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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Potential Implications of U.S.–Russian Coordination in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | July 2016

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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

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Introduction

Over the preceding weeks, Syrian regime forces, in coordination with their Iranian and Russian allies, have been able to make huge advances against the armed opposition across a number of fronts. In parallel with these military developments, Moscow and Washington have been engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at harmonizing their military actions in Syria. In a bid, ostensibly, to strike a decisive blow against ISIL fighters and the Nusra Front before the end of Barack Obama’s presidential term, a proposal for an agreement between Russia and the United States could have disastrous consequences for the Syrian opposition.

On the Ground Developments

The regime and its allies remain committed to laying siege to opposition strongholds in Northern Syria, cutting off the supply routes to Turkey which provide a lifeline for the opposition. Four factors boost the regime’s ability in this regard:

1. Russian aerial support: Moscow is keen for its allies to make gains on the ground in Syria which it can then translate into a stronger negotiating position in its talks with the US.
2. Iranian personnel backing, which comes in the form of both regular military forces and militia groups fighting alongside the Assad regime, has made it possible for the regular Syrian army to accommodate a shortfall in manpower.
3. The preoccupation of the world community, and particularly the US, with the fight against terrorism.
4. The vanishing possibility of any direct Turkish military backing for the opposition, in particular since Turkey’s failed coup attempt.

In order to complete the siege of Aleppo, the regime, backed by its Lebanese allies in Hezbollah, launched an offensive to capture a strip of road which brought the vital Castillo Road* within range of their artillery. At various points along a 2.5km-long strip dominated by the regime and its allies, the distance to opposition locations varies

* Also spelled “Castello Road”, this is a stretch of highway known in official maps as the Khaled Ibn al-Waleed Road. It bounds the city of Aleppo to the North and connects to the international airport.

between 250 and 400 meters, leaving the latter vulnerable to the regime's light weapons. Control of this vantage point gave Assad's forces the ability to cut off the road that links the eastern region of the Aleppo Governorate from Turkey via the Idlib Governorate. The end result is that opposition use of this vital road has come to a virtual standstill. In addition, Assad regime-aligned forces have also been able to capture the strategic vantage point of Mallah, just outside the ring road which encircles the city of Aleppo. With this in place, the Assad regime has managed to completely encircle the entire Aleppo Governorate.

While the armed opposition has thus far failed to retake these areas and thereby reopen the road linking the Aleppo Governorate with Turkey and the outside world, the topographical complexity of northern Syria and the high levels of population density in some parts of it mean that the Syrian regime's ability to hold on to its gains are also open to doubt—notwithstanding massive Russian aerial support. In addition, the regime still does not command the Shuwaihna area which overlooks Aleppo, and which remains within firing range of the opposition. In the difficult terrain in which it finds itself, and in a hostile social setting, it would be no surprise if the regime forces fail to secure both their right and left flanks. Equally, the opposition's ability to launch attacks along the southern rim of the Aleppo Governorate, and in particular on the district of "New Aleppo", remains intact.

In the towns of East Ghouta and West Ghouta, both in the Rif Damascus Governorate, the regime continues to attempt to build on its advances since the beginning of July 2016, when it captured the nearby town Midaa. It also seeks to build on the movement of its troops towards the towns of Hawsh Farah and Nashabiyya to which it has laid siege from the south, east and northeast¹. This greatly increases the risk that the regime will cut supply lines which tie the opposition forces in those towns to the countryside. One consequence of this situation is that the regime stands a chance of cutting East Ghouta into two distinct zones: one in the south, which it controls, and a besieged opposition bastion in the north which, once cut off from the agrarian lands to the south, can be made to kneel through lack of food. In West Ghouta, regime forces were able, with the aid of an unprecedented torrent of barrel bombs, to seal off the

¹ "Midaa consolidates 'the siege on Ghouta' eastward while its armed men are being drained slowly", (in Arabic), *Syria Now*, July 11, 2016, at: <http://syrianow.sy/index.php?d=7&id=146470>

densely populated residential towers in the adjacent town of Darayya which also sits right next to the Mezza Air Force base. This has effectively cut off West Ghouta.

Most observers of battlefield developments agree that the regime is set on plotting a major military campaign which seeks to capture the town of Harasta in Rif Damascus, thereby giving it control of the last remaining opposition outpost on the Damascus-Homs International Highway. If it succeeds, the regime will be able to protect the loyalists living in the Assad District. Some reports indicate that units within the “Nation’s Shield” militia are already in the preparation stages for such a push².

These developments indicate clearly that the regime is looking to seize an opportunity to wage massive military campaigns across fronts which have been steadfast in the face of aggression by pro-Assad forces for years. In doing this, the Assad forces will be able to exploit the frailty of an international ceasefire agreed to by the combatants in Syria and negotiated between Washington and Moscow in February and which lacks any mechanisms for accountability. Until such a time as an anticipated pact between Russia and the US will sideline the Syrian Air Force, pro-Assad forces have a carte blanche in the skies. Even before such an agreement comes into existence, the Syrian opposition has been beset by a number of setbacks, including the internal discord in the districts of Rif Damascus which has paved the way for regime advances and the multiplicity of its foes in the Aleppo Governorate and across Syria’s northern frontier, where the Syrian opposition is doing battle with ISIL, Kurdish forces as well as the regime and its allies. In the event that Russia and the US come to an agreement on the fighting in Syria, the very existence of the coalition which forms the armed Syrian opposition will be called into question, as any deal is likely to target some of its constituent forces³.

² “Preparations for a Military Operation Underway Near Damascus: What is the Target?”, (in Arabic), *Al Hadath News*, July 10, 2016, at: <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/178561>

³ The Nusra Front forms a part of the “Jaish Al Fateh” or “Army of Conquest”. For a fuller discussion of the constituents of the armed Syrian opposition, see “Syria’s Armed Uprising: the Status Quo January-June, 2016”, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 13 July, 2016, at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/50ae2ff2-ad7e-426b-8104-c71cffccd7b9>

Repercussions of a Russian–American concord and Comments

According to a version of the draft agreement which was published by the *Washington Post* earlier this month, the US proposes to form a 'Joint Implementation Group' (JIG) with Russia which would have as its main aim the destruction of both ISIL and the Nusra Front. This new coordinating body would take the Jordanian capital Amman as its main operating base, and seek to achieve a number of specific goals⁴. Specifically, the deal provides a mechanism for Russian and American forces to synchronize their activities in Syria for the purpose of attacking targets associated with ISIL and the Nusra Front. The participants in the JIG—in other words, the Russian and American militaries—will also work to strengthen the Cessation of Hostilities agreement brought into force in February. Equally, the terms of the agreement provide for the suspension of Syrian military activity in areas where the JIG forces are active, but also provide for the withdrawal of any of the two parties from the JIG in the event that their activities conflict with Syrian forces' activity.

There are a number of major flaws with the text of this proposal, most notably its completely distorted view of the Syrian conflict, which it conceptualizes purely through the prism of the terrorism which was a consequence of it. Other flaws in the text include:

- It includes a number of loopholes which provide the Syrian regime with the wide maneuverability it could use to bomb opposition locations. Equally, the proposal lacks any mechanisms to make the regime accountable in cases where it fails to uphold the terms of the deal.
- The provision of intelligence sharing between Washington and Moscow will leave room open for Russia—acting on behalf of its allies in Damascus—to manipulate the outcomes of coordinated military actions. In fact, the proposal explicitly allows for Russian defense of the Syrian military under certain circumstances.
- The proposal completely ignores the role of non-Syrian combatants who have been deployed across the country based on sectarian motives, while

⁴ See Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria Plan Teams up American and Russian Forces", *Washington Post*, July 13, 2016, at: <http://wapo.st/29EWvtI>; for the text of the proposal, see: <http://wapo.st/29SpwVV>

simultaneously calling on regional powers to block the entry of foreign fighters who enter Syria to fight in pro-regime militia.

- The provision of intelligence sharing and coordinated surveillance and reconnaissance is an opportunity for the Assad regime to present itself as a legitimate partner in this endeavor, paving the way for the full international rehabilitation of the Syrian regime as a legitimate member of the world community.
- In a break with UNSC Resolution 2254, the draft agreement makes absolutely no mention of the political transition or any kind of political track which would satisfy the political demands of the opposition. In combination with the latest battlefield developments, this serves to heighten fears that the Syrian opposition is being pushed against a wall, in preparation for a final agreement which ends the conflict but which fails to meet a modicum of the opposition's demands.
- If this agreement is enacted, it could lead to the destruction of the Syrian opposition's military structure, particularly in the governorates of Idlib and Rif Damascus where the FSA-backed opposition is positioned cheek by jowl next to other combat formations, some of which could be targeted through this deal. Additionally, any targeting of the Nusra Front will compel the leaderships of all the constituent groups within the FSA to reconsider the agreements which see them coordinate their activities with Nusra and other Islamist factions through, for example, the Army of Conquest Operations Room and other similar structures. If opposition groups are forced to make such decisions, the friction created could itself be destructive.

Conclusion

Given the lack of any clear guideline to protect the FSA-backed opposition from coordinated air strikes, and the possibility that the Assad regime will exploit any deal between Washington and Moscow to carry out its own campaign against the opposition, this proposal could ultimately set the stage for the complete neutralization of the Syrian cause. The fact that the draft makes no mention of any political transition, and that Russia's military activities in Syria in furtherance of its own geopolitical aims are already well underway, the JIG could spell the end of the Syrian opposition. With the US rapidly reducing its involvement in the Middle East, the next chapter could be smaller powers fighting a series of pitched battles against armed jihadists across the Fertile Crescent.