



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The US-Russian Agreement on Syria: Aims and Implications of the Hamburg Ceasefire

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2017

The Hamburg Agreement on Syria

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## Introduction

Speaking on the sidelines of the 2017 G20 Summit in Hamburg, US president Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin formally announced a ceasefire and “de-escalation agreement” covering southwestern Syria, covering combat zones in the provinces of Deraa and Quneitra. The ceasefire came into effect on July 9, at midday in Syria. The terms of the ceasefire within the Hamburg Agreement result from a far-flung negotiating process between Russian, American and Jordanian officials in Amman and in which Israel had a hand. The deal provides for security arrangements that would cover the southwest of Syria and would secure the borders of Jordan and Israel from a spillover of violence and Iranian allied forces. This is the main objective of the agreement for the two sponsoring states.

This is also the latest in a series of deals sponsored by both Moscow and Washington and aimed at imposing a ceasefire in Syria and allowing humanitarian aid into the combat zones or besieged areas. Two similar agreements and which merit particular attention include ceasefires signed on February 27, 2016 and on September 9, 2016, both negotiated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his US counterpart at the time, John Kerry. This paper will define the terms and objectives of the new agreement, before exploring what distinguishes it from previous attempts and goes on to examine its chances of success.

## The Text

According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as well as Jordanian and American sources, the agreement provides for a ceasefire along agreed demarcation lines which divide the Syrian regime and associated forces from the opposition groups they are battling. It is intended as a step towards de-escalation in southern Syria paving the way for a return to stability and towards the expansion of humanitarian aid to the region. The deal also provides for a monitoring operations room to be established in the Jordanian capital which will also have the use of satellite imagery and surveillance from drones. Finally, Russian military police will be deployed in southern Syria to further the aims of the Hamburg Agreement.

## Objectives

The main objective of the agreement was announced in Hamburg, Germany, an outcome of the first Russian-American since the election of Trump, is the removal of Iran and its associated militias from the Syrian borders with Jordan and Israel. Over the past three months, Jordan has attempted to further this objective by hosting meetings between Russian and American experts to try and chisel out an agreement that would prevent groups linked to either ISIS or Iran from threatening Jordan's security. During that space of time, the Syrian theater of operations witnessed a heated race with various local factions and their international backers seeking to control as much Syrian territory as possible. With the collapse of ISIL in northern and eastern parts of the country in sight, all sides want to bring about a change to the status quo and to alter political realities before a potential settlement of the seven-year-old conflict.

The most prominent feature of the conflict has been Iran's attempts to create a corridor that would link it geographically with Syria through Iraq and extending to Lebanon by controlling the land lost by ISIL in both western Iraq and eastern Syria. Securing Iran's position on the border with occupied Palestine gives Iran a window that overlooks the Arab-Israeli conflict and makes it an indispensable player in any future settlement. American refusal to accept such developments was made clear with US warplanes bombing Iranian-backed forces at the Al-Tanf crossing on the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan, a stronghold of Washington-backed Syrian opposition groups.

Israel in turn tried to prevent Iran from establishing its presence in the areas of southern Syria near its borders, targeting operations centers and cells under Iranian control in the region, most notably the raid in Quneitra in February 2015 which brought down a Hezbollah cell led by Jihad Mughniyah, son of assassinated Hezbollah leader Imad Mughniyah. Israel also targeted other Hezbollah leaders, such as Samir Kuntar and Mustafa Badreddine, who, Israel claims, were responsible for establishing the Iranian military presence on its northern border with Syria.

The number of Israeli attacks inside Syrian territory has increased in recent months and has spread to various locations linked to Iran, including those surrounding Damascus and the southern and central regions of the country. On 17 March 2017, Israeli aircraft targeted a site near Palmyra in central Syria containing sophisticated missiles that were reportedly intended to be delivered to Hezbollah in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>. On 22 April 2017, Israeli aircraft targeted a camp belonging to the National Defense Forces, a paramilitary proxy of the Syrian regime in Quneitra,

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<sup>1</sup>Yoav Zaitoun, "Senior officer: the target of the attack in Syria 100 rockets for Hezbollah," (Hebrew) Ynet site, 25/4/2017, accessed on 1/5/2017, at: <https://goo.gl/TmTkAs>

killing three individuals<sup>2</sup>. On 27 April 2017, Israeli aircraft targeted an arms depot belonging to Lebanese Hezbollah and fuel tanks for aircraft around Damascus international airport. According to media reports, four cargo planes, three of them Iranian and four Syrian, had arrived at Damascus airport from Iran about two hours before the Israeli strike<sup>3</sup>. The increasing frequency of Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in Syrian territory has been an important indicator of Israel's insistence on preventing any Iranian presence or military capacity in areas close to its borders. The same applies to Jordan, which recently warned against any Iranian attempt to approach its northern border with Syria.

## Failure of Astana 5 and Attempts to Take Deraa

The Hamburg agreement represents the outright failure of Iranian attempts to impose its control over the southern provinces of Syria. Since the announcement of de-escalation areas at the Astana 4 meeting, which took place in early May, 2017, and entered into force on May 6, Iran has been racing to wrest control of the largest possible area of southern Syria by imposing localized "reconciliations" and trying to reach the border with Jordan. This would allow Tehran and its proxies to besiege opposition forces presently based in Deraa.

Not only has Iran failed to achieve any of its aims through military means before ceasefires could demarcate new front lines but, during the Astana 5 discussions held on June 5-6, Iran also failed to secure a military presence on the ground in the southern region that would be in line with the terms of Astana 4. Russia, which was engaged in secret talks in Amman with the Americans, refused to respond to the Iranian demand to redraw the front lines in the de-escalation zones in the south according to which the states which were party to the discussions would be allowed to deploy troops in agreed areas.

The only success of the latest round of talks in Astana was to produce an agreement on the demarcation of the boundaries where a ceasefire was to be observed for the region surrounding Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus as well the region to the north of the city of Homs. The meeting failed to achieve an agreement between Russia and Turkey on how to define the boundaries of a northern region (the Governorate of Idlib and parts of the Hama, Aleppo and Latakia governorates); and between Russia and Iran on the borders of the region (Parts of the

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<sup>2</sup>Yoav Zaitoun, "Senior officer: the target of the attack in Syria 100 rockets for Hezbollah," (Hebrew) Ynet site, 25/4/2017, accessed on 1/5/2017, at:

<https://goo.gl/TmTkAs>

<sup>3</sup> Amos Harel, "The Attack Near Damascus - Israel's Policy of Ambiguity Corrupts", (Hebrew) Ha'aretz, 27/4/2017, accessed on 1/5/2017, at: <https://goo.gl/br2tZu>

Deraa, Quneitra and Suweida governorates). The sponsors of Astana agreed to set up monitoring centers with Russian, Turkish and Iranian participation in northern, southern and central Syria. The deal announced in Hamburg, in contrast, placed the southern region within a joint Russian-American zone, completely excluding Iran.

The results of this series of agreements is that while Russia and Turkey will supervise de-escalation in the north, supervision of different ceasefires in the south of the country, covering regions in the Deraa and Quneitra governorates, will fall on the US, Russia and also Jordan. Iran, meanwhile, will be relegated to the supervision of the de-escalation agreement around Damascus, together with Russia. In effect, this means that the Syrian regime's two main backers will remain unchallenged in the area around the capital and that the regime's ability to take military action will remain unfettered. Some reports on the Hamburg Agreement indicate that any Iranian militia will have to leave a zone which stretches 30 kilometers from the border with Jordan, while the parties to the agreement concluded in Hamburg also agree to cleanse the areas in question of extremist groups.

## Winners and Losers

The Hamburg Agreement envisages expanded US involvement in the Syrian conflict, and reaffirms the reality that there is no solution in Syria without Washington, while acknowledging Russia's leading role. Russia is the only influential party which is a guarantor of all of the de-escalation zones from north to south, giving it a presence across all of Syria. US engagement is apparently motivated by the need to serve Washington's dual objectives of containing Iran and defeating ISIL. The agreement does succeed in pushing Iran away from the borders of Washington's allies to the south of Syria while also trying to ensure that Iran is not able to benefit from the decline of ISIL in the west and east of Syria. On the other hand, the Hamburg agreement sets the foundations for greater coordination between Washington and Moscow regarding the Syria conflict, which will eventually lead to the elimination of ISIL.

Seen from another angle, the Hamburg Agreement could be viewed as an approximation of the "Safe Zones" which Donald Trump touted upon his election to the White House as a possible means of solving the Syrian refugee crisis. If implemented, this could allow Jordan to repatriate potentially tens of thousands of Syrian refugees north, a move which could be followed by Turkey and Lebanon.

The agreement can also be seen as a means of partially achieving the aims of all each of the international parties involved. The Syrians, the original parties to this conflict, have been sidelined with the final agreement holding little regard for their desires. Syrians are left to watch and worry as their country is divided into spheres of influence for various foreign powers which run along the country's western strip from north to south, while the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) dominate in the east and north-east.

## Conclusion

The Hamburg Agreement reduces the Syrian conflict to the war on ISIS, assuming that the focus would then be on how to maintain calm through a fair political solution necessary for sustained stability and peace. Truces and ceasefire agreements on their own are unsustainable. Unless they are a prelude to a political solution, they will be a pretext for the regime and its allies to resume attacks in the future.

The solution, this report argues, lies in facing the most complex challenges facing the future of Syria head-on. These challenges include the accountability of Syrian officials for war crimes; the fulfillment of transitional justice; the release of detainees; the disclosure of information relating to Syrians who were kidnapped, disappeared and imprisoned; the return of refugees; tackling the effects of demographic shifts; achieving national reconciliation and building a pluralistic political system based on citizenship which helps to keep Syria unified, and immune to foreign interference and regional and international polarization.