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Cautious Pessimism: The Ceasefire in Syria – Prospects for Success

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The Russian-American ceasefire in Syria went into effect on the evening of September 12, 2016, the first day of *Eid al-Adha* (the Festival of the Sacrifice). Symbolism notwithstanding, the event was not marked by great celebrations. Although the Syrian regime welcomed the agreement, President Assad, upon his arrival at holiday prayers in the town of Darayya on the outskirts of Damascus, was quick to proclaim his determination to reestablish Syrian state control over all parts of the country that are currently in the hands of “terrorists.” He also demonstrated no willingness to accede to his opponents’ demands to move ahead with regime reform. For their part, the Syrian opposition umbrella organizations announced their commitment to the ceasefire, but did not conceal their skepticism regarding the chances of its success, their partial reservations regarding its terms, and their complete lack of faith in the conciliatory intentions of the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian patrons.

In this tainted atmosphere, the signal was given to embark upon a graduated three-stage process: first, a decrease in the intensity of the violence between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition and an opening of routes of passage for the provision of humanitarian aid to the besieged neighborhoods of Aleppo; second, after seven consecutive days of the observed agreement, the establishment of a coordinated Russian-American Joint Implementation Center (JIC) to fight jihadist forces (the Islamic State and Jabhat Fateh a-Sham), which will be able to distinguish effectively between these forces and “legitimate” opposition forces; and, third, if warranted by the circumstances, the resumption of negotiations in Geneva and the formation of a transitional government. Russia and the United States, respectively, have taken it upon themselves to oversee the compliance with the terms of the agreement by the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, in hope that the rapid collapse of the February 2016 ceasefire will not recur.

Despite the optimism that the US Secretary of State Kerry and the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov attempted to convey at their joint September 9, 2016 press conference in Geneva, it is evident that the actors involved in the crisis harbor deep doubts regarding the agreement’s chances of actually being implemented and achieving its goals. These doubts stem not only from the painful past experience of previous ceasefires but from a combination of factors working against the current agreement. The first is the considerable vagueness surrounding the unsolvable

sum-zero question of the future of President Assad. As far as is known, the American-Russian plan – only part of which has been made public – focuses on immediately addressing the ongoing violence and the humanitarian crisis and on fighting the Islamic State and Jabhat Fateh a-Sham, but as of now does not address the roots of the crisis. Particularly conspicuous is the plan's disregard for the roadmap that was proposed by the Syrian opposition's High Negotiations Committee in early September 2015 in London, which was adopted by the British government and stipulates a detailed plan for a ceasefire, the establishment of a pluralist transitional government that excludes Assad, and the holding of democratic elections for the presidency, the parliament, and local councils within two years time. In addition, the messages by Russia and the United States conveyed to their allies regarding Assad's status have been unclear. In their joint press conference, Kerry and Lavrov repeatedly emphasized Assad's central role in upholding the ceasefire, but made no explicit mention of his future. On the other hand, in a letter to the rebels aimed at persuading them to abide by the ceasefire, Michael Ratney, US special envoy for Syria, assured them that the ceasefire would begin by preparing the ground for genuine "political change" that would find expression in the establishment of a "new Syria without Bashar al-Assad."

Second, a host of challenges cast a shadow over the ability of the United States and Russia to guarantee the ceasefire's implementation on the ground. Like the ceasefire agreement of February 2016, the current agreement does not include two of the most significant organizations participating in the civil war in Syria: the Islamic State and Jabhat Fateh a-Sham. Moreover, there are significant questions about the commitment of the official partners to the agreement, specifically, the Syrian opposition, which is plagued by internal divisions and the absence of a strong central leadership capable of imposing its authority on all the factions fighting on the ground. This situation makes the agreement vulnerable to a reality in which each faction reserves veto power and is capable, if it chooses to do so, of reigniting the hostilities in order to upset the ceasefire. At the same time, despite Russia's promise to restrain the forces loyal to the Syrian regime, the agreement does not include neutral enforcement and penal mechanisms in the event that the agreement is violated by Assad or his allies. Overall, it is also apparent that even in this particular situation in which the two superpowers have a mutual interest in mitigating the crisis, their influence on the events on the ground is extremely limited, as is their ability to restrain the problematic forces.

The Syrian opposition is the weak link in the ceasefire agreement. From the outset, the opposition's agreement was accompanied by numerous reservations that could quickly turn into a complete shirking of the agreement, in the event its concerns that the agreement will primarily serve the interests of the Assad regime and have a detrimental effect on its opponents are confirmed. The opposition believes that the agreement should ensure that negotiations for a political settlement are conducted concurrently with the war against the Salafi jihadist groups fighting the regime, and not in its aftermath. Further asymmetry is reflected in Jabhat Fateh a-

Sham's exclusion from the ceasefire on the one hand, and the agreement's disregard of the Shiite militias fighting alongside the Assad regime on the other hand. Against the background of this imbalance, the Free Syrian Army has accused the formulators of the agreement of employing double standards, and has stressed its opposition to any injury to the factions engaged in fighting the regime. Some opposition groups also announced that they would not accede to the superpowers' calls to distance themselves from areas with Jabhat Fateh a-Sham forces. This announcement reflects the rebels' positive sentiment toward the group, stemming from its role in breaking the siege on Aleppo, as well as the genuine difficulty that exists on the ground in defining clear indicators to distinguish it from other groups. There is likewise concern regarding a Russian plot to weaken the rebel forces, wreak further division in their ranks, and strengthen the status of the Assad regime as the only option in Syria, all under the guise of a ceasefire that does not ensure progress toward a political settlement.

Alongside the clear difficulties threatening the success of the ceasefire agreement, there are significant factors that may enable it. First, both the regime and the opposition are tired of the war of attrition of recent months in the Aleppo region, which has resulted in the mutual erosion of forces without any decision, and have come to see its continuation as pointless. Stopping the fighting, on the other hand, could spark progress toward a political solution, or at least provide a timeout that could be used for reorganization.

Second, Russia and the United States have stepped up their coordination and achieved an understanding that both countries are committed to restrain their allies. From this perspective, the establishment of a coordinated Russian-American Joint Implementation Center reflects lessons learned by both countries following the collapse of the ceasefire of February 2016. The center is intended to limit the military activity of the Syrian air force, whose barrel-bombing of civilian installations in the guise of a fight against terrorism played a significant role in the failure of the previous ceasefire and the political process that followed. The center is also designed to help the United States and Russia reach agreement in distinguishing between the Salafi jihadist rebel groups and the "legitimate" rebel groups.

Finally, more than in the past, the international and regional actors desperately need a successful ceasefire. The US administration is interested in hailing a concrete accomplishment in Syria to improve its legacy, with the US presidential elections imminent and the expiration of its tenure approaching. In addition, the administration is striving by means of the agreement to stop Turkey from gravitating toward the Russian-Iranian axis and prevent escalation between the Kurds and Turkey, which could result in further erosion of the Kurdish successes in northern Syria and perhaps even the dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces that were established under the auspices of the United States. Russia and Iran, for whom the ongoing war is exacting a high cost in blood and treasure, are likely to be satisfied with stabilizing Assad's upgraded status in "essential Syria" and with the legitimate right recognized by the agreement to neutralize

opposition forces – that is, if they fail to break their ties with Jabhat Fateh a-Sham. Turkey regards the agreement as a guarantee to frustrate the Kurds' aspirations for independence in northern Syria; it is likewise now assured a central role in shaping the future of Syria, given its military presence on the ground, its influence on the opposition forces, and its relationship with the United States, Russia, and Iran. Saudi Arabia, which served as a primary source of funding for the Syrian rebels, is deeply embroiled in the war in Yemen, and Jordan continues to suffer under the burden of the refugees and the social difficulties they pose, against the background of the rapidly approaching parliamentary elections. Saudi Arabia and Jordan are also interested in resolving the crisis, and to this end, may be willing to accept compromise settlements they have rejected in the past.

The major issue that should trouble Israel in light of the ceasefire agreement is the situation in southern Syria. Thus far, this front has remained relatively stable: the Israeli Air Force has enjoyed freedom of action in the skies of southern Syria (in practice, with Russian agreement), and more moderate rebel forces associated with the Free Syrian Army have demonstrated dominance in the region. In addition, Israel has had informal interactions with local Syrian actors based on deterrence and the provision of humanitarian aid. This situation, however, has the potential to deteriorate, as reflected recently by the mortar shells falling in Israel, fired by forces that are loyal to Assad and perhaps by the rebels, and by the surface to air missiles fired at IDF planes flying over Quneitra. Israel must now make sure that the rebels do not succeed in dragging it into the internal Syrian conflict by means of mortar fire resulting in Israeli retaliation against Assad's forces. At the same time, Assad may be feeling more confident in light of the ceasefire and may regard it as a success that he would like to expand into southern Syria. If the ceasefire in northern Syria holds, this might encourage the regime and its allies – Iran and Hezbollah – to channel its efforts to the south in an attempt to challenge the rules of the game there, perhaps on the assumption that Israel will opt for restraint in order to not be cast as upsetting the ceasefire. Maintaining the status quo in southern Syria, therefore, will require confirmation of the understandings with Russia, in coordination with the United States, regarding Israel's right to continue to enforce its security red lines – most notably, preventing both the establishment of Hezbollah forces in the region adjacent to the border in the Golan Heights and the penetration of Iranian influence in the region. Israel must also take action, in coordination with Jordan, to obtain an American-Russian commitment to respect the interests of both countries in all immediate and future settlements.

