



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Russia Proves that the De-Escalation Zones were a Means to a Military End

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2018

Russia and the Syrian De-Escalation Zones

Series: Situation Assessment

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2018

Copyright © 2018 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Creating the De-Escalation Zones, and Destroying Them	4
Dividing Syria into Strongholds	7
Conclusion	8

Introduction

Following the leaking of the contents of a Russian-Israeli understanding over a “De-Escalation Zone” in southwestern Syria, the Syrian regime began a military campaign to seek to forcefully take a number of territories in the region in question which had been under opposition control. Replaying the same sequence of events which had happened in Homs and in East Ghouta, the regime intends to force the armed opposition groups to surrender. This raises the question of whether the Russian intention in creating the De-Escalation Zones had been merely a ploy to destroy the opposition.

Creating the De-Escalation Zones, and Destroying Them

Moscow spearheaded the Astana peace process, with talks located in the Kazakh capital, following a Russian-Turkish understanding in December of 2016 which saw Syrian opposition factions withdrawing from their strongholds to the east of Aleppo and the regime’s capture of the country’s second-most important city and its surrounding governorate. Iran later joined the group of nations acting as “guarantors” of Syrian peace negotiations. One of the fruits of the Astana process was the creation of four separate “De-Escalation Zones” in four Syrian regions: Idlib Governorate; in the countryside north of Homs; East Ghouta; and in the south of Syria¹.

Seemingly motivated by a desire to contain Iranian influence, Moscow coordinated the actual implementation of the De-Escalation Zones with a number of different external parties. The details of the southwestern De-Escalation Zone were hammered out with the US on the sidelines of a G20 Summit held in Hamburg in July, 2017 with Jordanian input taken into account in a separate meeting in November of that year. Also in July, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that Egyptian-led mediation had allowed for the conclusion of an agreement with Syrian opposition factions to reduce tensions in East Ghouta and in the countryside north of Homs as well as to the south of Hama. In September of last year, the three guarantors of the Astana Process further arrived at an agreement on the details on the reduction of tensions in the Idlib Governorate, which also covered areas in the governorates of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia. Under Egyptian auspices, the Russians and Syrian opposition

¹ See earlier Situation Assessments by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, [here](#) and [here](#).

fighters agreed to extend the terms of their truce to the southern areas of the Rif Dimashq Governorate.

Just as it was putting the finishing touches on plans for the De-Escalation Zones, Moscow entered into a fray with the US over the areas that had previously been controlled by ISIL. While the Americans were able to leverage the power of Kurdish groups allied to them to capture territories to the east of the Euphrates, Russian forces were able to capture large swathes of land to the west of the Euphrates, and in fact Russia ended up capturing most of the territory once held by ISIL. The Kremlin was able to declare that the goal of completely defeating ISIL in Syria was “nearly complete” and to announce the beginning of the withdrawal of its troops from the country². By this time, this had become an established tactic employed by Putin since the beginning of Russian involvement in Syria—always ready to announce the beginning of the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria, but never fulfilling this stated aim.

Russia was in fact making preparations for a new series of military operations aimed at the destruction of the armed opposition within the areas it had previously agreed to designate “De-Escalation Zones”. This began in earnest following a visit by Russian President Putin to the Hmeimeim Air Field, after which Russia and her Syrian allies used their military might to pound opposition-held territories in Idlib Governorate, regions previously taken to be in the De-Escalation Zones. After three days of operations, Russia’s Chief of Staff, General Valery Gerasimov claimed that Moscow’s new strategic objective in Syria would be the complete annihilation of the Islamist opposition group Jabhat Al Nusra within the De-Escalation Zones³. The beginning of this new campaign coincided with Russian-Turkish discussions over the involvement of Turkish forces in Afrin (in the north of Syria) and their engagement of Kurdish forces in that region. It also coincided with a critical juncture in the discussions at the Russian city of Sochi⁴. With Ankara given a green light to take action against Kurdish groups in the north of the Aleppo Governorate, Syrian regime forces were able to take total control of the Abu Dhour Air Field in the eastern reaches of the Idlib Governorate following crushing battles which eventually prompted Turkey’s first direct anti-regime military intervention in the conflict,

² Andrew Osborn, “Putin, in Syria, says mission accomplished, orders partial Russian pull-out,” *Reuters*, 11 December, 2017, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-putin/putin-in-syria-says-mission-accomplished-orders-partial-russian-pull-out-idUSKBN1E50X1>

³ See Nourhan El-Sheikh, “Russia and the Fate of Al-Nusra: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Expert Opinions, Valdaia Discussion Club*, 30 January, 2018, available online: <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-the-fate-of-al-nusra-opportunities-and/>

⁴ Oliver Carroll, “Russian Syria peace talks achieve little beyond further division as fighting continues in Afrin,” *The Independent*, 30 January, 2018, available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-civil-war-russia-sochi-talks-assad-lavrov-protests-boycott-a8186371.html>

after Damascus had violated the terms of an agreement known as the Hejaz Railway Truce. Under the terms of that agreement, the region to the east of the old Hejaz Railroad and until the Aleppo-Homs Highway would be a zone for Russian operations against the Nusra Front. Meanwhile, the region stretching west from the Railroad towards the governorate of Latakia would be a safe zone for the opposition forces⁵.

One consequence of the Russian-Turkish understandings that allowed Ankara to act against forces in Afrin in exchange for compelling opposition factions to take part in the Sochi talks is that it allowed the Damascus regime to turn its attention away from the action in Idlib and towards East Ghouta instead⁶.

Speaking on the eve of the assault on East Ghouta, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov explained that the pattern learned in the "liberation" of Aleppo could be repeated again in the region surrounding the Syrian capital⁷. Only a few short days later, the regime capitalized on Russian support to take complete control of areas in the Ghouta, forcing the opposition factions to leave and to accept humiliating conciliation agreements⁸.

Shortly after completing its task in the East Ghouta, the regime turned its attention to the Qalamoun region to the west of the capital where the opposition factions met the same fate. The regime further moved against opposition factions in a number of towns on the outskirts of the capital: Babila, Bait Sahem and Yalda, as well as towns in the northern part of the Homs Governorate as well as in the southern regions of the Hama Governorate. By the end, the only anti-regime faction left was a small contingent loyal to ISIL and based in the District of Hajr Al Aswad to the south of the capital, a group which was eventually persuaded to leave. One further set of negotiations led to an Islamist faction leaving the Yarmouk Camp for Palestinian refugees, in exchange for a population exchange which saw Shia communities who had been

⁶ See, "Syria government makes Ghouta gains; Turkey steps up Afrin attack," *Reuters*, 3 March, 2018, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-government-makes-ghouta-gains-turkey-steps-up-afrin-attack-idUSKCN1GF0L8>; See also, Leonid Issaev, "Why is Russia helping Turkey in Afrin?," *Al Jazeera Online*, 29 January, 2018, available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-helping-turkey-afrin-180125122718953.html>

⁷ See, Ellen Francis and Angus McDowall, "More bombs hit Syria's Ghouta, death toll highest since 2013," *Reuters*, 20 February, 2018, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/more-bombs-hit-syrias-ghouta-death-toll-highest-since-2013-idUSKCN1G40N8>

⁸ See, "The Siege of East Ghouta," Situation Assessment Series, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1 March, 2018, available online: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Battale-of-Ghouta.aspx>

living under Iranian protection leave the towns of Kafraya and Foua in the outskirts of Idlib Governorate⁹.

Dividing Syria into Strongholds

With the regime quickly approaching its aim of ridding the areas under its control, in what it calls “Useful Syria” or “Loyal Syria” of opposition factions, the Syrian regime will face localized pockets of armed opposition groups only in the southwest of the country (surrounding the governorates of Quneitra and Deraa)—where the De-Escalation Zones are subject to Russian-American-Jordanian backing—and in the region surrounding Idlib Governorate—where Turkey, Iran and Russia are involved in ensuring de-escalation. To understand how the Syrian regime’s strategy unraveled, it is important to understand how Syria was effectively divided into four distinct “De-Escalation Zones”:

- The first is what is known as “Loyal Syria” or “Useful Syria” by the regime: completely under regime control, action in these regions is governed by a series of understandings between Iran, Russia and the regime, notwithstanding some undeclared competition between Moscow and Tehran. Bashar Al Assad has sought to consolidate power in these areas by issuing laws by presidential decree which grant municipal authorities the right to appropriate the property of displaced persons¹⁰.
- The region to the east of the Euphrates, in addition to two pockets in Tanf and Rakban, which are governed in accordance to agreements signed by international guarantors in Hamburg and in Da Nang (Vietnam). Washington has repeatedly demonstrated its resolve to the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian backers to maintain the stability of these regions. France and Saudi Arabia share US concern with the territories to the east of the Euphrates, while Turkish officials have further expressed their own government’s concern with the fate of this region, particularly the areas around Qamishli and Raqqa in the Hassaka Governorate.
- The frontier buffer zone along the northeastern edge of the Aleppo Governorate and extending to the northwest of the Latakia Governorate. The Turkish government, overseer of this last

⁹ For background, see “Russian Military Strategy Across Syria, Negotiating Tactics in Geneva,” Assessment Report (Situation Assessment) Series, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 18 February, 2016, available online:

https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Russian_Military_Strategy_across_Syria_Negotiating_Tactics_in_Geneva.aspx

¹⁰ Arwa Ibrahim, “Syria: ‘Absentees law’ could see millions of refugees lose lands,” *Al Jazeera Online*, 7 April, 2018, available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-absentees-law-millions-refugees-lose-lands-180407073139495.html>

region, has used its military muscle to add Afrin to that region. The Hejaz Railway Truce has also allowed Turkey to place a number of observation posts along a number of positions in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Latakia and Aleppo; one such outpost lies 200 km within Syrian territory. This frontier buffer zone is governed by a series of agreements between Russia and Turkey, and which Iran seeks to join. This region in particular is overrun by active armed factions, with its towns and cities serving as the final refuge of opposition groups pushed out of other regions.

- The southwestern region of Syria governed under a tripartite Russian-American-Jordanian agreement, joined in two separate occasions in the second half of 2017. This has not stopped the regime from violating the terms of the De-Escalation agreement and attacking the opposition groups in these territories. Thus far, Moscow has refused Jordanian requests to help ensure that the Syrian regime will not attack civilians and opposition supporters in Deraa within that. The Russians' Lavrov has insisted that the terms of the De-Escalation agreements were never intended to protect "terrorists" hiding in those areas. In contrast, Russia has been able to weigh in on Israel and to arrange for the Syrian regime to deploy its forces across the south of the country, provided that Iranian forces and Tehran-backed militia be moved away from the Golan Heights. This appears to be part of a wider understanding between Moscow and Washington which would see the eventual rehabilitation of the Syrian regime on the world stage, provided that it cut its links with Tehran.

Conclusion

Time has shown that the De-Escalation Zones were a Russian ploy all along, with their main aim being to pave the road for an eventual military resolution to the conflict in Syria and, specifically, to militarily crush the armed opposition factions, putting paid to any notions of a negotiated political settlement with an eventual transfer of power. Recent military gains have meant that the regime is even less likely to engage seriously with the ongoing Geneva peace process. The regime delegation refused even to take part in any meaningful dialogue during the last round of talks held in December, 2017.

With Putin's last electoral victory, Russia is also now better placed to avoid being drawn into more involvement in the Geneva process. What has become patently clear is Moscow's desire to completely destroy what remains of the De-Escalation Zones in both the southwest and northwest of Syria, and to replace the Geneva track with the negotiations currently underway and led by Russia itself in Sochi and Astana. By changing the facts on the ground, Russia hopes to change the focus of any negotiations away from a transition of power to merely being an agreement on the division of powers between a central authority and regional seats of power in the Syrian constitution-to-be.

In order to face the challenges ahead, the Syrian opposition will have to put into place a wider strategy for the entire territory of Syria, instead of a set of piecemeal reconciliations covering this or that parcel of territory. Such a comprehensive strategy must also combat Russian plans to collude with Israel and the United States, helped by a group of Arab and European states, to rehabilitate the Syrian regime on the world stage. The opposition must also refuse to accept the status quo as the only possible outcome, and must be willing to press its claims against the Syrian regime in international and other courts willing to hear cases related to war crimes and crimes against humanity and to seek justice for the hundreds of thousands of Syrian lives lost.