



INSS Insight No. 854, September 15, 2016

A Russian-US Agreement on a Ceasefire in Syria

Oded Eran, Zvi Magen, and Vera Michlin-Shapir

The agreement between Russia and the United States on a ceasefire in Syria, coming into effect on September 12, 2016, is a compromise between two rival powers, each with its own political agenda. It is hardly surprising that the effort to reach the agreement lasted several months and stretched over a series of meetings, including one between President Obama and President Putin during the G20 conference in China, and several between Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov. Moreover, the attempt to formulate the agreement was accompanied by mutual application of heavy pressure. The declaration that an agreement had been achieved was made after the United States publically posed an ultimatum, with Kerry announcing that “our patience is not infinite.” Indeed, the United States recently expanded the sanctions imposed on Russia for its conduct in Ukraine. For its part, Russia conducted a large military exercise on its southern border, close to the NATO line, extended its activity in the Mediterranean, and heightened its military pressure in Syria. Not disclosing the details of the agreement seems to be a deliberate policy, which allows both sides to declare success without having to present the concessions it undoubtedly had to make to reach the agreement. The decision not to publicize the agreement presumably also stemmed from operational considerations related to possible joint military actions.

The respective political objectives of the two sides on the one hand led the parties to the negotiating table, but on the other hand made it difficult for them to conclude an agreement. These divergent goals may also make it difficult to implement the agreement. Russia’s primary goal is to free itself of the sanctions imposed on it for its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its continued involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Russia’s second goal relates directly to Syria, particularly that state’s future. Moscow wants to preserve a regime that will remain loyal and ensure Russia’s standing in Syria and its strategic assets there: the military bases and the naval facility in Tartus on the Mediterranean shoreline. Both goals are linked to Russia’s desire to upgrade its status to that of a superpower by projecting itself as a proactive, constructive element deserving of greater recognition than it has been accorded to date by the international community.

At a joint press conference held by Kerry and Lavrov (together with the UN special envoy for Syria), Lavrov portrayed Russia as a nation acting responsibly and cooperating with the United

States and the international community on a range of issues, including Iran's nuclear program, the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria, and North Korea's nuclear testing. He also noted Russia's cooperation with the United States in stopping the Syrian slaughter, opening the passage to Aleppo to humanitarian aid, and fighting Jabhat Fatah a-Sham. Russian cooperation on these issues is designed to reflect Russia's drive to improve its international image. Moreover, Russia seeks to break out of its isolation, and to do so it is prepared to join the international coalition fighting terrorist organizations in Syria. By contrast, the United States wants to end the fighting in Syria by defeating the radical Islamic elements operating there and prevent mass civilian casualties. Furthermore, the United States seeks to maintain its image as the leading power in the Middle East and guarantee its position as the actor capable of shaping the future order in the region.

To attain these goals, both sides needed the agreement they reached late last week. However, while the concessions both the United States and Russia ostensibly made may seem significant, their effect on long term processes needed to stabilize Syria is doubtful. An important question here and in terms of the relations between Russia and the international community is: has the United States at least expressed a willingness to examine the possibility of easing the sanctions imposed on Russia because of the Ukrainian crisis, when the Russian strategy toward the international community is clear, and common wisdom has it that the sanctions regime is working? The United States itself recently announced the renewal of sanctions against elements in Russia, a decision that aroused much fury on the Russian side. The topic *will* likely come up *again* in the course of *future* Russian-US talks, with the US presidential election race in the background and with the sanctions adopted by the Europeans not within the purview of the United States' international considerations. *Even if* the United States promised Russia that the sanctions will be mitigated in the future, *such* a move will in any case have to be made by the next president. At this stage, it does not seem as if Washington has committed itself to include Russia in the international coalition it leads in Syria, but according to the ceasefire agreement, the United States and Russia will exchange intelligence and perhaps also launch coordinated attacks on agreed targets in Syria. It seems that Russia had to make do with these terms, in part because the agreement did not harm any of Russia's strategic assets in Syria, i.e., the current Syrian regime itself, and, as a corollary, Russia's strategic base on Syrian territory.

In the long term, Russia and the United States, as well as other international and regional *actors*, will have to replace the current Syrian regime within the Geneva framework and roadmap for ending the conflict in Syria (some claim a transition period of 18 months during which Assad would remain in charge). Apparently, the future of Syria, especially the possibility of federalizing the state, remained unresolved in the current round of talks. In any case, both the United States and Russia likely support replacing the Syrian regime, each in different degrees and for different reasons, and pending conditions that they will seek when the time comes. An open question concerns Assad's interest in fulfilling his role in the ceasefire agreement. Is his

willingness to do so not dependent on Russia's willingness to stand by him in future discussions about the permanent arrangement for Syria? As part of the agreement with the United States, Russia assumed a double responsibility: to end flights over areas where there is no fighting against the Islamic State or Jabhat Fatah a-Sham, and to end the use of barrel bombs by Assad's army's. Can Assad trust that Russia, which in the past persuaded him to concede his chemical weapons stockpile and is now pressuring him to accept the deal with the United States, will remain steadfast by his side? At this point, Assad does not have many choices, but when it comes to the long term, one may assume he can rely on backing from Iran to offset pressure from the Russians.

It seems, therefore, that, although the agreement serves the interests of the United States and Russia, it still lacks a guarantee that the fighting will stop. Fighting might break out at any time over any issue. The agreement expresses the need of both powers to promote their own interests, albeit to a limited degree at this time. The agreement does not have a formula for the full resolution of Syria's main problems: the nature of the future regime, the status of Assad and the Alawite ethnic minority in a future permanent settlement, and the millions of refugees and displaced people. A solution to these issues can only be found if the roadmap to end the fighting and stabilizing the arena is implemented. Therefore, the current agreement is not a foundation for stability, and the two parties to the agreement will have to revisit the issue of fighting in Syria and the diverse challenges it poses to them, and not only because of the anticipated violation of the ceasefire terms. Apart from the complexity of these issues, the change in the Oval Office and possible political changes in Germany and France may also become part of the matrix of factors affecting the ability of the international system – primarily the United States and Russia – to achieve a permanent political settlement for Syria.

