

The Precariousness of the De-Escalation Zones in Syria

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Although the Russia-Turkey-Iran agreement on de-escalation zones in Syria was announced with boastful statements, ongoing clashes on the designated zones point to serious impediments in implementing the ceasefire on the ground. “We as guarantors...will do everything for this to work,” declared Russian President Vladimir Putin in his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who in turn said that the agreement will solve “50 percent of the Syrian issue.” The Syrian opposition groups, however, criticized the overall Astana process, noting that the de-escalation zones could result in partitioning “the country through vague meanings.”

According to a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry, the agreement suggests that the guarantor states—Russia-Turkey-Iran—may deploy “armed monitors” to implement four separate de-escalation zones, which include (1) Idlib province and the adjoining districts of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia provinces (2) northern Homs province (3) the eastern Ghouta region of the capital Damascus and (4) along the Jordanian border in southern Syria, i.e. Deraa and Al-Quneitra provinces. The Syrian regime already rejected the idea of armed monitors patrolling the safe zones, welcoming only Russian “military police” who are already on the ground in these areas. On May 18th, a Joint Working Group of the guarantor states will begin discussing the specifics of the ground implementation and will finalize maps of the de-escalation zones by June 4th.

Given the fact that neither the Assad regime nor the Syrian opposition has signed the recent agreement, maintaining the de-escalation zones could be an arduous task. Three major problems arise (1) the Assad regime’s militaristic interpretation of the agreement and reluctance to provide “rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access” and “measures to restore basic infrastructure facilities,” which are stated as essential elements in the agreement, (2) the opposition’s deep skepticism and internal divisions, and (3) the potential provocations by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other al-Qaida affiliates to disrupt the process. These are nestled among the rebels in all proposed de-escalation zones and are most powerful in the Idlib region and its surroundings—a critical zone that could determine the fate of the agreement.

Doubts about the Assad Regime’s Compliance

Despite its declaration to abide by the agreement, the Syrian regime’s foremost emphasis was placed, and remains, on the fight against al-Qaida affiliated groups, instead of the details of restoring infrastructure in the de-escalation zones. Damascus does not hide its desire to see infighting among Syrian opposition groups, as was apparent from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem’s calling on Syrian rebel groups to focus on fighting extremists if they wanted to benefit from de-escalation: “It is the duty of these armed groups to force al-Nusra Front and others to leave these zones until the areas really become de-

escalated," he said. Moreover, the Assad regime emphasized its plan to launch a major military campaign in eastern Syria, targeting the oil rich Deir ez-Zor region. Thus, the Syrian government appears to perceive the "de-escalation zones" agreement as an opportunity to expand its influence in the strategic areas near the Iraqi border.

In fact, right after the agreement, the Syrian military quickly resumed its east Palmyra offensive and further engaged in difficult fighting with the Free Syrian Army and Kurdish YPG forces to capture the Deir ez-Zor surroundings that are currently held by the so-called Islamic State. Sealing the Iraqi border is highly critical for the Assad regime not only to secure eastern Syria's oil resources but also to ease military coordination with Iran.

Such a militaristic focus of the Assad regime raises major questions for the Syrian opposition. Previous ceasefire accords, including the first Astana track, signed in December 2016, have mostly helped the regime to advance its agenda and to claim more territory from rebel-held areas. Although Damascus was not the only party to be blamed for breaking ceasefire agreements, the regime has been too reluctant to allow humanitarian corridors that ultimately led to breakdowns of negotiations. As Aaron Lund accurately observes, "the rebels have certainly also been truculent and unreliable negotiators, but the government's behavior is far more consequential since it holds most of the prisoners, is in charge of most of the sieges, and can control UN and Red Crescent access."

The current agreement is far more demanding from the Assad regime as it does not only call for "conditions to deliver medical aid to the local population and to meet basic needs of civilians" but also "conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons." It is still unclear how Russia, if ever, will be decisive enough to enforce implementation of safety regulations for the refugees and other civilians. Such details in the provisions are apparently left vague for future talks in Astana. Thus, the Syrian opposition has legitimate reasons to be skeptical about the future of the de-escalation zones.

Internal Divisions Are the Achilles' Heel of the Syrian Opposition

The Syrian opposition's deep skepticism stems not only from the politics of the regime but also from Tehran's role. In their joint declaration, the opposition groups put Iran as the number one problem in their list of concerns and rejected its role as guarantor. Shia militias are expected to join the Assad regime's major offensive in eastern Syria—with Hezbollah moving from central Syria and Iraqi Shia groups pushing from the east—as the agreement has freed many Hezbollah fighters across the country.

Yet, the question of how to deal with the Shia militias as well as with the Turkish role is hotly contested among opposition groups. As the sole guarantor that supports opposition demands in the agreement, Ankara has an overwhelming burden to convince numerous groups.

Some opposition groups expressed their sympathy for a potential Turkish incursion into Idlib to monitor the implementation of the de-escalation zones. Others questioned Turkey's intention in the agreement. None of the designated zones are Kurdish enclaves where Turkey continues to pursue its war against the People's Protection Units (YPG). If Russia does not support YPG forces in the Afrin region any more, then Turkey will be able to effectively obstruct their goal to unite the Kurdish cantons, if not totally claiming the western part of the Euphrates which is not under US protection. The allegations that Ankara could sell out Idlib for the sake of its interests put severe pressure on the Turkish government, which earlier faced similar allegations after the fall of Aleppo. As a surprising counter-move, the YPG leadership began to seek negotiations with the Assad regime over a potential role in the fight against common enemies in the Idlib region; and thus potentially opening the Mediterranean route for the Kurdish cantons' economic independence.

The Spoiler Problem

Potential spoilers who feel threatened are a main impediment in most civil war ceasefire accords. It will thus not be surprising to witness Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and other al-Qaida affiliated groups—who hold northwestern Syria—spoil the agreement and escalate violence in case they feel vulnerable. In fact, HTS already declared that the group will fight to the death to defend its positions.

It is also important to consider how HTS carefully avoided al-Qaida propaganda to gain legitimacy after rebranding itself on January 28, 2017. The group is the outgrowth of failed merger talks between Ahrar al-Sham and the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS)—which was known as al-Nusra Front until it renounced formal ties with al-Qaeda in July 2016—after the fall of Aleppo. Those who split from the Ahrar al-Sham joined the effort to rebrand JFS under the name of Liberation of the Levant Organization (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) led by Hashim al-Sheikh, who once was the head of the Ahrar al-Sham. One of the groups joining HTS is the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement, which was perceived as one of the strongest moderate factions within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighting around Aleppo. The group's gradual shift toward more radical forces appears to be a strategic calculation to assure its financial wellbeing instead of an ideological move.

Thus, it is unrealistic to expect the Syrian opposition to declare an all-out war on HTS, especially in the Idlib region where it remains a dominant ground force. Such a move would further strengthen the regime's hand. Ironically, however, that seems to be the very expectation of the Syrian government from the opposition as plainly evident in Muallem's remarks. Perhaps, the Assad regime's realistic expectation is to increase the rift among Syrian opposition groups where HTS is not the dominant group such as in eastern Ghouta near Damascus. For example, the Jaish Al-Islam, a group that supports the Astana process, launched an attack on HTS on April 28th in that area.

Moreover, despite being a guarantor state, Iran may prove to be a spoiler of the Astana process as well. Washington is aware of the fact that Russia and Iran pursue divergent interests in Syria—while the former seeks long-term stability, the latter prefers a malleable Syrian regime that accommodates Shia militias. Whatever the outcome of the Iranian elections, the rising nationalist tide in Tehran may perceive de-escalation zones as dangerous to Iran's long-term ambitions.

Will Washington Drift from the Obama Policy?

Washington's policies will arguably be most critical in shaping the future of the de-escalation zones. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Washington points to Moscow's belief that the counter-terrorism focus may assure American-Russian cooperation on the de-escalation zones and thus the Astana track may pave the way for regime stability in Syria. Washington's criticism of the agreement's vague approach on most critical issues—such as how the safety of civilians would be guaranteed, what the future of the refugees in safe zones would be, and whether local law enforcement is done via patrolling, etc.—was helpful to voice the legitimate concerns of the opposition.

On the other hand, if the Trump administration accepts the Kremlin's offer to prioritize attacking Al-Qaida affiliated groups by mobilizing the Syrian opposition, the Assad

regime may be emboldened to gain strongholds in central and eastern Syria. Washington now considers merging 17 FSA groups—estimated at 30,000 fighters in total—into one faction in order to counter al-Qaida. If such a merger is realized, it will mark a significant shift from the Obama administration's approach to work with smaller opposition factions to retain US influence over them.

Unifying the Syrian opposition will be most difficult in the Idlib region—the largest area designated as a safe zone—since it may lead to a feeling of imminent threat by HTS and other potential spoilers. In the past year, US airstrikes targeted al-Qaida members; yet, the lack of a ground force to spot targets caused problems including high civilian death tolls. Hoping to gain more influence on the ground, the Pentagon helped three well established FSA groups form the Free Idlib Army (FIA) in September 2016. FIA leadership, however, has systematically been attacked by extremist groups.

The Assad regime's eastern Syria offensive also raises questions about Washington's plans for post-ISIS Raqqa. It is important to note that Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa governorates have never been fully integrated into the Syrian state. For decades, the local Sunni Arab tribes complained that their rich oil reserves were exploited blatantly. As supporting both Syrian Kurds from the north and FSA from the south, the US-led coalition will soon need hard diplomatic negotiations because of the rapprochement between the Syrian regime and the Kurdish forces.

After the de-escalation zones agreement, Damascus called the armed Kurdish groups as “legitimate” for the first time. The Assad regime’s calculation of a rift among Kurdish forces and Arab tribes will be a major challenge for Washington, especially if YPG forces overstretch by moving deep into southeastern Syria. Recent gains by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) on the adjacent Iraqi side of the border—the Sinjar region—already met with Turkey’s airstrikes and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) attacks.

Hence, Washington needs to navigate how to manage conflicting demands and feuds among its own allies in the Syrian war. The Trump administration’s recent decision to arm YPG with heavier weapons may risk further

alienation of Turkey, triggering future tensions on the ground. It is important to note that some former diplomats suggested arming Syrian Kurds and simultaneously helping Turkey’s fight with the PKK—an almost impossible task. Erdoğan’s upcoming visit to Washington will not likely change the White House’s decision, but the conditions of the armaments—whether for the exclusive use for the Raqqa operation or as a “loan” that would be repaid in the future—may be negotiable.

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