



## Doomed to fail: Syria is not ready for a ceasefire

*September 22, 2016*

*By Joe Macaron*

For the second time in nearly six months, Washington and Moscow are striving to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria. The ultimate objective of establishing a Joint Implementation Center to coordinate their airstrikes against common enemies remains unattainable, as both the US and Russia have diverging interests in the war-torn country and no control over the ground game.

While the September 9 ceasefire agreement addressed some of the deficiencies of its antecedent last February, the major oversight of the current deal is a recurrent dismissal of the Syrian conflict's dynamics. Yet, for years now the international efforts to bring together the regime and the opposition have repeatedly failed as well as the attempts to bridge the divide between the two major regional backers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, while the Turkish intervention in northern Syria on August 24 added a new layer of complexity. The incessant talks between Washington and Moscow are now the only open communication channel among the warring domestic and regional parties involved in Syria. Yet, three major trends explain why this arduous engagement has been futile:

### **I. The trust gap**

There is undoubtedly a trust gap that runs deep in the White House-Kremlin relation. The detailed language of the ceasefire agreement, that was leaked to the Associated Press in September 22, reflects this trust gap rather than the scope of the intended cooperation. Moscow wanted all along to have closer military coordination with Washington in Syria, a move the US has resisted for a while to avoid giving legitimacy to the Russian intervention or be seen as indirectly propping up Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been seeking two main concessions from the White House: disentangling Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate now known as "Jabhat Fateh el-Sham", from the Syrian rebels; and a political process without the precondition of having Syrian President Bashar Assad step down. While the death toll and budgetary cost of its Syrian intervention have been rising since last August, Moscow seems more willing at this point to merely engage Washington instead of offering any tangible compromise.

In return, the US administration is beginning to lose patience as displayed in its diplomatic offensive against Russia at the United Nations. Kerry suggested in a speech before the Security Council on September 21 to “immediately ground all aircraft flying in those key areas to de-escalate the situation and give a chance for humanitarian flow unimpeded”. This temporary move might allow aid to reach rebel areas if Russia voluntarily accepted this confidence building measure. Hours after Kerry’s offer, Moscow announced plans to send its aircraft carrier off the Syrian coast.

What is fueling the trust gap is the perception on both sides. Washington thinks Moscow is only eager to defeat Jabhat al-Nusra and is unwilling to pressure Assad while Moscow thinks Washington is eager to open the front against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Raqqa and is unwilling to pressure Syrian rebels.

## **II. The non-signatory partners**

When the Syrian regime on September 19 declared the ceasefire is over, Kerry told reporters in New York that “the Syrians didn’t make the deal; the Russians made the agreement”. Indeed, the major challenge facing the ceasefire is the fact that the non-signatory parties of the agreement are reluctant to accept it and are not bound by its clauses.

While Iran and the Assad regime are often skeptical of Russia’s long term intentions and commitment to the battle in Syria, there is at least a minimal trust in Moscow leading the talks with Washington. Actually, the pressure on Iran’s overt involvement in Syria has significantly decreased since last September when Russia directly intervened to alter the military balance on the ground.

In return, the sense of distress among the Syrian opposition comes from a belief that unlike Russia’s open military support, the US continues to be adamant about any kind of direct military support for the Syrian rebels seeking to topple Assad. While the White House considers taking sides in the Syrian war will harm US national security, including the priority of defeating ISIL, the Syrian opposition thinks that Obama’s weak hand is emboldening Assad.

While negotiating the ceasefire, both the United States and Russia were concerned about falling short of the expectations of their respective domestic and regional allies involved in the Syrian conflict.

### III. The ground game

It has been clear since last February that the calculus of the battleground in Syria trumps the calculus of the ceasefire talks between Washington and Moscow. Indeed, both the regime and the rebels are neither convinced to forsake the military option nor satisfied with the current geographical boundaries of the conflict. The regime argues that the rebels will use the ceasefire to acquire more weapons and fighters across the Turkish border, and the rebels contend that the regime is gaining legitimacy and time to regroup. Ironically, both sides of the conflict are requesting verification mechanisms to make sure the elements of the ceasefire agreement are enforced.

There is a false assumption in both Washington and Moscow that they can guarantee the ground game by simply providing air power to their respective allies. When the current ceasefire deal was announced, Kerry said that “if groups within the legitimate opposition want to retain their legitimacy, they need to distance themselves in every way possible” from ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra. Not only there were punitive measures instead of incentives for the Syrian rebels to disengage from Jabhat al-Nusra, airstrikes will not be enough to eradicate the al-Qaeda affiliate as ground forces are needed to complete the mission. Syrian rebels issued a statement on September 12 arguing that the ceasefire threatens “the future of the revolution” and might allow regime forces to seize control of strategic areas. And they declined to fight Jabhat al-Nusra or any other armed groups fighting the regime. Even the establishment of demilitarized areas around Aleppo, as mentioned in the ceasefire agreement, will not likely be feasible unless there is an acceptable third party on the ground able to enforce it.

Furthermore, the most important game changer in Syria since last February is the fact that US and Russia are no longer the only foreign powers influential in Syria’s battlefield. One of the major shortcomings of the September 12 ceasefire is that it did not take into account the implication of the Turkish intervention last August. Turkey is now consolidating its control over rebel forces in northern Syria. The “Ahrar al-Sham” movement, a coalition of Islamist and Salafist groups backed by Ankara, issued a Fatwa on September 20 allowing its militants to fight along Turkish troops against ISIL and Syrian Kurdish forces. This will likely set the stage for further confrontation in northern Syria. The rationale of the fatwa was to help liberate the areas under ISIL control to make sure they do not fall in the hands of YPG, describing them as “enemies of the revolution”. Meanwhile the White House is considering a plan to directly arm Syrian Kurdish forces to expedite the fight against ISIL in Raqqa.

The ceasefire did not recognize at least the need to have a separate truce between the Turkish army and the Kurdish forces in northern Syria.

### **Is the ceasefire doomed to fail?**

There are signs of US and Russian fatigue from the Syrian conflict. Washington is hoping to prevent further attacks on the Syrian opposition and to help contain the conflict in return for sharing some intelligence information with Moscow. Unlike last February when the Assad regime was advancing across Syria, Moscow recognizes now the military stalemate in Aleppo and the limits of airpower. However, the domestic players and their regional backers are eager to stay in the battlefield. The Syrian army already started an offensive on September 23 to tighten the pressure east of Aleppo and will likely try to expand territorial gains in Damascus suburbs and Homs while the Syrian rebels are likely expected to do a push in Aleppo's country side and in Hama. Yet, a drastic change in the military balance of power is not expected in the foreseeable future.

Simply put, the Syrian regime is not keen to end the sieges and airstrikes while the Syrian opposition will not want the ceasefire to hold for a week as it will be followed by airstrikes on Jabhat al-Nusra. It is good to agree on bombing ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, however who will follow through on the ground if both US and Russia are understandably not ready to deploy troops. The program of arming the Syrian rebels to exclusively fight ISIL has miserably failed as well as the initiative to have the regime forces and rebel groups separately combat ISIL militants instead of each other. The nationwide ceasefire concept has been failing in Syria for years now. The better approach in the last two months of the US administration might be to deal separately with local and regional ceasefires, in particular Aleppo and the areas alongside the Syrian-Turkish border. The ceasefire should not be a prerequisite and has to take into consideration what comes after in the political process.

Considering Washington's cautious approach, engaging Russia is the only plausible route to contain the Syrian conflict compared to the alternative of dealing with Iran or Assad himself. Yet, Washington has yet to articulate a Syria strategy with a clear intent that goes beyond fighting ISIL. The US-Russian agreement is a necessary yet not sufficient precondition to enforce a ceasefire. A top down resolution of the Syrian conflict by the US and Russia will not yield results if the regional backers are not involved or willing to be involved in the process and if the concerned Syrian players have no say in the outcome or are not ready yet to talk.