

Beyond Deconfliction in Syria

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Nov 16, 2017

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Brief Analysis

A joint U.S.-Russia statement and peace talks must be fleshed out quickly to ensure a growing Iranian presence in the country does not fuel a jihadist comeback.

On November 11, in Da Nang, Vietnam, President Trump and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, issued a joint statement on Syria expressing satisfaction with recent enhanced joint deconfliction efforts. These efforts, according to the statement, "have dramatically accelerated ISIS's losses on the battlefield in recent months." Thereafter, the statement delineated a series of steps, begun this past July, aimed at settling the Syrian war.

Despite victories in Mosul and Raqqa, the fight against the Islamic State is far from over. None of the conditions that gave rise to the jihadist group, most notably Iranian support for tyrannical rulers such as Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the expansion of marginalized rural Sunni populations, have been resolved. Preserving gains in the fight against the Islamic State is central to ensuring it doesn't reconstitute as a potent force. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, in comments following the joint statement, signaled that the United States will not withdraw from eastern Syria until the defeat of the Islamic State is clear and sustainable. "We're going to make sure we set the conditions for a diplomatic solution," he told reporters. The short-term goal, Mattis continued, is "to demilitarize one area and then demilitarize another, and just keep it going, [and] try and do the things that will allow people to return..."

Iran in Eastern Syria

Strategic issues, however, are clouding prospects for a sustainable diplomatic settlement. A closer look at the forces actually fighting the Islamic State in eastern Syria shows that upward of 80 percent, according to recent public statements by National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster, are supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Whereas the United States is wise to avoid anything resembling war with Russia, U.S. policy should not allow

Russia to cement Iran's grip on Syria. Videos of Shia militias liberating the border city of Abu Kamal, an overwhelmingly Sunni area, were hailed by the Syrian Ministry of Defense as yet another victory in Assad's attempt to retake "every inch" of Syrian territory -- that is, achieve total military victory.

The door was opened for Assad and Iran, rather than the moderate opposition, to lead the fight against the Islamic State by the de-escalation agreement signed by Moscow, Washington, and Amman on July 7 -- not by U.S.-Russia deconfliction efforts. Indeed, diminished U.S. military support for rebels linked to that deal has reduced bloodshed and improved humanitarian access in the area, but it has also removed a threat to the Assad regime. Southern Syria, notably, is the traditional invasion route to Damascus; the region also represents Assad's soft underbelly, given that the torture of teenagers there sparked the Syrian civil war six years ago. In turn, Assad's Iran-supported legions have been allowed to spread out over an unprecedented amount of Syrian territory, which Tehran intends to turn into a "land bridge" to augment its air bridge to Damascus airport.

Recognizing the dangers of this Iranian expansion, the November 11 statement "welcomed" a U.S.-Russia-Jordan memorandum of principles signed three days earlier that outlines the "reduction, and ultimate elimination, of foreign forces and foreign fighters" from southwest Syria. Unfortunately, efforts since summer 2017 to clear from the Golan frontier Iran-backed groups -- alone in substantially attacking Israeli forces during the war -- have reportedly moved them a mere six miles back. This is hardly the kind of security cordon necessary to assuage Israeli fears of another southern Lebanon front, in Quneitra province, and thus another avenue for Iran to attack Israel. Moreover, "reduction and ultimate elimination" is unlikely to happen given Assad's support for a Russian and Iranian presence in the country. U.S. forces and their allies have no such invitation and thereby little equivalent power to assert their interests, an inequity that must be addressed.

Given the extreme weakening of the former Syrian Arab Army by the war, Assad remaining in power will mean a heavy Iranian presence for the foreseeable future. Notably, the recent statement outlines UN Security Council Resolution 2254 as the path to peace -- but that resolution allows for multiple routes to continued rule for Assad, which should be an unacceptable outcome for Washington.

The official U.S. position, meanwhile, is rooted in the Geneva Communique, negotiated in June 2012. That document, however, also implicitly allows space for Assad to stay (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fixing-geneva-iii>). According to Section II, a "key step" to "any settlement" of the crisis is the formation of a "transitional governing body" (TGB) with "full executive powers" that will create a "neutral environment in which a transition can take place." The TGB "could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups...formed on the basis of mutual consent." This ambiguity has encouraged Russia to allow, and the United States to push back against, Assad's inclusion in the TGB while still remaining committed to the communique. Russian attempts to organize parallel processes in Astana or Sochi are thus meant not so much to circumvent Geneva as to exploit this loophole. For its part, UNSCR 2254 includes not only the Geneva Communique but also what was once Iran's "Four-Point Plan," consisting of an immediate ceasefire, formation of a national unity government, constitutional changes, and supervised elections.

Syrian Elections and U.S. Role

The November 11 statement stipulates "free and fair elections under UN supervision, held to the highest international standards of transparency, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate." Yet there is concern that the law governing Syrian elections currently permits only citizens with valid exit stamps to vote -- or a minority of those who fled for their lives across the Syrian frontier.

Correspondingly, Washington must press Moscow to urge its ally Damascus to liberalize its election law so that all Syrian citizens in the diaspora can participate. With a new round of Geneva talks set to begin November 28,

preceded by an opposition meeting in Riyadh, the United States must also make clear that it will not endorse any election process in which Assad participates, since such an endorsement would implicitly legitimize him. Otherwise, Assad will be guaranteed a victory and Iran will maintain its substantial position in the country. Such factors will increase the likelihood of a future Iran-Israel clash, hinder national stability, and foster the conditions that allowed the Islamic State to thrive in the first place.

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