations committee during the pre-talks in Ankara and the actual talks in Astana, justified the committee's decision in a series of tweets, stressing that the only issues they discussed during the talks were the conditions of the ceasefire, complete cessation of hostilities, saving besieged areas, release of detainees and resuming service of the Ain el-Fijah spring. It is most likely that there is not a unanimous agreement over negotiation and some opposition groups may not be aware of it and not willing to attend it. In such a case, the preconditions, in case of being accepted by Assad's regime, will be violated by the discontented groups. After all, the strong presence of the IS group is highly challenging and their terrorist actions will linger for years.

In addition, the Syrians interviewed about the Astana talks who state two main reasons negotiations will continue to fail, no matter who is brokering them and no matter what implementation mechanisms are used: a lack of inner unity of purpose among the opposition and the absence of an external, international will to remove the regime and return Syria to its citizens. Since the Syria's conflict has been highly complicated for the presence of different groups, the unrest seems to increase civilian casualties and destroy the country. In other words, getting freedom would be a pyrrhic victory for Syrian nation and it is better to bring an end to violence instantaneously. In a nutshell, it would be naive of the Syrians to continue fighting, in which they pay large sacrifices without a palpable result. If the same trend continues, the tragic stories will repeat itself and the lives of many others will be lost.

The two warring sides will have to narrow the room for militancy through reinforcing ceasefire. Life and honor have been too cheap in that country. The flagrant violation of human rights and dignity is really outrageous. Moreover, it should be noted that the IS militants seek to implement their project there which is stoking sectarian violence and changing the unrest into an ideological war.

In such a case, Syrian nations will be divided into many groups which would be an irreparable loss to that country. It is further believed that the main purpose of the war, which was protecting the rights and liberty of the nation, has been forgotten. The war for peace has been changed into war for war by the IS fighters. The surge of emotions for revenge will never lead to peace, the negotiating parties will have to consider both sides of the coin and make a wise decision to end the turbulence.



## Constructive or Destructive Role of Media

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

The right to freedom of speech as one of the basic human rights enshrined in main international human rights documents and national law. Freedom of speech is the inseparable element of a democratic society: Whether the society is democratic or not, can be defined by the factor of independent press and mass media. The main functions of mass media are to cover the events, gather and spread information and finally to control the activities of state authorities. It used to be said that the mass media is the fourth power after the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. The society, in its turn, may exercise control over the authorities in case it is aware of its actions and if necessary can intervene; for instance through voting during the elections. Nevertheless, media can play destructive role, such as time killing movies, playing violence, divisive or hatred literacy, if it is not organized on the basis of national interests.

More clearly, the constructive role of media is that they have freely access to information so as to monitor and control over the state authorities exercised by the society and to the maintenance of the self-controlled society, which is the demand of democracy. The definition of a self-controlled society means that it itself shall make own decisions. And the society can do this in case it is informed in aggregate with the open exchange of opinions. Mass media as an instrument for the exercising of freedom of speech and expression gains importance for a democratic society. Hence, Political pundits believe when the people are aware of the facts, and the country will be calm.

According to Article 50 of the Afghan Constitution, "Right to Know" or "Right of Access to Information" is a fundamental human right for every Afghan citizen.

Playing an important role in the fight against corruption, the right to access information increases transparency, accountability, public participation, democracy, development and paves the way for journalists prepare investigative reports that inform the public. The limited access to information by citizens is an obstacle in fighting corruption and increase transparency and accountability. Access to information encourages citizen participation, ensures good governance and social inclusion, promotes free media and improves the efficiency of public institutions.

Also, according to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Conventions, to which Afghanistan is a signatory, the democratic states guarantee the right to freedom of speech and expression, which also provide restrictions and respect for these rights prescribed by law, as there is no freedom which is absolute and unlimited. Yes, it is necessary to exercise freedoms in order to have a democratic society, but their limitations are also needed for the maintenance of the democratic society.

And the most important in this issue is that the limits of freedom of speech correspond to the two key preconditions: necessity in a democratic society and statute-established, as the

rule of law is the basis for democracy. In order to specify the role of freedom of speech and expression in a democratic society, it is necessary to show the demands of democracy addressed to mass media: they shall criticize the authorities when state officials and politicians make mistakes; news shall stimulate criticizing attitude towards the political course of the authorities; news and entertaining programs shall be defined according to taste of audience.

However, there are exceptional cases such as protection of national security, promotion of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.

Overall, democracy is meaningless without Freedom of media and freedom of thoughts but in conflict or post-conflict countries such as Afghanistan- there is a dire need to promote media literacy as a safeguard against destructive and divisive strategy of enemies. Media literacy is also important for new or transitioning democracies. In these circumstances legal frameworks are usually under development and will greatly impact the future state of independent and free media. The greater the media literacy, the more prepared audiences (and information providers) will be in deciphering messages and recognizing value and credibility.

Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. Media literacy includes understanding code of conduct and knowing the quickly changing media landscapes. This is particularly relevant in today's age of social media, and ever developing media technology. Media literacy also involves recognition of the use of, and power of, subtext. Subtext is the context or background of the primary message and may include images, background audio, and framing, each of which conveys specific messages, associations, and insinuations.

To benefit from constructive role of media, media management is vitally important for nation building, peace and prosperity of a nation. It is highly important that our people realize that today's world is ruled by media monopolies; positively or negatively it can affects our thoughts, attitudes, society, families and future generation.

On the other hand, limitation of media is counted freedom of thoughts; therefore, it is greatly imperative to organize the media on the basis of national interests and convergence culture. Citizens can also play role if they are made aware that anything smells of division is either the movement of enemy or ignorant elements; they can be trained how to use new media (face-book, tweeter and etc) to participate or monitor social, political and administrative issues. In addition, new media can largely put an end to the monopoly of traditional media. Otherwise, it is obvious that a neglecting sheep nation will beget a government of wolves.

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## Theresa May's Trump Card

By Guy Verhofstadt

In the same week that British Prime Minister Theresa May outlined her vision for a "hard" Brexit from the European Union - withdrawing from the single market and the customs union - incoming US President Donald Trump met with Michael Gove, a leading Tory Euroskeptic. Gove was on hand for Trump's public announcement that the United States would move "very quickly" to reach a post-Brexit trade deal with the United Kingdom.

Not surprisingly, the UK's Brexiters are now touting a hypothetical trade deal with the US as a way to fill Britain's post-EU trade vacuum. But this could prove to be a hollow solution, given that the UK maintains a trade surplus with the US, and Trump is a vocal critic of American trade deficits. Meanwhile, many observers in continental Europe are wondering if the UK's pursuit of a bilateral deal with the US is just about economics, or if it implies a broader shift in British foreign policy.

The May government's recent behavior suggests that it is putting the new US administration's interests before those of the EU and the rest of the world. This approach was on full display in December, when May criticized then-US Secretary of State John Kerry's condemnation of Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank. But perhaps May's unorthodox intervention should not have come as a surprise, given that Trump tends to reward such disruptive behavior.

A second episode occurred earlier this month at a meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, where British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson vetoed an EU statement of support for an ongoing Middle East peace effort. The British government then refused to send a high-level delegation to a Middle East peace conference organized by the French government, arguing that it would send the wrong signal just four days before Trump took office. It is no secret where Trump stands with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict: throughout his campaign, he promised to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem - in clear violation of international law.

Meanwhile, there is some evidence to suggest that Trump's Euroskeptic team is influencing May's Brexit strategy. Johnson met with key members of Trump's administration just prior to May's recent speech, and we can safely assume that they discussed the UK's path out of the EU. Trump administration officials, for their part, have since suggested that they helped convince May to roll the dice on a hard Brexit.

This represents not only an astonishing reversal of US policy toward Europe - which has, for seven decades, unwaveringly supported European integration - but also a dramatic shift in the UK's external stance. May is apparently willing to gamble

her own country's future on an alliance with an unpopular, untested, and mendacious American president.

By courting Trump, White House Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon, and other Euroskeptic figures in the US administration, May's government is playing a dangerous and shortsighted game. In her recent speech, May claimed that "the UK is leaving the European Union, not Europe." But she would do well to remember that Britain's security and prosperity is primarily linked to the EU, not to an isolationist, "America first" US. The vast majority of the UK's trade is with the EU, not with the US; and this, like the UK's geographical location and security environment, is not going to change. By seeking a close relationship with both the Trump administration and the EU, May is trying to ride two horses at once. Trump has already questioned the EU's raison d'être, and suggested that the UK will not be the last country to exit the bloc. And Bannon has been a cheerleader for far-right European nationalist parties, promising to help National Front leader Marine Le Pen in her campaign for the French presidency this spring. If Trump continues to view NATO as "obsolete," or starts to tear down the pillars of the international order and the supranational organizations that have maintained global stability since 1945, he will undermine British, European, and US security. It is hard to see how a weakened EU, NATO, or United Nations could possibly be in anyone's interest. Trump's inaugural address suggested that the rest of the world has thrived at ordinary Americans' expense. He promised to "make America great again" by isolating it from all negative influences, limiting trade, and supporting "American-made" products. But if Trump goes down this path, he will make all countries, including the US, much poorer. And May, for her part, should realize that there isn't much room for the UK in an "America first" world.

Instead of pandering to the Trump administration, British and European leaders should be pointing out that American "greatness" rests on the strong multilateral institutions, close partnerships, and international rules that have long maintained global peace and stability. And leaders from both the UK and the EU should be forging a strategic partnership to ensure European security, now that Trump's presidency has cast US security guarantees into doubt. Lastly, UK and EU leaders should follow German Chancellor Angela Merkel's lead and make it clear to Trump that their cooperation is conditioned on shared values. Now, more than ever, Britain and the EU must defend and promote liberal democratic norms, not embrace populists' narcissistic nationalism. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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