

Syria - After Detours U.S. Finally Agrees To Russian Ceasefire Plan

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The recent talk between the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Kerry brought some progress. The U.S. was so far [not willing](#) to agree to a real ceasefire in Syria and persisted on a lower level “cessation of hostility” agreement. This now changed. The U.S., for the first time, [agreed](#) to proceed towards a full ceasefire between its proxy forces in Syria and the Syrian government and its allies. In the press availability after the Tuesday talks Kerry said:

[T]oday, we believe we moved the ball forward in some ways, and I’ll say specifically. First, we pledged our support for transforming the cessation of hostilities into a comprehensive ceasefire. And we committed to use our influence to use the parties to the cessation in order to ensure compliance.

Second, we agreed that if a party to the cessation of hostilities engages in a pattern of persistent noncompliance, the task force can refer that behavior to the ISSG ministers or those designated by the ministers to determine appropriate action, including the exclusion of such parties from the arrangements of the cessation. Interpreted directly, that means that if they continue to do it and they’re pretending to be part of the cessation and they’re not, they could be subject to no longer being part of the cessation immediately.

Those last sentences are mainly directed at Ahrar al Sham which never signed the cessation agreement but claimed to be part of it while continuing its attack on Syrian government forces and civilians. Kerry is conceding to the Russian standpoint that Ahrar, by its action, is a terrorist group that needs to be fought down.

Fourth, we call on all parties to the cessation of hostilities to disassociate themselves physically and politically from Daesh and al-Nusrah and to endorse the intensified efforts by the United States and Russia to develop shared understandings of the threat posed and the delineation of the territory that is controlled by Daesh and al-Nusrah and to consider ways to deal decisively with terrorist groups.

Kerry had agreed to this position on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in earlier talks but later retracted with weak excuses that “intermingling” between al-Qaeda and “moderate rebels” made fighting al-Qaeda nearly impossible. That “intermingling” is [no longer an excuse](#). The U.S. now agreed that Russia and the Syrian government will fight al-Qaeda and that any other groups standing nearby and getting hit have only themselves to blame.

By the way, the New York Times [account](#) of the talks and the press conference by chief manipulator David Sanger are waaay off from what was really said.

The “cessation of violence” has held up quite well since the end of February. The south is mostly quite and there are only few hotspots elsewhere where fighting still flares up. Over 100 settlements and their local forces have, with Russian mediation, signed ceasefire agreements with the government.

There is also a new, deeper level of Russian and U.S. cooperation of Syria and on fighting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. A common rough plan was agreed upon to attack and eliminate both group. As part of this plan Iraqi forces under U.S. control [attacked and occupied](#) Rutba in west Iraq. Rutba, part of Anbar province, controls much of the open land and desert in the triangle of the Iraqi, Jordan and Syrian border. This move cuts off the southern route that connected the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian/Russian part of this move will be the liberation of Deir Ezzor in south-east Syria in the upcoming months. An attack on the Islamic State held Raqqa will only follow later on after a large concentration of force is made possible.

There are a few other active flashpoints in Syria. In East Ghouta, east of Damascus city, the Saudi sponsored Salafists of Jaish al-Islam are fighting groups once supplied by the CIA and now associated with al-Qaeda/Jabhat al Nusra for control of the area. This fight is already part of the disassociation from Nusra that the U.S. agreed upon. But the fighting is bloody with at least 500 losses on both sides during the last weeks. The Syrian army is the laughing third party in this and today [took](#) a significant part of the south of the East-Ghouta pocket.

The rebel part of Aleppo city, controlled by al-Qaeda, is now cut off from its only supply line. Improvised rockets from the rebel side are daily hitting civilians in the densely populated government held side. To eliminate the now besieged al-Qaeda in east Aleppo city will be a very bloody and destructive fight that might take months.

In the north Turkish supported “moderate rebels” still try to move towards east along the Turkish-Syrian border to eliminate the Islamic State access there. But each time they announce to have taken this or that town away from IS, a counterattack follows and IS regains its positions. This infighting between hostile forces is again to the advantage of the Syrian government.

Around Palmyra the Islamic State has made some surprise attacks on the Shear oil field and the T-4 military airport on the western road to Palmyra. There was, according to unofficial sources, some significant damage to Syrian and Russia material on the air base but no news about the incident was published. The advances the Islamic State made in area have by now, with significant Russian help, all been reversed. Following a consolidation phase a renewed push from Palmyra eastward to Deir Ezzor is expected.

Hizbullah has pulled back all troops from the Aleppo area where they were replaced by Iranian forces. It is [unwilling](#) to commit additional forces just to move some ceasefire lines a few miles back or forth. It continues its engagement around Damascus and in the border region to Lebanon with IS and al-Qaeda being the main targets.

Russia, Iran, Hizbullah and the Syrian government are all aware that the U.S. is “flexible” with its interpretation of agreements and tends to cheat whenever it believes that it can do so to its own advantage. They are fully prepared to respond and escalate again should the

U.S. proxy forces divert from the new agreements or should some significant other changes on the battlefield occur.

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