INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES

Issue Brief

Intra Syrian Talks - Round Four: Grappling with Peace

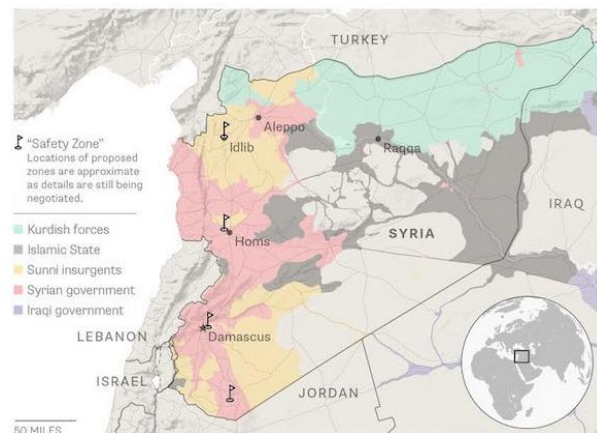**Arhama Siddiqa,** Research Fellow, ISSI

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The fourth round of intra-Syrian talks were held in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana from May 3 to 4. Delegations of the ceasefire guarantor states, Russia, Iran and Turkey took part in the negotiations alongside the Syrian government delegation and representatives of the Syrian armed opposition, the United Nations, United States and Jordan.

The diplomatic talks have resulted in an agreement to establish safe zones in Syria in what is hoped will be a big step toward peace in the battle-weary country. A memorandum on the creation of four security zones in Syria was signed during the talks. The Russian Foreign Ministry released the official document on May 6, titled "Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic.[1] These safe zones are primarily meant to help distinguish between extremist groups, including Islamic State terrorists (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), from the armed opposition groups.

According to the document:

1) De-escalation zones will be set up in four regions of Syria, namely, in the Idlib province and some parts of the neighboring provinces (Aleppo, Latakia and Hama), the area north of Homs, the suburb of Damascus East Ghouta and some provinces in Syria's southern parts - Daraa and Quneitra.

2) Safe zones will be established at the borders of the areas where checkpoints for the passage of civilians and humanitarian aid and ceasefire monitoring points will be installed. The use of weapons would be forbidden in the safe zones, allowing for the restoration of infrastructure and essential services and the return of refugees. There will also be observation posts to ensure compliance with the provisions of the ceasefire regime. These will provide free movement of unarmed civilians and humanitarian access to the areas, under guarantor states' control.

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[1]   http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041

3) The countries acting as the ceasefire guarantors will set up a joint working group on de-escalation ten days after signing the memorandum. It will deal with defining the boundaries of the de-escalation zones and safe zones, among other issues.

4) 4) The guarantors shall take steps to complete by June 4, 2017 the preparation of the maps of the de-escalation areas and security zones and to separate the armed opposition groups from the terrorist groups.

5) The memorandum is to be in force for six months with the possibility of automatic extension for the same period. According to Russian Presidential Envoy on the Syrian settlement, Alexander Lavrentiev, the document could become indefinite[2].

The Syrian armed opposition delegation declared it could not accept the memorandum, saying the establishment of de-escalation zones would threaten Syria's territorial jurisdiction. It also stated it will not sign anything while Iran remains among the guarantor states. "We don't accept Iran's participation as a guarantor state,"[3] one opposition delegation member reportedly shouted during a speech by Kazakhstan's foreign minister at the signing ceremony.

Iran believes that the agreement is a significant step toward the de-escalation of what has so far been an impregnable conflict. "We support any initiative aimed at de-escalation of the conflict in Syria, prevention of bloodshed and destruction leading to the fleeing of the Syrian people from their native territory. We support any step aimed at a ceasefire"[4] an Iranian Foreign Ministry official stated.

The UN special envoy on Syria, Staffan de Mistura, also welcomed the agreement, calling it "an important, promising, positive step in the right direction in the process of de-escalation of the conflict."[5]

On May 3, Russian President Putin announced during the joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan that the two leaders, as well as the US President Donald Trump, had discussed the establishment of safe zones in Syria calling it "one of the ways to consolidate the ceasefire regime".[6]

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[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.rt.com/news/387105-syria-talks-safe-zones/
[4] http://www.trunews.com/article/russia-iran-turkey-adopt-plan-for-security-zones-in-syria
[5] https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-05-04/note-correspondents-transcript-press-encounter-un-special
[6] https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201705041053273529-de-escalation-zones-syria-signed/

Meanwhile, the United States State Department offered a cautious welcome to the declaration. Their wariness stems from failures of past agreements and the belief that the Syrian regime is incapable of stopping all attacks on civilians and opposition forces.

However, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the United States itself proposed a stop violence in the areas hit by the most severe clashes between the government and the armed opposition so as to create conditions of safety for the civilians[7].

It is not yet clear how the safe zones will be enforced. Russian Colonel General Sergei Rudskoi said that personnel from Russia, Iran, and Turkey will operate checkpoints and observation posts and that other countries may eventually have a role to play too[8].

It is generally accepted that an overarching solution for the whole of Syria is not yet possible. Despite the opposition losing control of east Aleppo in December, Assad does not have the forces to defeat the rebel troops outright. The war has also broken up into multiple geographical disputes.

The devil lies in the details - details which will only add up as things proceed. So far, the de-escalation borders have not been confirmed. Specifics about peacekeepers have not been posted. In short, nothing concrete is yet in place.

Previously, the US was essentially in charge and had completely dictated over all events in the region. Now, however, Russia has very effectively interposed and completely marginalized the US. Another critical new element, one of significant importance could be on-ground, armed monitors as this would further cement the guarantor states' role in the region. The only way US can come in now is through Turkey- Erdogan's upcoming May 16 visit to the Us and his meeting with President Trump will be noteworthy.

The three major pitfalls of the agreement, apart from opposition's protest against Iran acting as a guarantor, is the level to which the Russians will impose on Syrian air force compliance, the degree to which jihadi forces linked to al-Nusra but active inside the safe zones would be regarded as legitimate targets by Russia or Syrian warplanes, and the paramount problem that all parties do not have one clear definition of who the terrorist is. For example, for Assad, every armed group that opposes his rule is a terrorist and must be eliminated.

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[7] https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705061053335325-lavrov-us-syria-safe-zones-astana/
[8] http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-russia-syria-safe-zones-20170505-story.html

A previous ceasefire agreement that went into effect on December 30, 2016 helped reduce overall violence in Syria for several weeks, but eventually collapsed. Other attempts at a ceasefire in Syria have all ended in failure. The next round of Syrian peace talks will be hosted by Astana in mid-July 2017, with expert meetings scheduled to be held two weeks beforehand.

A strategic way all parties can look at the current situation is to try and get as many people/parties in the fold of the political process, relying on the theory that the terrorist of today can be tomorrow's political partner. Any improvement that will save the lives and curb further bloodshed would be welcome.

That said, one thing is clear: any resolution in Syria cannot be implemented in isolation from the other powers in the world such as the United States and Saudi Arabia. Everyone needs to be on board the same train if lasting peace has to be brought about in the region.