

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Syria's Cessation of Hostilities: Enduring but not Expanding?**

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The cessation of hostilities that went into effect in Syria after midnight on 26 February has proved more successful than might have been expected. Violence and daily casualty figures have dropped to a fraction of their previous levels, and humanitarian aid has reached some, though not all, besieged civilian communities in regime- and opposition-held areas. UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was sufficiently buoyed by the prospect to announce that peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition will resume on 9 March. But while expanding the cessation into a political solution is desirable, at this stage this means ending the conflict on terms far closer to those long advocated by Russia than the U.S. or the Syrian opposition and its regional backers may stomach. An indefinite, incomplete, and grudging halt to the fighting is a more likely prospect.

On the positive side, this is the first time that a general stop to fighting has been agreed in Syria, applying to all regime and opposition combatants (other than the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra). Previously, even relatively important truces such as those relating to Homs in May 2014 and December 2015 and in Zabadani in September 2015 were local. As significantly, the U.S. and Russia have moved for the first time beyond agreeing general diplomatic frameworks—the UN Security Council presidential statement (“Annan plan”) in March 2012, Geneva-1 communiqué the following June, and the Vienna statement in November 2015—to outlining an operational plan to stop the violence in Syria. Its success will partly be a test of their influence over the local combatants they respectively support and over the other main regional players involved.

It is equally obvious, conversely, that the cessation of hostilities faces major obstacles and risks. The armed opposition will find it hard to stand by while Russia continues its air strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra, especially in Idlib province where their positions overlap extensively, but also in and around Aleppo. The Assad regime and the opposition have already traded accusations, echoed by the external powers, with dire warnings of the imminent collapse of the pause in fighting, even though it has been far more positive than not on balance. This was entirely to be expected, although U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry reported that he and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov had helpfully agreed not to “litigate in public,” and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon insisted that “no breaches have been significant enough” to keep the cessation of hostilities from holding.

But even amidst the mutual recriminations, there has been a striking shift. The combatants have ceased hostilities for predominantly self-serving reasons: the opposition cannot afford to be blamed for their resumption, while the regime may seek, with Russian collusion, to manoeuvre the U.S. into accepting it as a partner against the Islamic State. But by observing the cessation for any length of time shows that both sides have the ability to enforce compliance within their ranks.

This demonstration of realpolitik and (relative) self-discipline should bode well for peace talks, but optimism is premature. If the cessation of hostilities endures, it will put the Assad regime in an awkward situation politically. Pressure to seize the opportunity to end the conflict through negotiations may grow among its own supporters and social base, making it harder to justify not doing so.

The regime appears to be already acting to pre-empt such political problems, as can be seen from President Bashar al-Assad’s decree of 22 February scheduling parliamentary elections a mere seven weeks later, on 13 April. This attempt to demonstrate his claim to represent and respect popular will and to shore up the legitimacy of his government moreover came shortly after an earlier decree amnestying army deserters—similar amnesties have been declared previously, but this one is likely timed to reinforce the image of reason and magnanimity.

Assad’s offer of a full amnesty for all opposition fighters who lay down their arms during an interview with a German television channel on 1 March serves the same goal. So does the suggestion by regime sources that the army and associated militias are preparing to retake Raqqa from the Islamic State—they did the same following gains around Aleppo in late 2014, which were then dashed by serious setbacks in Idlib province. Such boasts seriously exaggerate the regime’s capabilities at this stage, but are probably a further attempt to burnish its credentials, both to its own public and to a U.S. administration keen to focus all effort on defeating the Islamic State.

Positioning ahead of possible peace talks is to be expected of all parties. But whatever its claims to the contrary, the Assad regime does not wish to engage in serious negotiations over transition, let alone genuine power-sharing, even on terms that have improved considerably thanks to Russia's military intervention. This reveals two paradoxes.

First, Russia has an interest in bringing its military intervention to end with a clear political success, and so it will probably press the Assad regime to cease hostilities so long as this is to their joint political and military advantage. But a cessation is an insufficient political gain on its own. Russia will probably seek to consolidate it with a diplomatic settlement based on its longstanding proposals for transition in Syria. These would allow Assad to remain in office until presidential elections are held in two years, and then to run as a candidate again; leave key powers in his hands or those of ministers and commanders loyal to him (especially the army, intelligence, and possibly the central bank); impede significant reform of state institutions on the pretext that their integrity must be preserved until the transition is complete; and relegate the task of amending the constitution to mechanisms to be agreed on by the main parties during the transitional period.

These proposals are certainly unacceptable to the Syrian opposition, and broadly to the U.S. as well. But this points to the second paradox. If the U.S. is determined to resolve the Syrian conflict through a diplomatic process, then the only possible deal under present military, economic, and administrative conditions inside Syria will almost certainly be based on Russian proposals. The US continues to insist that it will not accept Assad remaining president indefinitely and that any agreement must include his departure at some point, but the US has so far failed to deploy the kind of levers that might compel Russia to accept this view.

Perhaps Russia could still be persuaded to accept a formula ensuring Assad's departure by the end of a transition, in exchange for U.S. and opposition acceptance of its remaining proposals. But it is not enough to have a private or implicit understanding: the ability of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to exploit the Gulf Cooperation Council's peace deal in order to preserve much of his power and influence after his formal departure from office reveals the risks of such an approach. Any formula would therefore have to be made formal, and be accepted explicitly by Assad. Not only is this highly unlikely, but Russia's leverage over him may simply not extend that far.

These difficulties suggest that a political solution is still far off. They may also open the way for new proposals purportedly designed to break the impasse, such as federalism, which both Assad and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov have said at different times is not ruled out as an option. Many Syrians also fear that the U.S. and Russia will agree on a formal partition of Syria, which according to a recent survey is opposed by an overwhelming majority, but this goes against all evidence of both U.S. and Russian policy thinking.

Rather, Syria's long "hurting stalemate" is likely to switch from the military field to the political one, at least for some months. If the current cessation of hostilities endures, this means an entirely welcome reduction in the suffering of the Syrian people, but conditions may not yet be ripe for it to lead to a political solution.

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