



CIS Members Reject Russian Request for Assistance in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: In June 2017 the Russian government made a request to members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to provide a unit for a Russia-led mission in Syria, emphasizing peacekeeping. The governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both CSTO members and close partners of Russia, had been specifically mentioned in the request and each declined to provide peacekeepers unless they would be part of an official UN peacekeeping mission. The accompanying excerpted article from Azerbaijan reports on another request from the Russian government, this time for members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to get involved in reconstruction efforts in Syria. The article provides insight into how much cooperation members of organizations led by Russia are willing to provide.

The article comes from the online version of *Baki Xabar*, an Azerbaijani-language newspaper with ties to the government, and it reports on the request made by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at a recent meeting of the CIS Council of Defense Ministers. At the meeting, Shoigu again appealed to CIS members, this time to become involved in the reconstruction process, including “the demining of areas, joint patrols in de-escalation zones, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the restoration of infrastructure.” While Shoigu avoided calling it a peacekeeping mission, most of the tasks he mentions came up at the time of the CSTO request last year. The CSTO grew out of the framework of the CIS, but the latter organization’s Council of Defense Ministers includes all CSTO members (Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) plus Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

The article marks the only official public response to the request from a CIS member and while the response came from a deputy in Azerbaijan’s National Assembly, and not from the president or defense ministry, it is still notable considering the newspaper’s ties with the government. The response from the deputy mentions a couple of reasons why Azerbaijan rejected involvement in Syria. The deputy’s statement that “Azerbaijan should promote its own position rather than that of the CIS or any other party” and that officials there believe they “have not so far felt any serious support from the CIS on a number of global problems that we have faced” could have come from other CIS members, based on their past experiences with the organization and security issues.

The deputy notes that the government of Azerbaijan recognizes authorities in Syria and wants “a quicker end to the civil war,” but that it is opposed to “Syria’s position because it has supported the separatist regimes rebelling on Georgia’s sovereign territory.” The Syrian government officially recognized the independence of Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in May 2018. The deputy also mentions how the Azerbaijani government supports “Georgia’s position on this matter” and that “Azerbaijan itself as a country has been suffering from separatism.” The other CIS members have also stated they want an end to the war in Syria and though they do not have as good of relations with Georgia as Azerbaijan does, none have recognized the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Ultimately, while the other governments of CIS member states remained silent in response to the request, the response from Azerbaijan is an example of what one CIS member is willing to do with the organization. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**

Source: Mahammadali Garibli, “Rusiyanın MDB ölkələrinə ‘Suriyanın bərpasına qatılın’ çağırışı – məsələnin Azərbaycan üçün maraqlı nüansları... (Russia’s call to CIS Countries ‘To Join the Reconstruction of Syria’: the nuances of the issues for Azerbaijan),” *Baki Xabar*, 7 June 2018. <http://www.baki-xeber.com/siyaset/78538.html>

...Army General Sergey Shoigu, the Russian Defense Minister, has called on CIS member states to participate in the restoration of peaceful life in Syria. The Russian minister made this statement at the CIS Council of Defense Ministers’ meeting held in the town of Kyzyl, Republic of Tuva. “Today a large part of Syrian territory has been liberated from terrorists... All conditions have been created to settle the conflict by political means, and to revive Syria as a unified and indivisible state.” – said Shoigu...

In this vein, the Russian Defense Minister proposed that CIS member states participate in the reconstruction of Syria... “There is a wide spectrum of opportunities for our collaboration with regard to Syria. This includes the demining of areas, joint patrols in de-escalation zones, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the restoration of infrastructure. We hope for your support to demonstrate our unity in the fight against international terrorism and in the provision of general security...”

...Azerbaijan is also a member of the CIS. However, we, as a country have not so far felt any serious support from the CIS on a number of global problems that we have faced. Besides, Syria has recognized the “independence” of Georgia’s separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia... Georgia is Azerbaijan’s close neighbor and strategic partner. If we take into account all these factors, how should Azerbaijan respond to Russia’s proposal on Syria?

...Aydin Mirzazade, a National Assembly deputy, said in an interview with our newspaper that Azerbaijan is taking a balanced approach to these kinds of matters... “I think Azerbaijan can participate in these kinds of projects based only on bilateral agreements... Azerbaijan should promote its own position rather than that of the CIS or any other party... Azerbaijan does not intend to intervene in any other matters related to the civil war. Our country’s position on Syria is clear. We recognize the official authorities there, and wish for a quicker end to the civil war. As far as Georgia is concerned, we cannot share Syria’s position because it has supported the separatist regimes rebelling on Georgia’s sovereign territory. Since Azerbaijan itself as a country has been suffering from separatism, we support Georgia’s position on this matter.” (said Mirzazade)

“Azerbaijan should promote its own position rather than that of the CIS or any other party.”