

30-Dec-16 World View — Russia and Turkey announce a new ceasefire in Syria

Description

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- Russia and Turkey announce a new ceasefire in Syria
- Damascus Syria is without water after reservoirs were poisoned

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There have been two major ceasefire announcements so far this years, plus a few smaller ones. None lasted more than a few days.

But Russia and Syria have previously declared that a victory in Aleppo would mean victory in the entire war, and an end to the fighting. The rebel groups would be so decimated, despondent and dispirited that they'd lose the will to fight. So Russia's president Vladimir Putin had to make good on that promise.

So even though the rebel groups fighting against Syria's president Bashar al-Assad are nowhere near defeated, Russia and Turkey on Thursday declared that there would be a nationwide ceasefire. Let's point out a few things.

- "This time it's different." That's because, this time the U.S. was completely excluded, and the negotiations took place in Moscow rather than Geneva. I guess the Putin decided that it wasn't that much fun anymore to make a fool of John Kerry again and again. This agreement was reached between Russia, Turkey and Iran.
- Seven "moderate" rebel militias signed on to the deal, but a number of others did not.
- There will be no ceasefire for jihadist groups, against whom military action will continue. These include al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front, now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham or JFS), and the so-called Islamic State (IS or ISIS or ISIL or Daesh).
- In September, Bashar al-Assad said with respect to a ceasefire deal:

"We as a nation ... are delivering a message that the Syrian state is determined to recover all regions from the terrorists and restore security, infrastructure, and everything else that was destroyed in both human and material aspects."

In fact, rebel groups control vast regions of Syria, and al-Assad is left in control of a small part of country mockingly called "Alawite-istan," named for al-Assad's ethnic group, Alawite.

- Al-Assad has signed on to the deal and promised not to target moderate rebel groups or civilians, all of whom al-Assad considers to be "terrorists." This means that Russia is controlling al-Assad,

at least for the time being.

- Turkey has troops in northern Syria, preventing the Kurds from achieving their goal of taking control of much of northern Syria, creating an independent Kurdish state called “Rojava.” Turkey considers the Syrian Kurds to be a major security threat to Turkey. The Syrian Kurds have not signed on to the deal.

Why would the Syrian rebel groups sign on to the agreement? A representative gave the answer in an interview on RFI on Thursday (my transcription):

“Obviously after Aleppo I think everyone realizes that there is no limit to the level of violence and barbarism that can be exercised against any target, including hospitals and civilians, to reach some object. And therefore if one gets that to stop, the military solution should absolutely be stopped.”

In other words, some of the “moderate” rebel groups signed on, but only to stop the bombing.

And that’s the problem with the whole deal. There’s no compelling force behind the ceasefire. It’s all transitory. As soon as any one of a number of factors on the ground changes, the whole ceasefire will unravel, as previous ones have done.

I consider Bashar al-Assad to be the most volatile of the participants. His air force is going to continue bombing al-Nusra and ISIS forces, many of which will be indistinguishable from the “moderate” rebels that he’s promised not to target. He considers all of these rebels to be like cockroaches to be exterminated, and he seems likely to be unable to control his impulses and target any of them. As soon as another barrel bomb hits a hospital or a marketplace or a hospital, it will be clear that there’s no ceasefire.

Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also very volatile. He used to get along with al-Assad until 2011, when al-Assad’s bombers started targeting innocent women and children, including Palestinians in a refugee camp near Latakia. Erdogan must have had to swallow hard to sign this deal, as he’s watch Syrian and Russian bombers target Turkmens and other ethnic groups related to Turks, as well as Palestinians, whom Erdogan supports.

Iran could be pretty volatile as well. They’re known to be strongly against any Turkish presence in Syria, and Erdogan has no intention of withdrawing from northern Syria. Also, there are pockets of Shias living in regions controlled by rebels, and Iran will feel compelled to protect them.

The only thing that’s really changed on the ground in the last few weeks is that the Russians have taken control of Aleppo. The rest of Syria is still an uncontrolled scattered collection of militias, armies and jihadists of various ethnicities and religious sects.

Peace talks are scheduled to be held within a month in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, assuming that the ceasefire is still holding. The choice of Kazakhstan makes it clear that this is deal involving Turkey, Russia and Iran, and not including the United States, the United Nations, or the European Union. [BBC](#) and [Russia Today](#) and [Gulf News \(Dubai\)](#) and [Vice News](#)

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Damascus Syria is without water after reservoirs were poisoned

Four million people in Damascus, Syria's capital city, have been without water for five days after water reservoirs were poisoned with diesel. It's not clear who was responsible for the poisoning, but it's believed that the perpetrators are some of the same militias that signed on to the peace agreement on Thursday. However, they claim that they're not responsible, since they would be harmed more than anyone else.

Despite the ceasefire, Syrian warplanes have been bombing a valley northwest of Damascus to recapture the region that provides most of the water to Damascus. [Reuters](#) and [Middle East Eye](#) and [Russia Today](#)

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