

Syrian war continues after Munich deal

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An agreement announced early Friday morning by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a “cessation of hostilities” and stepped-up humanitarian relief in Syria has failed to produce an immediate halt to the five-year-old conflict that has claimed the lives of over a quarter of a million people and driven another 11 million from their homes.

Neither the US nor the Russian military has shown any indication of halting their air strikes, which both claim are being carried out in a campaign against “terrorists,” including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Centcom, the Pentagon’s regional command that oversees US military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, issued a bulletin Friday listing at least 20 bombing raids carried out by US warplanes over the previous 24 hours. Russian warplanes, meanwhile, were reported to have carried out strikes against the town of Tal Rifaat in northern Aleppo as well as hitting targets in northern Homs.

Meanwhile, neither the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad nor the Western-backed “rebels” has formally signed on to the “cessation of hostilities” agreed to after five hours of talks in Munich by the 17-member International Syria Support Group. The body could not refer to the agreement as a cease-fire as no Syrians, either from the government or the Islamist militias that are fighting against it, were present for the negotiations, much less consented to the deal.

Riyad Hijab, the chief of the so-called High Council cobbled together by Saudi Arabia to represent the “rebels” in United Nations-mediated talks with the Damascus government, dismissed the deal reached in Munich. “No agreement is possible [while] President Assad remains in office and the Iranian Pasdaran [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—IRGC] remain in Syria,” said Hijab, a former Syrian prime minister, who defected in 2012 in return for a large cash bounty from French intelligence.

President Assad, meanwhile, told AFP on Friday that the aim of his government was to reestablish its control

throughout Syria. “If we negotiate, it does not mean that we stop fighting terrorism. The two tracks are inevitable in Syria,” he said.

Similarly opposed views on the agreement were expressed by Kerry and Lavrov. Behind the facade of fighting terrorism, Washington continues to pursue a war for regime-change, utilizing Islamist militias as its proxy forces, while Moscow is seeking to prop up the Assad government, its principal ally in the Middle East.

Driving the Munich talks was the shift in the balance of forces within Syria itself, with Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air strikes and aided by the Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and other militias, having retaken key areas from the armed opposition in northwestern Latakia province as well as in the city of Homs and elsewhere.

Over the past several days, the Syrian army has largely encircled Aleppo, before the war Syria’s most populous city, half of which fell under the control of the anti-Assad militias. Most critically, it has cut off the principal supply route that brought arms and other support to the Islamist militias, and is close to cutting off a secondary route.

The Western powers and their regional allies, principally Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are hoping that they can use the Munich agreement to blunt the Syrian government advance and salvage their proxy forces on the ground in Syria.

In a press conference announcing the agreement in Munich, Lavrov rejected Kerry’s description of the Syrian government offensive in Aleppo as “aggressive.”

“Well, if liberation of the city that has been taken by illegal armed groups can be qualified as aggression, then, well, yeah, probably,” the Russian foreign minister said. “But to attack those who have taken your land is necessary.”

He charged that Aleppo and its western suburbs had been seized by the al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, as well as two allied Islamist sectarian militias, Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Defending the cutting off of the supply route from Turkey, Lavrov noted that a resolution passed by the UN Security Council forbade the

supplying of groups deemed terrorist.

As part of the Munich agreement, two task forces are to be formed, one to oversee humanitarian relief, and the second, jointly chaired by the US and Russia, to supposedly pursue the cessation of hostilities. Reportedly, the remit of this body will include the resolution of disputes over what are legitimate targets in the US and Russian air campaigns.

The key sticking point in the agreement, however, centers around the fate of the al-Nusra Front and similar Al Qaeda-linked militias.

Ever since Russia began its air strikes at the end of last September, US and other Western officials have condemned Moscow for targeting opposition forces other than ISIS. They have proven consistently reticent about naming those whom they objected being targeted, because in most cases they consist of Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters.

If the deal breaks down, it will most likely be over Washington's attempt to protect Al Qaeda, the same group that it has portrayed to the American people over the course of more than 15 years as the paramount threat to their security and which has served as the pretext for waging unending wars.

Kerry left no doubt that the Munich agreement may prove the ante-chamber of a wider and even bloodier war. "If the Assad regime does not live up to its responsibilities and if the Iranians and the Russians do not hold Assad to the promises that they have made ... then the international community obviously is not going to sit there like fools and watch this. There will be an increase of activity to put greater pressure on them," Kerry told the Dubai-based Orient TV on Friday.

The US secretary of state added, "There is a possibility there will be additional ground troops."

Kerry was referring to Saudi Arabia's statements that it is prepared to send troops to fight in Syria, supposedly as part of the anti-ISIS campaign. There is no doubt, however, that the overriding objective of the Saudi monarchy, which has been a principal base of support for the Islamist militias in Syria, is the swift toppling of the Assad government and the installation of a Western puppet regime.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said Friday that he was "confident" that both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, another Sunni monarchy that has backed the Islamist militias, would send Special Forces units into the country. Meeting with both Saudi and UAE officials on the sidelines of the NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels, Carter suggested that the Saudi and UAE

units would be used to back Syrian Sunni forces in retaking the city of Raqqa from ISIS.

The Syrian government has made it clear that it would view any entry of forces from Saudi Arabia or the other Gulf oil sheikdoms as a hostile invasion.

Once on the ground in Syria, Saudi and allied forces would not refrain from supporting the Al Qaeda-linked militias that Riyadh has played such a prominent role in creating. A Syrian government or Russian attack on Saudi or UAE units would in turn raise the prospect of a US counterattack providing the spark for a direct military confrontation between the world's two principal nuclear powers.

Warning against such a deployment of Saudi ground forces in Syria, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told the German daily *Handelsblatt*, "A ground operation would involve all participants in a war. Therefore, the Americans and our Arab partners must consider well whether they want a permanent war."

The results, Medvedev cautioned, could be "a new world war."

On Friday, Russia's state-funded RT news network claimed that the Russian prime minister had been mis-translated, using a Russian phrase that meant "another war on earth" rather than "a new world war." *Handelsblatt*, however, pushed back against Moscow's claims, insisting that Medvedev was accurately quoted, adding that Russian officials had approved a German-language transcript of the interview that included the term *einen neuen Weltkrieg*, or "a new world war."



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