

Shaping U.S.-Russian Cooperation Against Jabhat al-Nusra

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Brief Analysis

Helping Russia target the jihadist group will only benefit the Assad regime unless Washington ensures that such efforts are carefully targeted, strictly conditioned, and accompanied by additional reinforcement of the moderate opposition.

The Obama administration is reportedly considering a deal with Russia to coordinate an expanded bombing campaign against al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in Syria. In exchange, Moscow would pressure Bashar al-Assad's regime to stop bombing other rebel militias that the United States does not consider terrorist groups. According to a June 30 *Washington Post* report, the U.S. military would not provide Russian forces with "the exact locations of these groups," but it would "specify geographic zones that would be safe from the Assad regime's aerial assaults."

Any such agreement could help roll back JN's recent growth in northwest Syria, spurred by repeated regime violations of the "cessation of hostilities" agreement brokered by Washington and Moscow. But the challenge lies in reducing the grave risk of Assad becoming the primary beneficiary of joint strikes against JN. Avoiding that scenario means crafting an agreement whose geographic scope and precision will ensure a positive impact on Western-supported moderate rebels. Three issues require particularly careful consideration:

1. **Where the strikes occur.** Jabhat al-Nusra is hostile toward the more moderate rebel groups and communities

supported by the United States and its Western allies. If joint U.S.-Russian strikes against JN occur in areas where the group is in conflict with other antiregime forces but the regime is not present, then such targeting could help those antiregime forces while doing nothing to help Assad. Yet the consequences would be very different if the strikes occur in areas where JN is attacking the regime in tacit cooperation with other groups; such strikes would benefit the regime and harm the prospects of the non-jihadist opposition.

2. **The extent to which cooperation is contingent on Russia not hitting groups other than the Islamic State and JN.**

Russia seeks to apply terrorist designations to rebel militias such as Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham -- Salafist groups whose views are not exactly in line with America's, but whom Washington has tacitly avoided proscribing or targeting due to their utility in fighting Assad. Since Moscow wants the political symbolism of cooperation with the United States, it should be told that there is a price to pay for such cooperation, namely, concentrating strikes only on groups that both countries agree are terrorist.

3. **The extent to which the regime steps up its strikes against non-JN-affiliated groups.** In East Ghouta, for example, the Syrian army has recently targeted Jaish al-Islam, taking advantage of the group's tensions with JN. While it would be unrealistic to think that Damascus will agree to the same terms as Moscow about who to strike, Washington should make clear that it will call off the deal if the regime escalates such strikes in a bid to take up the slack for decreased Russian operations against non-JN groups.

The fact remains that JN has been key in countering regime assaults in the northwest, most notably in Idlib and around Aleppo. The group's suicide attacks are instrumental against regime checkpoints and fortifications, in many ways serving as the poor man's answer to Assad's artillery salvos, airstrikes, and barrel bombs. Suicide tactics by JN, Jund al-Aqsa, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and other extremist groups are a serious threat to Syrian army operations in the northwest, particularly around Latakia, Hama, Aleppo, and Alawite villages in the Homs area (including Zara, where JN and its affiliates reportedly massacred inhabitants in May). As a result, the regime has had to divert troops from operations to retake and hold Palmyra, Deir al-Zour, and Tabqa.

The risk is that U.S.-Russian cooperation against JN will put the more moderate groups in a tough spot. If said cooperation winds up strengthening the regime, the divided moderate opposition may feel it has to negotiate with Assad to survive, similar to what some groups in the Damascus area have done. This would make the regime and its Iranian allies less prone to major concessions, making a sustainable negotiated settlement to the war that much more difficult.

The challenge, then, is for the United States to find ways to strengthen the moderate opposition at the same time that it goes after Jabhat al-Nusra. Accordingly, Washington needs to have its eyes wide open on how cooperation with Russia might affect the war's overall course. Joint Russian and Western bombing of JN will not cause a popular uprising against the group. Rather, it could produce an anti-Western reaction and a sense of betrayal among the moderate rebels if the new bombing strategy is not accompanied by vigorous steps to reinforce them.

Russia and Assad are not playing with a particularly strong hand at the moment. The regime is struggling to preserve its successes in the northwest, which were only achieved thanks to massive intervention by Russian aviation. And JN may once again threaten Russia's air base at Hmeimim in the near future. In this situation, the United States has a strong bargaining position and should not give it away too quickly.

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