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The Ceasefire and U.S. Interests on the Jordan-Syria Border

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Brief Analysis

By setting limits on Iranian deployments in southern Syria, Washington could insulate Jordan from problems on the border and encourage Iranian caution in the east, potentially decreasing the likelihood there of a U.S.-Iran clash.

If the U.S.-Russia-Jordan ceasefire agreement announced July 7 for southwest Syria holds, it would be an important new development in the Syrian war. The area, which includes territory controlled by moderate rebels and the Assad regime, runs from Quneitra in the Golan southeast to Suwayda, including Deraa. In recent years, to ensure continued calm in rebel-controlled territory, Amman, with assistance from Washington, has periodically conducted air and ground operations against militants affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Nevertheless, Jordan is increasingly concerned that Assad-regime-aligned, Iran-backed Shia militias will move south. Both Israel and Jordan want to prevent Iran from establishing a foothold on the border. Ideally, the agreement would preclude such deployments, but precedent suggests that Iran-backed militias have not been obliged by Russia's deals. As in eastern Syria, should Iran and its proxies deploy forces to this region, such a development could provoke a response from the United States or Israel.

The Agreement

This latest ceasefire agreement for Syria, in which Jordan is also a party, was announced after a bilateral meeting at the G20 between U.S. president Donald Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin. As for the rebel-controlled areas, they run east from the Golan about seventy kilometers, surrounding Deraa city, and have about 400,000 residents. Meanwhile, approximately one million people live in regime-held territory, encompassing Deraa, Suwayda, and Madinat al-Baath. While few details have emerged to date, the broad agreement is that Russia, Jordan, and the United States will exert pressure on their local allies -- including Russian pressure on the Assad regime -- to adhere to the ceasefire, which will be monitored by a joint center. On July 14, Reuters reported that Moscow volunteered to deploy ceasefire monitors to the area.

The agreement does not contain details on the long-term disposition of this territory. For its part, Amman would like the border -- under regime control -- to eventually reopen so that Jordan can resume exports to one of its leading trade partners, thereby stimulating the kingdom's anemic economy. At the same time, Jordan, which already has 1.4 million refugees, will accept no more, although more could indeed arrive should Iran-backed forces move south. These militias would also increase the threat to Jordan of cross-border subversion. Relatedly, Israel has made clear that Iranian deployments along the border are a redline. On July 9, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu told his cabinet that "this ceasefire must not enable the establishment of a military presence by Iran and its proxies in Syria in general and in southern Syria in particular." Iran already has a significant military presence in Syria, although not in the south.

Troubling Precedents

On several occasions this year, Iran-backed Shia militias have violated ceasefire agreements arranged by their ostensible Russian allies. In January 2017, for example, the Assad regime and these militias ignored a Russian-Turkish accord, continuing offensives in several areas of Syria, including Wadi Barada, Ghouta, and al-Sharqiya, on the outskirts of Damascus. Then, in May, Shia militias violated a so-called de-escalation agreement penned by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, attacking the outskirts of Homs and Hama. That same month, U.S. airstrikes killed several members of an Iran-backed Iraqi al-Hashd al-Shabi militia, who were advancing on U.S.-backed anti-IS Syrian forces in al-Tanf, a "no go" zone established by Moscow and Washington. During these strikes, U.S. military aircraft also reportedly targeted the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, killing several of its members.

Coming Problems in Deraa

The ceasefire agreement effectively halts the advance of Shia militias led by Hezbollah around Deraa and southwestern Syria, but it does not comprise mechanisms to remove these forces. And if the ceasefire is violated, Hezbollah will likely continue to progress toward the Syria-Jordan border without having to marshal additional forces. According to pro-Hezbollah sources, Katibat Radwan, Hezbollah's elite special forces unit, which has already participated in several major battles in Syria -- including most notably in Aleppo -- was preparing to deploy to Deraa earlier this month. Should Hezbollah resume its offensive in Deraa, Katibat Radwan will most likely lead the operation.

In any event, the pause in the Deraa campaign is a boon to Iran. Hezbollah and Assad regime forces have tried several times to take the city but encountered stiff resistance, with Hezbollah sustaining heavy casualties, thus generating complaints among the organization's constituents back in Lebanon. The ceasefire provides the militia with time to regroup prior to what promises to be a bloody campaign. When and if Hezbollah senses an advantage, precedent suggests the militia will violate the ceasefire and attack the rebels in the south.

Priorities for Iran and Hezbollah

Because the agreement is geographically limited, Iran and Hezbollah, even if they abide by the truce, will not be bound to curtail operations elsewhere in Syria. Indeed, Hezbollah and other Shia militias may look to exploit this period, especially given Washington's seemingly narrow focus on the offensive in Raqqa and on consolidating the liberation of Mosul. Iran's immediate priorities in Syria are to preserve the Assad regime, protect Damascus and its suburbs, capture Deir al-Zour from the Islamic State, and eventually establish its vaunted land bridge between Syria and Iraq and onward to Lebanon. If the United States tolerates the deployment of Shia militias in Deir al-Zour, operations in East Ghouta, the clearing of remaining rebel pockets around Damascus, and the containment of southern rebels in Deraa, Iran might actually forgo an attempted capture of Deraa for the moment.

By focusing on the border area and leaving out the Damascus suburbs, this agreement indirectly allows Hezbollah to operate freely around Damascus and in Tadmur (Palmyra), where Shia militias and Assad's army are advancing slowly but surely toward Deir al-Zour, so far unchallenged. And Iran is far more interested in Deir al-Zour than in Raqqa. [Strategically speaking, Deir al-Zour is critical for the land bridge](#), containing gas and oil fields and phosphate mines that could help boost the Assad regime's challenged economy.

U.S. Options

By striking a Hashd unit in al-Tanf in May, the Trump administration demonstrated a willingness to target Iranian assets in Syria. The Hashd incident, however, was focused on protecting the U.S.-backed ground troops tasked with liberating Raqqa from the Islamic State. It is less clear that the administration will be open to targeting these forces entering areas where IS does not pose a problem. To wit, following the Hashd strike, a spokesman for Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition, clarified the defensive nature of Washington's Syria policy. "The coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime or pro-regime forces," he said, "but remains ready to defend themselves if pro-regime forces refuse to vacate the deconfliction zone." The spokesman added that prior to the airstrike, U.S. forces had "issued several warnings" to the Iran-backed militia.

While Moscow has purportedly committed to preventing the Assad regime from violating the ceasefire in the south, Russia should not necessarily be trusted to honor this promise or to punish Iran and its allies for any infringements. Indeed, to date, Moscow has taken a rather laissez-faire approach to Iranian and Assad-regime ceasefire violations. Moreover, Russia has allowed the Assad regime to transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah while also permitting Israel to attack these weapons on Syrian territory. Little evidence exists to suggest Moscow will change its approach and actively deter its allies from breaching the ceasefire. And even if Russia enforces the ceasefire in the south, Moscow could well encourage Iran and its allies to pursue offensives elsewhere in Syria.

Given U.S. concerns about Jordanian stability, the Trump administration should establish a redline on Iranian deployments to the south. To do so, Washington should inform Moscow, Damascus, and Tehran that any regime or Iranian air or ground operations in the ceasefire area would be considered a threat to U.S. forces and met with an appropriate response from the air. Washington and Tehran may already be destined to clash in the east, should Iran continue its efforts to consolidate its land bridge by securing the Syrian border with Iraq in U.S.-controlled territory east of the Euphrates River. Setting limits on Iranian deployments in the south, via limited airstrikes, may correspondingly make Iran more cautious in the east, helping avoid an escalation there. Indeed, if Washington does not take such a step, there is a distinct possibility that Israel will.

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