



September 13, 2016

The American-Russian Arrangement for a Cessation of Hostilities in Syria: Overview and Initial Assessment



American Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hold a joint press conference in Geneva (Facebook page of the American State Department, September 9, 2016)

Overview

1. On September 9, 2016, American Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a joint press conference in Geneva. They announced they had reached an arrangement for a **sustainable cessation of hostilities** in Syria.¹ It was reached after months of American-Russian contacts led by Kerry and Lavrov. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov the arrangement is supported by documents whose contents were not made public "because they contain rather sensitive and serious information and we do not want this information to come to the hands of those who would be trying to undermine the implementation of measures dedicated to humanitarian access and other parts of our arrangements."²

¹ Kerry and Lavrov used the terms "arrangement" and not "agreement," and "cessation of hostilities" and not "ceasefire." That reflects caution regarding the prospects of the implementation of the arrangement.

² <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/09/261722.htm>. According to the Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat on September 12, 2016, there are five documents that include detailed technical and military information. They were phrased in recent months by American and Russian experts.

2. The following are the main points of the arrangement which went into force at sundown on September 12, 2016, based on the remarks made by Kerry and Lavrov at the press conference in Geneva (Website of the American State Department, ITIC emphasis):

A. The first stage:

1) A cessation of hostilities throughout Syria, as of sundown [i.e., 19:00], September 12, 2016 (the beginning of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha). Initially hostilities will cease for **48 hours** and then the ceasefire will be extended for a **further 48 hours** and then for **seven days**.

2) The cessation will **include air attacks carried out by the Syrian air force against the "moderate opposition" in various areas specifically designated by the United States and Russia**. Implementing the arrangement "requires halting all attacks, including aerial bombardments and any attempts to gain additional territory at the expense of the parties to the cessation."

3) There will be "**unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access** to all of the besieged and the hard-to-reach areas, **including Aleppo**." The "arrangement also requires forces from both sides to pull back from **Castello Road**...Castello Road is a major artery into [the northern part of] Aleppo, and what this pullback will do is create a demilitarized zone around it, permitting as quickly as possible the resumption of humanitarian and civilian traffic along that road." In addition, "**in the Ramouseh Gap area in southwest Aleppo** [recently captured by the Syrian army], both pro-government and opposition groups will be required to provide safe, unhindered, and sustainable humanitarian, commercial, and civilian access to eastern and western Aleppo."

B. The second stage:

1) The second stage will begin "**once it is established after seven continuous days of adherence to the cessation of hostilities and increased humanitarian access**, then U.S. and Russian experts will work together to defeat Daesh and Nusrah." In addition, "beginning September 12th, we will...commence preparatory work for a **Joint Implementation Center**" (JIC). Preparatory work will include "initial discussions and some

sharing of information necessary for **the delineation of territories controlled by [the] Nusrah [Front] and opposition groups in the area of active hostilities.**"

2) **Sergey Lavrov** noted that "representatives from Russia and the U.S. will be engaged in...solving practical matters of delimitation and separation of terrorists from the moderate opposition. And there will be strikes agreed against terrorists – the strikes of the airspace forces of Russia and the air forces of the U.S." Lavrov said he would **"like to highlight that the task of separating terrorists and moderate opposition and physical separation of them on the ground is enshrined in the document which we have agreed upon today as a key priority."**

3) **John Kerry** raised a number of conditions for the beginning of the **second stage**. He said that "after a period of reduced violence, then we will see the United States and Russia taking coordinated steps to isolate and defeat the terrorist groups that have added immeasurably to Syria's suffering and misery – and **we will facilitate a political transition, which is the only way to bring about a durable end to this war.**"

The Situation and Reactions on the Ground

3. **The arrangement for a cessation of hostilities went into effect throughout Syria at sundown on September 12, 2016.** John Kerry said violence had begun to decline and reports from the ground indicated a relative easing of the clashes. However, a short time after the arrangement went into effect **reports were received of Syrian air strikes in the region of Aleppo and Hama, and of local clashes in Idlib and Dara.** On the other hand, the Syrian regime claimed that "armed groups" had fired mortar shells and snipers attacked Aleppo on the evening of September 12. **[Note: On September 13 no significant clashes were reported.]**

4. The initial response of both sides clearly indicated that **the Syrian regime, the Iranians and Hezbollah support the American-Russian arrangement.** On the other hand, the Fateh al-Sham Front is strongly opposed to the arrangement (and certainly, which did not even respond). Other rebel organizations oppose the arrangement (among them the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is supported by the United States and the West) and condemned the arrangement in strong terms (an initial summary of reactions to the arrangement can be found in the Appendix).

The Significance of the Arrangement

5. **Apparently America has low expectations for the success of the arrangement**, as noted by statements made by John Kerry. He clearly said that it was **not a long term ceasefire agreement but rather an arrangement that could be expected to lead to a reduction in violence and the suffering of the Syrian people**. The Russians also did not demonstrate many expectations (Lavrov said that "as far as the implementation of this arrangement is concerned, no one can give 100 percent guarantees..."). However, **Russian statements made it clear that implementing the arrangement serves both Russian and Syrian regime interests**.

6. **An ITIC analysis of the arrangement exposed three central weaknesses that are liable to cause it to fail:**

a. **The difficulty in distinguishing between the Fateh al-Sham Front (the branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria) and the so-called "moderate" rebel organizations collaborating with it**. In an attempt to overcome the weakness, which was evident in previous cessations of hostilities, this time the decision was made to create a joint American-Russian center (the Joint Implementation Center, the JIC) to distinguish, at the practical and theoretical levels, between the Fateh al-Sham Front and the "moderate" rebel organizations. The problem is that **it is very difficult to make such a distinction because the other rebel organizations are dependent on the Fateh al-Sham Front, and because of the mixture of many various groups on the ground**. Thus many rebel organizations can be expected **to resist cutting themselves off from the Fateh al-Sham Front** because it would place them in a **position of weakness** towards the Syrian regime.

b. **The lack of a mechanism for imposing the arrangement on the rival sides** is another weakness. The United States and Russia are counting on the monitoring and documenting of violations and on their ability to influence their associates. However, even during the previous agreement (reached in February 2016), it was clear that **monitoring and documentation were ineffective** and that the influence of the powers was not sufficient to deter warring sides with conflicting interests from violating the arrangement.

c. **Implementing the arrangement in Aleppo**, where the most important and complex fighting is focused, **is problematic**. Opening Castello Road and the

road through the Ramouseh Gap to civilian and humanitarian movement is liable to be fraught with difficulty because of the suspicions of the rival sides of the advantages it may give the other side. The arrangement was reached at a time (not randomly, as far as Russia and the Syrian regime are concerned) when the **Syrian forces had successfully encircled Aleppo and reimposed a siege on it**. The arrangement **preserves that gain**, and may push the rebel organizations to try to undermine it in Aleppo (especially the Fateh al-Sham Front, which was most harmed by the arrangement).

7. Thus the Americans are now trying to **soothe the concerns of the rebel organizations**. Reuters reported that Michael Ratney, the American envoy to Syria, wrote a letter to the "armed opposition groups" **urging them to abide by the American-Russian arrangement**, saying it provided them with the right to self defense against Syrian army and Russian attacks. He added that the arrangement would end the aerial bombardments by the Russian and Syria air forces on their positions and on civilians living in areas under their control. He urged them not to cooperate with the Fateh al-Sham Front because it might result in "dire consequences" for mainstream Syrian rebel groups (Reuters, September 10, 2016). In ITIC assessment **it is highly unlikely that such American messages will be effective in view of the rebel organizations' obvious desire to collaborate with the Fateh al-Sham Front, and their perception that the arrangement would put them in a position of inferiority** (the responses of the rebel organizations appear in the Appendix).

8. **In conclusion**, it would seem probable that this arrangement, like the one that preceded it (February 27, 2016), **will not lead to a sustainable, stabile ceasefire that can serve as a foundation for negotiations and be effective in ending the Syrian civil war**. There are too many rivalries and opposing forces participating in the war: the Syrian army, Iran and Hezbollah on one side, and the pro-Western rebel organizations, the Islamic rebel organizations, the jihadist organizations, the Kurds and other local forces on the other. In the various areas where those forces are fighting no decisive victory has been declared, so that no side is motivated to lay down its arms and make it possible for the other side to gain an advantage. In addition, **there is no force that can force the rival sides to stop fighting. The United States and Russia have only limited influence on the situation on the ground, especially where complicated battles are being waged as in Aleppo**. Moreover, **a basic conflict of interests and perception exists between the United States and Russia as to the future of the Syrian regime**. The conflict was not expressed in the arrangement but may influence the conduct of both powers in the Syrian arena.

Appendix

Initial Responses to the American-Russian Arrangement (Updated September 13, 2016)

Syria

The Syrian Regime

1. On September 10, 2016, **Syrian TV reported that the Syrian government had agreed to the arrangement** and announced its readiness to cease its military activities in Aleppo on humanitarian grounds. According to the announcement, Syria agreed after the United States promised Russia it would differentiate between armed operatives supported by it and those belonging to the Fateh al-Sham Front, and would establish a center to coordinate attacks on ISIS and the Fateh al-Sham Front³ (Syrian TV, September 10, 2016).

2. On September 12, 2016, **Syrian army headquarters** announced it would **implement the lull in the fighting for seven days throughout Syria**. The lull began at 19:00 on September 12, 2016, and is supposed to continue until one minute to midnight on September 18. According to the announcement, the army reserved the "right to respond decisively" to any gunfire or violation carried out by "the armed groups" (SANA, September 12, 2016).

3. On September 12, the day the arrangement went into effect, Syrian President Bashar Assad paid a visit to **Daraya, a town south of Damascus that had been destroyed**. He stated strongly that the State of Syria was determined **to regain all the territory currently in the hands of the "terrorists."** He ended by saying that **the Syrian armed forces continued their activities without hesitation or compromise, regardless of internal or external circumstances**, to restore security and tranquility to all Syria (SANA, September 12, 2016).

The Fateh al-Sham Front (Al-Nusra Front)

4. On September 13, 2016, the Fateh al-Sham Front issued an open statement calling the American-Russian arrangement "**a new conspiracy.**" It said the objective of the arrangement was to cause the jihad to fail and to exterminate it. The "conspiracy" planned to defraud and split the jihad fighting factions (i.e., the rebel

³ The Syrian announcement calls the Fateh al-Sham Front by its former, more familiar name, Al-Nusra Front. The ITIC uses the new name.

organizations) by preserving Assad's rule. The rebel organizations ("the factions of the revolution"), according to the statement, were united in condemning the arrangement. Thanks were given to all those who supported the Fateh al-Sham Front, both publicly and covertly (Twitter account of the Fateh al-Sham Front, September 13, 2016).

5. The following are the key points issued by the Fateh al-Sham Front on September 10, 2016 (according to the Orient News channel, affiliated with the Syrian opposition):

- a. The main objective of the American-Russian arrangement is to harm the "Syrian revolution." The arrangement will lead to more killing of Syrian people to restore it to the bosom of the Syrian regime.
- b. America's Middle Eastern policy seeks to weaken the Sunnis and turn them into a minority, and at the same time to strengthen Iran.
- c. According to the Fateh al-Sham Front, the chances the American-Russian arrangement will lead to the disbanding of the al-Fateh Army are low (the al-Fateh Army is an umbrella network for collaboration between the Fateh al-Sham Front and other rebel organizations).

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Other Rebel Organizations

6. On September 12, 2016, the FSA issued an open statement about the American-Russian arrangement ("the deprivation agreement"). **It was signed by the 21 organizations affiliated with the FSA.** The main points were the following:

- a. The top priority is to improve the humanitarian conditions of the Syrian people, especially in besieged areas. However, care should be taken not to make "quick, temporary gains" such as ceasefire agreements that would lead to a cessation of bombing for a number of days, or the entrance of a limited amount of food, **in return for "endangering the future of the revolution" and "the loss of strategic positions" to the Syrian regime.**
- b. The signatories welcome the decision to bring humanitarian aid to Aleppo and promise their full cooperation. However, they completely reject the link between humanitarian aid and "regional ceasefires" or "a false political solution." They also reject the fact that other besieged areas, such as Homs and the rural area around Damascus, were not included in the agreement.

c. The lull in the fighting in its present form **makes it possible for the Syrian regime and its allies to keep slaughtering civilians and make additional strategic military gains. The agreement does not ensure genuine guarantees or provide for mechanisms to impose it or clear sanctions if the Syrian army and its allies violate the ceasefire.** The creation of the JIC will give the Syrian regime another opportunity to kill and uproot the Syrian civilian population and destroy property.

d. **The arrangement does not include the Fateh al-Sham Front and turns a blind eye to the foreign sectarian militias** [i.e., Hezbollah and the Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias]. The militias fight alongside the Syrian army and for years have committed their crimes unhampered. **Such a double standard is unacceptable.** The signatories **oppose harming the Fateh al-Sham Front or any other faction fighting the Syrian army because that would weaken the revolution's military strength and strengthen the Assad regime.**

e. In conclusion, the Syrian people and its factions will never forget who killed and blew them up, imposed a siege on them, burned their cities and town. "You can be absolutely certain that **we will not give up the principles of the revolution or surrender to the political and personal pressure exerted against us**" (Twitter account of Riyadh al-Asaad, September 13, 2016).

7. On September 10, 2016, **Lieutenant Colonel Riyadh Musa al-Asaad**, commander of the FSA, strongly condemned the arrangement. He Tweeted the following condemning "the agreement of miscreants Lavrov and Kerry for the killing of the Syrian people, the destruction of the victims it sacrificed and its defense of the terrorists, criminals and murderers in the gangs of Assad, Hezbollah and Shi'ite militias" (Twitter account of Riyadh al-Asaad, September 10, 2016).

The Region

Iran

8. **Iran publicly welcomed the arrangement. Bahram Ghasemi, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said that Iran had always supported efforts to reach a ceasefire in Syria** and to make humanitarian aid accessible to the Syrians. He noted, however, that the ceasefire depended on instituting oversight mechanisms, especially for the borders, to prevent the transfer of weapons and the entrance of reinforcements for the "terrorist groups" operating in the country (Fars, September 11, 2016).

9. **Hossein Jaber Ansari, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs**, also claimed Iran supported the ceasefire. He said he hoped that it would support a ceasefire and a plan for peace that would end the humanitarian crisis in Syria and pave the way for a political resolution based on the will of the Syrian people. He also claimed, however, that Iran would not be part of the agreement and would not bear any responsibility or commitment toward it. He added that Iran's position on the agreement depended on the receipt of detailed information, but Iran would support any agreement acceptable to the Syrian government and people (Fars, September 11, 2016).

10. **It would seem that the ceasefire serves Iran's immediate future interests. It legitimizes the continuing involvement of Iran and its proxies (Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias) in the fighting alongside the Syrian army.** However, Ansari's statement that Iran was not party to the agreement might be an expression of the displeasure of the Iranian leadership at Russia's willingness to conduct direct negotiations with the United States and reach an agreement with it without the full participation and cooperation of Tehran. Russia's conduct may reinforce Tehran's assessment that Moscow's actions in Syria are based on its own national interests and **do not necessarily take Iranian interests into consideration.**

Turkey

11. **Senior figures in the Turkish regime welcomed the American-Russian arrangement. President Erdogan** called for the extension of the ceasefire beyond a week and added that the Turkish Red Crescent would help deliver food, clothing and children's toys to the residents of Aleppo (Aksam.com, September 12, 2016). **Prime Minister Yildirim** expressed hope that the ceasefire would continue for a long time and called for peace in Syria and Iraq (Star.com.tv, September 12, 2016).

The International Arena

Russia

12. **Sergey Rudskoy, head of operations at the Russian General Staff**, spoke about the arrangement in an interview with the Russian media. He said that **the Russian air force would continue its aerial attacks on the "terrorist organizations" in Syria.** To that end, he said, Russia and the United States were preparing to establish a joint center for coordination to identify terrorist targets. **He said Russia was prepared to monitor the ceasefire from the air with unmanned aerial systems and drones**, and that Russia had the capabilities to receive reliable

information about events on the ground at any given moment. **Russia expected, he said, that all the groups supported by the United States would abide by the arrangement.** Russia appealed to the FSA, which was supported by the West and Turkey, and urged it **to stop fighting the Kurds near Aleppo** (Sputnik and Tass, August 12, 2016)

The United States

13. **John Kerry, the American secretary of state,** gave a speech to correspondents at the State Department in Washington. He said that according to initial reports the violence in Syria had lessened since the ceasefire went into effect. However, he added, it was still too early to reach definite conclusions. He said the objective of the ceasefire was to reduce the violence in Syria and get the sides to the negotiating table in Geneva (Wall Street Journal, September 12, 2016).