

COMMENTARY

No.228

Wednesday, 1 October 2014

To Confront the Islamic State, Seek a Truce in Syria

Yezid Sayigh

Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

As a core coalition led by the United States gears up to confront the militant Islamic State with action in Iraq, there is a rare opportunity to engineer a truce in Syria. Both the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the more moderate armed rebels arrayed against it are stretched thin, bleeding badly, and in an increasingly vulnerable position. They remain as far as ever from negotiating a political solution to the conflict, but the timing is opportune. Each has self-serving reasons to suspend military operations to confront the looming jihadist threat from the east.

The two sides would unilaterally observe truces that are separate but implemented in parallel. This approach would not require a formal diplomatic agreement, just robust endorsement and timely coordination by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—the government's and the opposition's external backers that are most engaged in Iraq and warily converging on the shared goal of destroying the Islamic State.

If such a truce takes hold between the regime and rebels in Syria, it would embolden and empower civilian communities on both sides that are desperate for a respite, making it harder for their leaders and commanders to order a return to armed conflict. New dynamics and grassroots actors cutting across dividing lines could emerge on the ground, potentially paving the way to a meaningful political dialogue for the first time since 2011.

No Strategy for Syria

A truce in Syria would be in keeping with the approach to degrading and destroying the Islamic State that U.S. President Barack Obama outlined on 10 September. Indeed, a truce would allow a distinct improvement on what has been viewed by many as better than nothing, but less than a strategy.

An obvious drawback to Obama's approach is that it relegates dealing with the conflict in Syria between the Assad regime and the rebels to a later stage, and offers no detail on what might be done there in the meantime. As critics have pointed out, this may severely limit the impact of the campaign against the Islamic State and allow the militants to regroup and rebound.

Obama's call on 10 September for the U.S. Congress to give "additional authorities and resources to train and equip" Syria's rebels offered the Syrian opposition some comfort but little that is substantively new. Reports that Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies may host up to 6,000 rebels for training are hardly more encouraging: Saudi senior officials and advisers spoke grandiosely a year ago of spending billions of dollars to build a new rebel army, but this came to naught.

Even with the necessary resources, rebuilding Syria's moderate armed rebellion will take time. But this is in increasingly short supply. As alarming field reports from Aleppo reveal, the city and surrounding areas—what the International Crisis Group recently called "the most valuable of the mainstream opposition's dwindling assets"—may fall soon to regime forces. And the Islamic State clearly intends to retake the town of Azaz north of Aleppo and the nearby Bab al-Hawa border crossing to Turkey; if successful, it will probably seek to seize or deny use of the Atmeh border crossing in Syria's neighbouring Idlib Province, the last still in rebel hands. The crossings are critical for the rebels' resupplying and training; the flow of goods and humanitarian assistance; and the functioning of local administrative councils, the opposition's Syrian Interim Government, and international agencies in liberated areas.

The rebels are fighting on two fronts in the northwest and are increasingly overextended. A truce with the regime would allow them to regroup and concentrate their strength on facing the Islamic State, whose looming offensive will otherwise take them dangerously close to breaking point.

Regime Vulnerability

The Assad regime can derive only limited comfort from the rebels' predicament. It too will be hard put if new Islamic State offensives compel it to spread its forces—already badly stretched—even thinner.

According to reasonably plausible opposition estimates, regime losses spiked in July 2014, reaching 1,100 dead. This included 250–300 military personnel and civilian technicians killed in

attacks by the Islamic State on the gas fields and installations of Jabal al-Shaer and Furglus, east of Homs. Upwards of another 700 soldiers were lost when the Tabqa air base in Raqqa Province fell to the Islamic State on 24 August.

The regime continues to adjust and adapt militarily and has not run out of reserves. But the death toll is keenly felt among the regime's core constituency, the Alawis, who have already suffered disproportionately. An exodus has started from isolated Alawi villages, and the community is said to increasingly favour retrenching from other parts of Syria to defend home areas.

With the Islamic State turning its guns on the regime's last remaining positions in the city of Deir ez-Zor and maintaining pressure east of Palmyra, Alawi unhappiness may deepen. Concern over a potential Islamic State attack may additionally slow, or stall, the ongoing offensive by regime forces to sever the rebels' last supply line into the beleaguered eastern half of Aleppo.

These strains with supporters coincide with growing fiscal pressure on the regime. Besides inflicting material damage, the Islamic State's attacks on Jabal al-Shaer and Furglus have cut gas production and revenue. The Damascus government often complains of low tax revenue, and since July, it has decreed significant price increases for a basket of goods and services including sugar, rice, water, electricity, and, most importantly, bread, the price of which rose by some 67 percent. The government also announced that it is seeking a new loan from Iran to fund imports. Reflecting the mounting pressure, the Syrian pound lost 10 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar by mid-September, reaching SYP182 to the dollar, from SYP165 a month earlier.

Advantages of Parallel Unilateral Truces

With all these strains, the Assad regime and the armed rebellion have equally good reason to batten down where they can. And with the Islamic State knocking on both their doors, the stakes are even higher. This is certainly not enough to ensure they will cease firing at each other, but the timing is opportune to try.

The government's and the opposition's external backers have critical roles to play, and, faced with the Islamic State threat, a powerful incentive to play them. Now is the moment for three outside actors in particular—Iran, the United States, and Saudi Arabia—to pressure the regime and rebels alike to commit to separate unilateral truces, coordinating the process indirectly to ensure these are implemented in parallel.

A major advantage of this approach is that it sidesteps tortuous discussions about political preconditions and the status of the Syrian parties of the sort that rendered the otherwise commendable Geneva 1 communiqué of June 2012 stillborn.

There is still not enough convergence between the two sides to allow a political solution. When Obama ruled out relying on the Assad regime in the fight against the Islamic State in his 10

September speech, he also referred to the need to continue “pursuing the political solution necessary to solve Syria’s crisis once and for all.” But there is no prospect of this happening: diplomacy died with the collapse of the Geneva 2 talks last February, and the Assad regime is no more willing now than it was then to share meaningful power.

But the rise of the Islamic State means that there is room for a truce based on self-interest, not on compromise. Each warring party needs to regroup and prepare to face virtually inevitable Islamic State offensives.

The key at this stage is clarity and simplicity. A truce means a complete cessation of fire in all areas under regime and rebel control; unfettered movement of food, medicine, and fuel; restoration of water and electricity supplies; and an end to the use of torture against prisoners. This would include relieving besieged communities—for example, the rebel-held neighbourhoods of the Eastern Ghouta and Zabadani near Damascus, and pro-regime Nabul and Zahra near Aleppo—and opening land-border crossings to allow trade and the flow of humanitarian assistance. For a majority of Syrians, this would make an enormous difference. And if these initial objectives are attained, then it may become easier to tackle the contentious issue of releasing the tens of thousands of political prisoners held by the regime in subsequent phases.

The Politics

Clearly, this kind of truce differs fundamentally from the coercive pacification strategy pursued by Assad’s government in various areas since the start of 2014. Often labelled “national reconciliation” by the regime, highly unequal truces were imposed by force on local communities after severe blockades of food and medicine and months of bombardment.

The regime will undoubtedly try to haggle as its outside backers nudge it toward a ceasefire. For example, it may insist on applying a truce only on some fronts while maintaining its military pressure and sieges where it has the advantage. And it may demand that economic sanctions and travel bans be lifted in return for ceasing fire and ending sieges.

Indeed, the Assad regime was quick to angle openly for the international coalition lining up against the Islamic State to “work with President Assad,” as Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister Fayssal Mikdad said in mid-July. Two months later, he reiterated that “the real address for counterterrorism is Damascus,” signalling the regime’s continuing hope that the coalition’s need for at least tacit security cooperation can be a prelude to its political rehabilitation. Both regime-linked and Israeli media have claimed that the United States is already providing the Assad regime indirectly with precise intelligence about Islamic State targets in Syria.

But the regime is in a vulnerable position and cannot impose terms. Above all, it risks stoking the deep unhappiness of its own fighters and social constituency if it does not accept a truce unconditionally, especially one that comes without political preconditions of its own.

Unambiguous Iranian political intervention in support of a truce would be vital in order to tip the balance, especially given the regime's deepening financial dependence on Iran.

Of course, Assad will not be the only challenge; many Syrian rebels may also oppose a truce. They are particularly averse to one that does not entail prior concessions by the regime on key demands, including Assad's commitment to power sharing, as several commentators have proposed, and the release of political prisoners.

Moves by the United States and other anti-Islamic State coalition members to increase aid and training for the rebels may encourage some to think they can hold their own against both the regime and the new jihadist threat, but this is dubious at best, a delusion at worst. The rebels have made gains in Hama and Homs provinces since June, but the regime has also done so, and opposition media confirm that it had additionally wrested control of the entire western Hama countryside by mid-September. Jabhat al-Nusra took Quneitra and surrounding regime positions in southern Syria in September, but the regime had previously won a potentially more significant prize when it took the Mleeha suburb in the Eastern Ghouta area of Damascus in August, after a long siege.

Even so, ensuring rebel support for a truce will not be easy, especially if it is not accompanied by an immediate release of prisoners. But like the regime, the rebels face a population exhausted by war. They will come under significant grassroots pressure to respond favourably if a general truce becomes a feasible possibility.

Some civil society groups have sought to broker local truces in various parts of Syria since early 2014, without success. In one incident in late August, the Army of Islam, which is part of the Islamic Front that receives modest support from some Friends of Syria countries, arrested fifteen local activists it accused of seeking a truce with the regime in two Eastern Ghouta villages.

Jabhat al-Nusra may pose a particular challenge, as it is the most likely to reject a cessation of fire with the regime. Since August, it has clashed with the U.S.-supported Syrian Revolutionaries' Front and pulled out of the joint judicial committee in Aleppo. It may be planning to take over the border crossings with Turkey.

But Jabhat al-Nusra too has reason to worry about the Islamic State. And it needs to be responsive to the civilian population's desire for a respite to confirm that it is genuinely a Syrian organization first and foremost, prioritizing the interests of the communities where it operates over those of a global jihad.

For the “moderate” rebel camp, committing to a truce will not kick off any new adverse trends within the rebellion. Other Salafist groups have either already declared for the Islamic State or are in decline. The Daoud Brigade, for instance, defected to the Islamic State in July, and the Ahrar al-Sham Movement started its decline even before the 9 September explosion that eliminated most of its leadership. Conversely, mainstream Salafist groups such as the Army of Islam and Suqour al-Sham have moderated their Islamist rhetoric. On 3 August, they formed a joint command structure with secular rebel factions such as the Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front and the Hazm Movement, which was also later joined by Ahrar al-Sham.

The opposition’s external backers will have to gain credibility and trust among the rebels if they are to persuade them to cease firing at the regime, in part by increasing material and training assistance to enable opposition forces to confront the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, should use their influence to neutralize or mitigate active opposition from Salafist groups, and possibly even from Jabhat al-Nusra.

But building grassroots support for a truce also means encouraging the rebels to respect the authority of the opposition’s local administrative councils over civilian affairs. This should especially include justice and policing, as these most directly affect the security of local communities and are the areas of greatest intervention by armed groups. In parallel, stepping up assistance through those councils for humanitarian relief, infrastructure, and local development projects would help shore them up politically and make them an attractive and credible alternative to the Islamic State.

Avoiding Complacency

Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq will take time. U.S. Department of Defence planners reportedly estimate this could take up to three years. And even then, success will ride on the ability—and willingness—of the Baghdad government to work toward genuine political inclusion of the Sunni community; to reform the army, police, and public finances; and to greatly enhance delivery of key public services.

The Islamic State will not remain on the defensive in the meantime. In Iraq, it is regrouping and consolidating, in part by absorbing or eliminating rivals and erstwhile partners within the Sunni camp. It is also actively recruiting and training in Syria, where the opposition reports it started training 6,300 new recruits in July alone. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency estimated that as of mid-September, the Islamic State had up to 31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria—three times previous estimates.

With military pressure against it mounting in Iraq, the Islamic State is likely to respond by going on the offensive elsewhere. This means targeting rebel strongholds in northwest Syria, but the group could also advance from Deir ez-Zor across the badia (steppe) to appear east of Damascus and even as far south as Sweida, which has so far largely escaped the war. The Islamic State

already poses a serious looming threat to Lebanon, and extending into southern Syria would place it squarely on Jordan's northern border, threatening the kingdom as well. Such a move would potentially enable the group to threaten rebel control in the Deraa-Hawran area in Syria, where Jabhat al-Nusra is already the strongest rebel force.

If the Islamic State makes significant advances in Syria, especially against the more moderate opposition, this will give it a new lease on life and undermine gains made against it in Iraq. The group must be contained and rolled back in Syria in parallel, albeit in ways that do not undermine the Syrian opposition and associated armed groups or empower the Assad regime. A general truce can achieve this purpose.

Changing the Conflict Dynamic

Powerful voices on both sides of the Syrian conflict will oppose any kind of truce or insist on deal-breaking preconditions. The recent intensification of chlorine attacks and air strikes on opposition areas and moderate rebel targets reveals the effort by regime hardliners to undermine the potential for some form of modus vivendi. But with the scope opening up for de-escalation and compromises on several fronts between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, the cost-benefit calculations of the main Syrian protagonists can be altered. And they must, with Syria's death toll approaching 200,000, the number of internally displaced persons nearing 6.5 million, and over 3 million refugees in neighbouring countries.

Above all, a truce can change the dynamics of conflict in Syria by creating an opportunity for the Syrian people to make their preferences felt. A "peace camp" straddling the divide might not emerge, but those demanding different political approaches and some form of accountability for the losses and hardships they have been compelled to endure may be empowered.

Every diplomatic initiative to restore peace in Syria since 2011 has regarded a general ceasefire as a necessary condition for any process leading to a political solution. Predictably, the Assad regime, which deliberately militarized the crisis, was not invested in making this succeed, but the opposition also failed to turn the demand for a ceasefire into a powerful political tool in its own hands.

By de-linking a ceasefire from a political solution, unconditional, parallel truces can alter the conflict's dynamics. Whoever seizes the opportunity first—the Syrian opposition and those who genuinely support it, or Assad—can make it costly for the other to reject it.

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Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: ysavigh@carnegie-mec.org

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