



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Will the Ceasefire in Syria Hold?

Mahrukh Khan, Research Fellow, ISSI

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A ceasefire has come into effect in Syria after five years of bloodshed. The ceasefire agreement has been hailed as a victory for diplomacy between Moscow and Washington. The Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed the deal as a real step towards halting the bloodshed in the region. The United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon also welcomed the agreement as a long awaited signal of hope. The US Special Envoy to Syria Micheal Ratney stated that the accord could allow a quick resumption of negotiations resulting in a political process to end the conflict in Syria. President Assad voiced similar thoughts but added concerns about how the agreement could be misused by terrorists to advance their ambitions in Syria.

The war in Syria has resulted in an estimated 470,000 deaths, 9 million injured and the biggest migrant crisis since World War II. The conflict in Syria has been a proxy between the US-led western alliance and Russia. Regionally, the Sunni side supports the rebels and the Shia side President Assad.

The joint communiqué issued by Russia and the US on February 26, 2016, remains thin on pinpointing the terrorist groups in Syria while the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat-ul-Nusra are out of the ceasefire. The cessation of the hostilities does not apply to the Islamic State, Jabhat-ul-Nusra and other organizations designated as terrorists by the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Also, all participants of the agreement are required to deploy proportional amount of force in self defense against the groups not party to the agreement of the ceasefire.

The ceasefire has already been met with skepticism. The Saudi-backed Syrian opposition group, the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC), has nullified the deal as breaches have taken place. The HNC accused the Syrian government of violating the deal in the first 24 hours of its implementation, along with further violations made by government allies. The HNC has also requested the UN to specify the territories covered in the agreement to prevent further violence and hostilities.

On the other hand, Russia has accused moderate rebel forces of nine ceasefire violations. Many fear that difficulties will arise in getting Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the same page. Another difficulty for the US, Russia and other parties involved is to distinguish between the moderate rebel groups and the extremists as Syria is home to many such entities.

The French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has talked about indications that attacks have been continuing against zones controlled by moderate opposition. However, the matter still needs to be

examined. Hence, the French government has requested the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to meet and examine the accusations made by the Saudi-led HNC and the Russians.

The ceasefire which otherwise appears largely to be holding for now, has helped facilitate flow of the humanitarian aid to the besieged areas. The war-torn country has received much awaited humanitarian aid, supplies, food and medicines. The agreement has essentially allowed the UN task force to oversee the delivery of aid. This aid is set to reach all hard-hit areas in the country including those regions attacked by the Syrian government, opposition fighters and the Islamic State militants.

The coming days will be a test of commitment by the US and Russia. Both sides face the challenge of uniting all the parties involved in Syria against the terrorist groups - Daesh and Jabhat-ul-Nusra - and move towards a long lasting peace through agreements and political negotiations in Syria. The Syrian government has also stressed to the international partners involved in the ceasefire deal to seal international borders in order to halt the free movement of extremist armed groups and weapons. Nonetheless, the ceasefire itself faces many challenges. There are no peace keeping troops on ground to monitor and determine ceasefire violations.

If the rebel groups oust President Assad, another struggle of power could lead to a new civil war and fragmentation of the country, which will result in a spill-over of the strife into Turkey and the Middle East at large.

The recent statement issued by Secretary Kerry regarding partition of Syria as plan B if the ceasefire fails to hold has perplexed Russia and the regional countries. The Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov made it clear that Russia is not considering any Plan B for Syria. Many suggest that the US idea of the partition of Syria is nothing but a bluff to pressurize the parties involved.

Displaying a subtle shift in policy, the US is looking for a renewed political push to resolve the conflict. Coordinated steps between the US and Russia could help turn the tide in Syria. The war in Syria is a complex conflict which has brought death and misery to the country. The coming days will be critical and will witness the test of commitment by the US, Russia and other international partners involved in the agreement.

Pakistan welcomed the ceasefire deal between the US and Russia and reiterated its principal stance of neutrality and respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. Pakistan has already shown

concern for the humanitarian crisis the war has caused in and around Syria and urged the international community to address the situation. Pakistan has wished the deal a success and hopes that the deal can act as a portent factor for peace.

The people of Pakistan have remained concerned about continuing civil strife in Syria, which has not abated in the past 4 years. In fact, with every passing day casualties have mounted and displacements have played havoc with the peace of the region. As a member of UN and OIC Pakistan has always called upon all the parties to stop fighting and move to the negotiating table to explore peace and negotiations amongst different warring factions. If Geneva I and II accords had been implemented, subsequent carnage could have been avoided. Now all parties and guarantors of the ceasefire should consolidate ceasefire and craft a framework for peace, stability, and reconstruction. A war-torn Middle East cannot serve the interests of any community or country.