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ASSESSMENT REPORT

A Russian–Turkish Ceasefire for Syria: the Chances of Success

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Jan 2017

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Introduction

Following an earlier agreement for the evacuation from East Aleppo of the Syrian armed opposition, along with civilian refugees who had sought the opposition's protection, Turkish mediation allowed for an agreement between Syrian opposition factions and Russia on a cessation of violence across all of Syria, as part of a deal announced in Ankara on December 29, 2016. The ceasefire, which went into effect on the day it was announced, is intended to provide the groundwork for a political process set to begin towards the end of January in the Kazakh capital of Astana, which could decisively end the Syrian crisis. What specifically distinguishes this latest attempt at a ceasefire from previous efforts and gives it a fighting chance at durability, allowing for the eventual success of the Turkish-Russian initiative?

The Failure of a Russian–US Compromise

There have been two separate Syria ceasefires sponsored by the United States and Russia since the latter's direct military involvement in the conflict began in September 2015. The first of these took the shape of an agreement reached in Vienna in November 2015 and which was further codified in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015). That first ceasefire, which took effect on February 27, 2016, was aimed at bolstering the chances of what would eventually become the Geneva III Agreement which, in turn, failed due to the Assad regime's continued shelling of opposition-held areas and its refusal to allow humanitarian aid into stricken zones.

This was followed by a second agreement concluded by US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, and which aimed squarely at defeating "extremist groups" in Syria (including the Nusra Front, latterly known as the "Fateh Ash Sham Front", or "FAS", and ISIL). Announced on September 9, 2016, this second deal also failed to achieve its aims once the Syrian regime and its backers in Tehran, emboldened by Russian military support, became convinced of the possibility of an outright military victory over the opposition. Russia and the US, the main sponsors of this second agreement, also failed to agree on the terms of security coordination between them, a fact exacerbated by Moscow's insistence that the Syrian peace process be tied to the Crimea conflict. The Assad regime and its allies in Tehran and various sectarian militias saw Moscow's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict as a sign of deliverance and their eventual triumph. In fact, the Russians were only interested in preventing the Assad

regime from being completely toppled, while also seeking to compel the combatants to come to an agreement.

Russian–Turkish Rapprochement

In parallel to the rapid deterioration of bilateral relations between the US and both Russia and Turkey, relations between Ankara and Moscow witnessed a rapid rapprochement. This picked up particularly after the failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, an incident which raised doubts amongst Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s AKP-led government over the role of the US, especially given Washington’s outspoken support for Kurdish separatist groups in Syria.

In an indication of the growing strength of Russian-Turkish relations, Operation Euphrates Shield saw Turkish military forces involve themselves directly in the Syrian conflict for the first time. The mission, which started in August 2016 and aimed to unseat Kurdish armed groups in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo, was also indicative of Russian frustration with the US. It also marked a turning point in Russia’s willingness to engage with the Syrian opposition, with Moscow directly involved in negotiations with Turkish-hosted armed opposition groups. Finally, Operation Euphrates Shield was also a watershed in the transformation of Turkey from a pro-opposition power in the Syrian conflict into a mediator among combatants.

The first fruits of the reconciliation between Ankara and Moscow were seen in the ceasefire observed by Iran and its proxy sectarian militia on the ground, in a deal which saw the peaceful evacuation of besieged fighters and civilians from the eastern quarters of Aleppo. The success of the Aleppo operation gave Russia and Turkey the confidence they needed to progress towards a more comprehensive, Syria-wide peace.

The Ankara Agreement

On December 20, 2016, Russia convened a six-party summit bringing together the foreign and defense ministers of Turkey, Russia and Iran, which culminated in the Moscow Declaration. The Declaration envisaged a wider ceasefire which covered the entire territory of Syria and all combatants to the conflict (with the exceptions of the Nusra Front and ISIL). The Declaration also called for the revitalization of an internationally-sponsored Syrian political process, which had been defunct since January 2014. Simultaneously, Turkey was hosting negotiations between representatives of

Russia and of various armed Syrian opposition factions, the results of which were announced in the Ankara Declaration. This was composed of three distinct texts, covering a ceasefire between the Syrian regime and the opposition; mechanisms for the monitoring of that ceasefire and for the provision of humanitarian aid to areas under siege by the regime; and the basis for peace negotiations to be held in Astana.

What makes this latest agreement different from all the previous attempts at a ceasefire in Syria is the absence of endless bickering between Moscow and Washington that had bedeviled previous attempts to end the crisis. Turkey is speaking on the behalf of the Syrian armed groups which it supports, and which between them command roughly 60,000 fighters. Russia, meanwhile, acts as a sponsor of the Assad regime, as well as Iran, its Revolutionary Guard forces and its armed proxies active on the ground. In other words, the sponsors of the latest agreement were directly connected to the combatants on the ground. The groups which have been explicitly not involved in the terms of the new ceasefire include a number of Kurdish factions as well as the Nusra Front and ISIL.

The documents related to the agreement and published so far also reveal a number of safeguards to ensure the implementation of the deal. This includes the deployment of both Turkish and Russian observers, as well as a series of punitive measures to be used against parties that violate the ceasefire. Ankara and Moscow have cloaked the deal with a measure of legal legitimacy by securing the blessing of the international community in the form of UN Security Council Resolution 2236, which itself built on the earlier UNSC 2254 and the Geneva Communique (2012)¹.

All indications at the moment are that Turkey and Russia are sincere in their dedication to arriving at a political resolution to the crisis in Syria—and that such an agreement would ultimately be in the interests of both parties. Moscow is keen to demonstrate that the military force it put on display can be translated into diplomatic victories, and also seeks to avoid being further drawn into the Syrian quagmire in the midst of dire economic circumstances. Turkey's motives in trying to end the conflict to its south are rooted mainly in its own security fears: the continuing conflict in Syria is threatening to undo Turkey's internal security and stability, while the country's resources are already being drained by the demands of fighting a war on multiple fronts. American support

¹ The text of UN Security Council Resolutions 2236 and 2254, adopted on December 18 and August 21, 2015 are available here: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2236\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2236(2015)) and [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254(2015))

for one of these parties, armed Kurdish groups in northern Syria, is also heightening Turkish concerns that the continuation of the Syrian conflict may result in emboldened demands for Kurdish separatism along Turkey's southern frontier.

Obstacles on the Path to Peace

This is the second ceasefire in a row where Iran has been sidelined during the deliberations: both the Ankara Declaration and the Moscow Declaration which led to the evacuation of Aleppo were the products of Russian-Turkish talks. Yet both Russia and Turkey were keen to involve Tehran in later stages of the agreements, in acknowledgement of the latter country's extensive influence on the Syrian regime. These measures did not appease Iran however, which remains wary of the closer ties between Russia and Turkey and also maintains that a number of the groups party to the Ankara Declaration—particularly the Ahrar Al Sham and the Jaish Al Islam—are terrorist groups. Iran's Revolutionary Guard in particular is suspicious of efforts by Russia and Turkey to end the conflict in Syria, while many others in the country fear the existence of as-yet undeclared understandings between Turkey and Russia over Syria.

Just as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was able to use its Lebanese and Iraqi proxies to try and thwart the earlier deal struck over Aleppo by preventing the peaceful evacuation of the armed Syrian opposition from the city, the same group today seems intent on using Hezbollah to continue to shell opposition-held areas in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, in contravention of the Ankara Declaration. Unless Russia is able to rein in the activities of these Iranian forces, whose side it takes in the negotiations, it will have to face the prospect of this latest agreement similarly collapsing.

One of the possible breaks on Iranian behavior may end up coming from the US. While Iranian hardliners in the Revolutionary Guard may seem determined to achieve a military solution to the conflict in Syria, moderate voices in the country, including Hassan Rouhani, the president, and Javad Zarif, the foreign minister, understand the need to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia, especially as the incoming Trump administration could prove to be a source of added international pressure on Tehran. In other words, insulating Iran from US pressure could be a lever of Russian influence on Iran.

Another potential difficulty to the implementation of the Ankara Declaration involves the FAS Front. The armed Syrian opposition maintains that the latest ceasefire must include FAS, in contrast to the international players who regard FAS as a terrorist organization

equivalent to ISIL. Despite these ambitions, the Syrian opposition remains incapable of achieving the single change which could give it the decisive edge over the Assad regime and its paramilitary allies, namely the dissolution of all existing armed factions and the integration of their members into a unified, Syria-wide army committed to the principles of the 2011 revolution.

Aside from the above, the ultimate success of Russian-Turkish efforts to end the Syrian crisis will be strongly dependent on the willingness of the other regional and global powers interested in ending the conflict. This includes, first and foremost, the incoming US administration, and the extent of its resolve to support Russian-Turkish efforts to achieve a political resolution to the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

The latest attempts by Moscow and Ankara to bring peace to Syria seem to be the most genuine attempts at ending the bloodshed in that country, and which may in the end succeed in realizing the aspirations of the Syrian people. The main reason behind this seemingly counter-intuitive reality is the major influence which the two sponsors of the agreement have on the two competing camps in Syria, as well as the growing international consensus on the urgent need to end the crisis. Even within this consensus, however, the diversity of opinions on what the desired final results of a peace process will bring, and the intransigence of the Syrian regime in its rhetoric, all serve to make ultimate success more complicated. For its part, the Syrian opposition has yet to put forward a leadership—both military and political—which could serve as a decisive alternative to the Assad government, while satisfying the Syrian people that their sacrifices when confronting one of the most tyrannical regimes in human history were not in vain.