



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Astana Agreement: Russia Pre-empted No-Fly Zones

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

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Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

On May 4, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, announced from the Kazakh capital of Astana their intention to act as “guarantors” of an agreement on Syrian “de-escalation”. The agreement covers four main regions of Syria which are site to confrontations between the regime and its allies and armed opposition factions. These regions are spread across parts of eight Governorates along the western strip of the country extending from Aleppo in the north to Daraa in the south. According to the text, the agreement aims “to put a prompt end to violence, improve the humanitarian situation and create favorable conditions to advance political settlement of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic”¹. The agreement entered into force at midnight on the May 6 for a period of six months, subject to renewable under the consent of the guarantors.

A broad outline of the terms of the agreement first appeared on the eve of the summit that brought Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian Vladimir Putin together in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on May 2, a day before the latest round of Astana talks were due to begin. At Sochi, President Putin put forward the initiative aimed at reducing fighting in Syria prior to its formal proposal. This report attempts to ascertain the likelihood of the agreement’s success, and questions Moscow’s ulterior motives.

Significant Provisions of the Agreement

The most significant conditions laid out in the text of the Astana agreement, as approved by all three guarantors are stated below²:

1. the following de-escalation areas shall be created with the aim to put a prompt end to violence, improve the humanitarian situation and create favorable conditions to advance political settlement of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic:

¹ See the full text, published in English by the Russian Foreign Ministry:

http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041

² Taken verbatim from the English version published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- Idlib province and certain parts of the neighboring provinces (Latakia, Hama and Aleppo provinces);
 - certain parts in the north of Homs province;
 - in eastern Ghouta;
 - certain parts of southern Syria (Deraa and Al-Quneitra provinces).
2. Within the de-escalation areas, the use of all types of weapons, including the air force will cease to ensure safe, rapid and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance to these areas and to provide appropriate conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons.
 3. The establishment of security zones along the lines of the de-escalation areas in order to prevent incidents and military confrontations between the conflicting parties.
 4. The security zones include checkpoints to ensure unhindered movement of unarmed civilians and delivery of humanitarian assistance as well as to facilitate economic activities and observation posts to ensure compliance with the provisions of the ceasefire regime. The functioning of the checkpoints and observation posts as well as the administration of the security zones shall be ensured by the forces of the Guarantors by consensus. Third parties might be deployed, if necessary, by consensus of the Guarantors.
 5. The Guarantors shall take all necessary measures to ensure the fulfillment by the conflicting parties to continue the fight against DAESH/ISIL, Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaeda or DAESH/ISIL as designated by the UN Security Council within and outside the de-escalation areas.
 6. The Guarantors shall in 2 weeks after signing the Memorandum form a Joint working group on de-escalation in order to delineate the lines of the de-escalation areas and security zones as well as to resolve other operational and technical issues related to the implementation of the Memorandum.
 7. The Guarantors shall take steps to complete by 4 June 2017 the preparation of the maps of the de-escalation areas and security zones and to separate the armed opposition groups from the terrorist groups mentioned in para.5 of the Memorandum.

Putting the Agreement into Context

This latest agreement comes after the failed tripartite attempts to sustain the previous ceasefire reached between Russia and sections of the Syrian armed opposition under

Turkish mediation in Ankara last December. Through this agreement, Moscow had tried to launch a political track in Astana aimed at stabilizing the ceasefire on 24 January 2017, as a step towards imposing its vision of a solution for Syria. However, the heavy regime violations carried out with its Iranian-backed militia allies, especially in the vicinity of Damascus (Barada valley and the eastern Ghouta in particular) led the agreement to almost completely collapse. These opposition groups carried out a number of offensives in response to the abuse of the ceasefire agreement by the regime and its allies as a cover for continuing the process of resolving the conflict militarily.

Russia again joined the regime to repel a major offensive led by the opposition on the Eastern outskirts of Damascus, and in the northern Hama countryside in mid-March. On April 4, in response to the major opposition attack in northern Hama Governorate, the regime targeted the opposition-held town of Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib, with chemical weapons, killing dozens of civilians, mostly children and women, and leaving 400 people wounded after exposure to toxic Sarin Gas.

In stark contrast to the Obama administration's hesitant response to the regime's August 2013 chemical attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, the Trump administration rushed to react militarily. Trump authorized a Tomahawk missile airstrike on the helicopter airfield from which the Sarin attack was launched in the Homs countryside as retribution for the regime's violation of UN Security Council resolution 2118. Despite the limited US response, the move provoked Russian fears of a change in US policy towards the Syrian crisis, signaling a return to greater US interventionism. The response indicated that the US was ready to restrict Russian freedom to determine the course of the Syrian conflict both on the ground and politically.

The Trump Administration immediately went back to suggesting safe zones in Syria as a solution to the refugee issue, an idea that the Obama administration had rejected on the grounds that it might drag the United States into military intervention. Trump asked the Pentagon and the State Department to draw up a plan for the establishment of safe areas inside Syria within 90 days. The Russians did not hide their displeasure at this proposal, which interfered with their military objectives. And so they began laying the foundations of the Syrian solution, with the help of Turkey to put pressure on the opposition to attend talks in Astana. By launching the de-escalation initiative, Moscow appears to be trying to block any move by the Trump White House to take decisive action over the Syrian conflict, which the Kremlin has become accustomed to regarding as its preserve throughout eight years of the previous US Administration.

Russian Objectives

In short, Russia has two main objectives which it seeks to achieve through the implementation of the De-escalation Zones in Syria.

- Firstly, to create the impression that a Russian-led political process exists for Syria, thereby aborting any attempts to break Moscow's grip on power, whether politically on Damascus or on the battlefield. At the same time it aims to continue the alliance with the regime and Iran, in an attempt to strike the opposition on the ground. This is especially clear considering the fifth paragraph of the agreement, which states that the guarantors will continue to confront Daesh/ISIL and the Al Nusra Front, even in areas set aside as de-escalation zones. These confrontations have long been used as a pretext by Russia and its allies for targeting the areas controlled by the opposition. It is under this pretext that Russia clears areas of opposition members, as they did in the Barada Valley under the four cities agreement, and as they are currently doing in the Damascus suburbs of Barza and Qaboun. The tripartite agreements, which did not involve the Syrian parties participating in Astana, were used to isolate opposition areas and siphon the opposition out before further similar agreements, covering other areas, could be reached.
- The second objective is to block any change in US policy towards Syria, especially now that Washington has shown its willingness to use force against the regime in Damascus. Russia even sought to impose the agreement on the US, and the Russian special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentev, called on the United States to condone the agreement and not to fly over the de-escalation areas. The Russians went as far as presenting a draft resolution to the UN Security Council supporting the agreement, to establish its international legitimacy in the hands of Russia, Turkey and Syria.

Reactions

The head of the Syrian regime delegation, Bashar al-Jaafari, welcomed the agreement, saying that it provides a window for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, which has entered its seventh year. Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem meanwhile opposed the United Nations playing any role in monitoring the de-escalation zones. "We do not accept the role of the United Nations or international forces in monitoring the good implementation of the memorandum," he told a news conference in Damascus, adding;

"The Russian guarantor explained that there will be the deployment of military police forces and observation centers in these areas".

In turn, the opposition reaction to the agreement has been varied. Part of the delegation withdrew from the Astana talks in the final meeting in protest of Iran's status as a guarantor whilst simultaneously overseeing the process of killing, uprooting and displacing the Syrian people. On the other hand, a spokesman for the opposition delegation to Astana, Yahya al-Aridi, said that de-escalation areas may help prevent the bombardment and barrel bombing of civilians. Al-Aridi also stressed that the agreement could pave the way to a wider, comprehensive political solution for Syria, covering even the transition of power, and rejected the idea that the Astana Agreement merely entrenches the regime. A third camp within the opposition expressed the fear that the agreement would be a prelude to dividing the country.

Internationally, Moscow's focus was on the so-far undetermined US position. While US State Department diplomats expressed concern over Iran's role in the deal, the Pentagon said it was carefully considering the Russian proposal to create de-escalation zones and ascertain its feasibility. The Pentagon was reluctant to limit the US Air Force's freedom of movement over Syria as part of the agreement.

Conclusion

Despite Russian hopes of continuing to lead political efforts in Syria, Moscow may now be more concerned with avoiding an escalation that could provoke intervention by the US. Yet the prospects for a truce are worse than ever before. All the factors that derailed the previous agreements are still present as many of those in the regime camp believe that an outright military victory is within reach. Repeated agreements are made for this end by chipping away at opposition areas, emptying them of opposition fighters and assembling dissidents in Idlib, hoping to eradicate them at a later stage. The regime and its allies are increasingly optimistic that they will be victorious, as these agreements have often led to more conflicts and ruptures within the armed opposition. Yet the American standpoint remains crucial in determining the fate of the agreement and its future trajectory, especially in light of resurgent US involvement in the region and Washington's stated desire to contain Iranian expansionism.

