

The Division of Syria? US to Build Additional “De-Escalation Zones”: Tillerson

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In his [testimony](#) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 30, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told lawmakers that the US is working to create additional de-escalation zones in Syria. The secretary did not say where exactly the zones will be built. It's logical to assume that the top diplomat meant the southern and south-eastern parts of Syria under the control of US-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish militias.

The area accounts for about one third of the national territory with approximately 70% of hydrocarbons in Syria. Tillerson emphasized that he was not talking about demarcation zones to divide the country. He said the regime change was not the goal but the US executive will approach lawmakers for authorization to act against the government of Bashar Assad, if need be.

The secretary did not say that the plan presupposes an increase in military presence but, once established, additional zones will inevitably require more military personnel to carry the mission out. If the creation of the zones is coordinated with other actors, it won't be Americans only. Russia, Jordanian and US militaries are controlling the de-escalation zones in the provinces of Deraa, Quneitra and As-Suwayda located in the south-western part of Syria. If Mr. Tillerson was talking about a unilateral move, then the US military presence will grow substantially, including armor units and other heavy military equipment.

The issue of setting up additional de-escalation zones was not on the agenda of the Astana talks on Syria held on October 30-31. The US was invited as an observer but nothing was said about the plan Secretary Tillerson announced to Congress. Creating de-escalation zones is never all roses. For instance, the process is not running smoothly in the province of Idlib. Turkish forces control the north of the province but the bigger part of the territory is under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham terrorist group, which is excluded from peace talks.

“There is a pretty high level of tension there and there is still a threat of offensives by radical groups deployed there,” [said](#) Alexander Lavrentyev, the head of the Russian delegation at the Astana talks on the Syria crisis, adding “But we hope that our Turkish partners will in the end fulfill their part of the obligations concerning the Idlib de-escalation zone and will stabilize the situation.”

If done unilaterally, the establishment of additional zones mentioned by Tillerson means that the United States administration has taken a decision to keep the pro-Syria government

forces away from the territory controlled by the US-led coalition. It'll hardly be a contribution to the peace process. It coincides in time with France pushing a new Syria initiative at the UN. The US and Great Britain have already expressed their support of the French proposal. It cannot be ruled out that setting up additional de-escalation zones Mr. Tillerson talked about is a part of US-UK-French plan of post-war settlement in Syria.

Moscow is pushing an initiative of its own. President Putin's proposal to convene the [congress of Syrian religious and ethnic groups](#), including the Kurdish-led authorities in northern Syria, scheduled for Nov. 18 in Sochi was discussed on the sidelines of the Astana meeting (October 30-31). The idea to create the "Syrian National Dialogue Congress" was first mentioned at the 14th annual Valdai Discussion Club meeting (October 16-19). Vladimir Putin believes that the congress could be an important step toward a political settlement and could also help draft a new constitution for the country. Special UN envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura agreed to participate in the event. About 1,500 representatives of 33 parties and movements have been invited to attend.

Moscow's plan presupposes participation of the US and even major powers outside the region — Saudi Arabia, the United States and Egypt — in the peaceful settlement based on Syria's territorial integrity.

So far, the negotiations between the opposition and the Syrian government have been rough-going. The idea of Russia-sponsored reconciliation forum is opposed by the opposition High Negotiations Committee and Syrian National Coalition (SNC). They may obstruct the process but it won't diminish Russia's role as a key player able to pressure regional powers for concessions and prepared to show flexibility itself. It's important that Russia's diplomatic initiative has the backing of Damascus, Tehran and Ankara.

Perhaps, the prospects of Russia-sponsored initiative's success pushed the US administration to announce the plans to build additional de-escalation zones in Syria. If the US-backed coalition established the zones unilaterally to present other actors with a fait accompli, it would be the way to divide Syria contrary to what the UN-sponsored Geneva peace effort, as well as the Russia-Iran-Turkey-initiated Astana talks, has tried to achieve. If not, it should become part of international agenda. The US plan to build additional de-escalation zones was announced as a slam dunk during congressional hearings. The way it was done makes one think it'll be a unilateral move taken to obstruct the Russia's peace plan. The division of the country into zones controlled by opposing coalitions runs counter to the interests of Syrian people. This is a very worrisome development which can potentially hinder the prospects of stable peace in Syria.

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