

Jordan and the US- Russia Deal in Southern Syria

Joe Macaron

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After two months of secret negotiations in Amman, US and Russian officials reached a ceasefire agreement in southwestern Syria. While a few crucial details are not ironed out yet, the deal was announced following the July 8 meeting between US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Hamburg, Germany. The ceasefire, albeit fragile, is welcome news in Amman after the increased military operations and escalation of rhetoric with the Syrian regime this past spring. The US-Russian deal takes the pressure off Jordanian authorities and allows them to potentially expand their role further in the Syrian conflict. However, Syrian rebels in the southern front are resisting attempts to force a new status quo, while Iran is not committing any support to a deal it did not participate in making. The southern front is becoming a decisive battle of influence as local and regional players are racing to seize territorial gains across Syria. What happens in the coming weeks and months will test not only the US-Russian agreement but also Jordan's leverage in the southern front.

From a policy perspective, Jordanian authorities addressed the Syrian challenge in what can be described as a "Jordan first" policy, with primarily three objectives in mind: 1) resorting to surgical airstrikes or a "hit and withdraw" approach across the border when necessary; 2) aiming to establish a buffer zone for Syrian refugees to eventually return home; and 3) sponsoring Syrian opposition groups to safeguard the border and prevent the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the

Levant (ISIL) or Iranian-backed militias. The September 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria pushed Jordan to calibrate its policy on many fronts and further cement its balancing act among warring rivals. King Abdullah and President Putin reached an informal agreement where Russia does not target rebels in southern Syria with airstrikes in return for Jordan influencing these armed groups to focus on fighting ISIL instead of the Syrian regime. That Jordanian restriction often caused divisions among armed groups operating in the south, most notably those who wanted to take the fight to the Syrian regime.

Jordan's Challenges

In that context, the US-Russian deal reached last week breathes life again into Jordan's intricate policy in Syria. The truce will be monitored by Washington, Moscow, and Amman through satellite and drone images, observers on the ground, and a monitoring center. However, despite the announced ceasefire that began July 9 at noon Damascus time, warring parties did not stay completely put. While Russia refrained from launching airstrikes over southern Syria, the Syrian regime continued sporadic attempts to seize control of areas in the southern Deraa governorate while simultaneously withdrawing troops and Iranian-backed militias from Deraa toward Damascus.

The premature announcement of the ceasefire will not prevent the warring parties from racing to expand territorial gains until a more comprehensive agreement is reached between

Washington and Moscow. Among the remaining contested issues, two stand out: 1) while the areas covered by the ceasefire are clearly defined, no consensus has been reached yet on demarcating the areas to be held by the opposition and those to be held by the Syrian regime; and 2) the question of whether Russian police can be deployed on the ground to monitor the truce has not been resolved, as US and Israeli officials continue to have some reservations.

Jordanian concerns in southern Syria have evolved over time, most notably since January 2017 with the start of the Astana talks. Right after Trump was sworn in as president, King Abdullah visited Moscow and Washington and expressed concerns about ISIL's territorial gains in several villages in the Yarmouk River basin a few kilometers from the Jordanian border. During his second trip to Washington in April, the king had Iranian-backed militias on his mind, telling *The Washington Post*, "the Revolutionary Guard is about 70 kilometers away [in southern Syria]. If it is bad news for us, you have to put the Israeli equation into this." During that same trip, King Abdullah began to explore the idea of a ceasefire deal and suggested a policy recommendation to the Trump Administration: compromise with Russia on Crimea to get its help on Syria, and keep pro-Iranian groups away from southern Syria.

Abdullah's trip to Washington renewed the chatter about a possible US and Jordanian intervention in southern Syria, which was

further reinforced after the US-led annual joint military exercise, called Eager Lion, in Jordan last May. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mouallem warned on May 8 that "if the Jordanian forces entered without coordination with the Syrian government they will be considered as hostile forces." Furthermore, the Syrian regime accused Jordanian authorities of playing a role in the issuance of a document in March 2017 that proposes self-rule for the southern region of Syria, which is seen as encouraging federalism in the country.

While the Syrian regime has long been skeptical of Amman's role in the Syrian conflict, the mood among Jordan's ruling and military elites has always been against any direct intervention in Syria. Despite reassurances from Washington and Amman, the Syrian regime and the Iranian-backed militias exploited the tensions to make inroads in Deraa. Meanwhile, the US, Russian, and Jordanian talks were making steady progress, managing to de-escalate the rhetoric between Amman and Damascus. While there are no political or diplomatic relations between Jordanian authorities and the Syrian regime, their military leaderships have maintained an open channel since at least last December, which helped Moscow to contain the heightened tensions between both sides.

Challenges in Implementing the Ceasefire

US and Jordanian officials reportedly want the area from Quneitra through Deraa and al-Suweida until al-Tanf (where the US military base is located on the Damascus-Baghdad

highway) free from both Sunni extremist groups and pro-Iranian militants. Even if that precondition holds, there are several obstacles to such an objective, including the fact that the Syrian regime controls parts of al-Suweida governorate and in the last month has pounded areas in Deraa, seeking to expand territorial gains in the south. The Syrian regime and Iranian-supported groups are trying to force a new reality on the ground ahead of finalizing any deal with Russia and the United States.

If the July 9 ceasefire succeeds in pacifying the southern front, the expectation is that further steps will follow. In return for recognizing Jordan's influence in southern Syria and keeping Iranian-backed militias away from the Jordanian border, Russia has requested certain steps from Amman: 1) guaranteeing the participation of the Southern Front rebels in the Astana talks; 2) having the Syrian regime control the al-Nasib border crossing with Jordan; and 3) initiating reconciliation attempts between the Syrian regime and opposition groups operating in southern Syria.

Jordan will undoubtedly face challenges in implementing its part of the deal. The Southern Front, a loose umbrella of Syrian opposition groups established in February 2014, declined to attend the Astana talks in early July and announced it would not abide by its decisions. The Syrian opposition fears a division between the north and south of the country if such a ceasefire goes through, and the US-Russian-Jordanian machinations are exacerbating the already existing tensions between the different

factions of the opposition. Armed groups in the north would like to unite with the Southern Front while criticizing the secret deal between Washington, Moscow, and Amman. They also assert that the US-Russian deal is a recognition of Iran's influence just 70 kilometers away from the Jordanian border, beyond the agreed ceasefire line, and refuse to give up control of the al-Nasib crossing to the Syrian regime. Furthermore, Jordanian authorities want the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to focus on the fight against the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Army, an Islamist group that pledged allegiance to ISIL in May 2016; however, the FSA is increasingly invested in repelling attacks by the Syrian regime.

While Amman maintains that no Jordanian troops will be deployed inside the Syrian border, it remains to be seen if pro-Jordanian FSA fighters and the Syrian regime will agree to work together or if Iran will negotiate the existence of a US-Jordanian sphere of influence in the south in return for an Iranian supply route to the Levant that goes through Iraq and Syria. A Jordanian official said that the international community, regional powers, and Jordan will not tolerate having "a land line all the way from Tehran to Beirut." In return, Iran affirmed that it is not bound by and will not act as a guarantor for the US-Russian deal but will continue to consult with Moscow on the Astana process. It is unclear whether Moscow will have enough leverage to persuade Iran to stay away from the south unless there are larger agreements that cover the rest of Syria.

Potential Scenarios Moving Forward

Jordanian authorities have long held the view that establishing a buffer zone is the most effective way to address the border challenge with Syria; the dilemma was whether that goal should be accomplished by carrying out a limited US-Jordanian military intervention or by reaching a US-Russian deal. However, Jordanian officials often feel that their American counterparts do not take their border concerns seriously and that, despite Russian reassurances, the Russians are playing into the hands of the Iranians. Considering that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is distracted by its own crisis and the United States continues to lack a clear post-ISIL strategy, Jordan will have to make its own calculations regarding Syria. Amman's only alternative to confrontation with the Syrian regime is to hang on to the US-Russian agreement while coordinating covertly with Israel and keeping Iranian militias at a distance.

If the US-Russian deal completely collapses it will be hard to extend the ceasefire to other parts of Syria, and that will most likely put at risk the Astana process altogether. However, if the ceasefire holds and evolves, Amman will be able to play a mediation role in the Syrian conflict as well as in reconstruction efforts in the south. Jordanian authorities might have to find a way to have direct contact with both the Iraqi and Syrian governments without endangering the Southern Front coalition that believes the US-Russian deal does not take their interests into consideration. Washington and Amman

have significant influence on the Syrian armed groups via the US-led Military Operations Center (MOC) and it is yet to be seen how that leverage can be used to persuade them to endorse a ceasefire the US considers a "priority."

Meanwhile, and through letters instead of high-level engagement, American officials are assuring (AR) the Syrian opposition that the ceasefire will not be a preamble for dividing Syria. It will be hard to see how that deal will go through without a buy-in from the Southern Front, or despite an Iranian veto. The Syrian opposition should be consulted as Moscow is mandated to reach an understanding with Tehran on the parameters of the deal. Negotiating a ceasefire in southern Syria outside the de-escalation zones agreed upon in the Astana process raises questions about the viability of the Astana talks moving forward. The US needs to have a clear political strategy before negotiating any long-term ceasefire, while the Syrian opposition groups will have to determine what their options are and the limits of their influence on developments in Syria.

If King Abdullah decides to go along with the Russian engagement and reopen direct contacts with Bashar al-Asad's regime, that move will most likely require scaling back support for Syrian rebels. Jordan will have to balance between engaging the Syrian regime and the need to have Syrian rebels control a buffer zone that allows the return of Syrian refugees. Jordan's intricate policy in Syria will emerge as the most probable winner of any successful US-

Russian deal, but it would also most likely be the first victim of its collapse. The recent ceasefire agreement and the Syrian regime's military campaigns, along with the Astana

process, have placed the Southern Front, and Amman, at a turning point where Jordan might have to decide which side to take. Jordan might be approaching a moment of truth in Syria.

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