

Turkey claims to have brokered cease-fire in Syria

Alex Lantier**29 December 2016**

On Wednesday, anonymous Turkish officials told the Anadolu state press agency that they had agreed to a deal extending to all of Syria the cease-fire declared in Aleppo after Syrian government troops retook that city earlier this month. They said they had reached the agreement in talks with Russian and Iranian officials.

“The source said that under the plan, Ankara and Moscow will work for the cease-fire to come into force at midnight on Wednesday,” Anadolu reported. “It added that terrorist organizations will be excluded from the deal.”

Anadolu cited Russian parliamentarian Sergei Jeleznyak as saying, “This decision has a strategic character and it may end to a large extent the Syrian crisis.” It also reported that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev had expressed his “readiness” to host talks in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime and opposition militias.

The deal reportedly includes provisions for an initial suspension of airstrikes and other confidence-building measures. Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) spokesman Yasin Aktay said the AKP government aimed for the cease-fire to be effective “as we enter 2017.”

For the time being, however, the agreement remains very fragile and its content unclear. Not only does a deal brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran—and, significantly, excluding Washington—face opposition from the US foreign policy establishment, but it is not clear that Moscow, Ankara and Tehran agree on what the cease-fire entails.

Moscow backed away from endorsing the cease-fire after it was announced in Turkey. Asked by reporters in a conference call for a comment on the cease-fire proposal, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov replied,

“I cannot answer that question right now... I don’t have sufficient information.”

There is little prospect of such a deal bringing peace to Syria by the beginning of 2017, i.e., the beginning of next week. First, it expressly excludes “terrorist” militias in the Syrian opposition, including the Islamic State (IS) and the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra), which will continue to be targeted.

Nor do Russia, Turkey and Iran agree on which other forces within Syria are “terrorist,” and thus should continue to be targets for military action by their forces, as well as US and European forces, in the region. The cease-fire, as the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* wrote, maintains “constructive ambiguity” over which opposition militias are considered terrorist. A major bone of contention is apparently the AKP government’s classification of US-backed Kurdish nationalist militias in Syria as terrorist.

The AKP is focused on preventing the establishment of a Kurdish state within the current territory of Syria. It views the US alliance with Kurdish nationalist groups as a basic national security threat. Turkish army units are currently fighting a bloody battle in Syria, at Al-Bab, to capture the city and set up a potential Turkish offensive on the Syrian city of Raqqa, an IS stronghold that Ankara does not want to see fall to US-backed Kurdish nationalists.

Discussing the cease-fire proposal, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavu?o?lu acknowledged that the other powers involved in the talks had not yet classified the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), as terrorist. However, he said that the PYD would not attend talks in Astana.

“Now, there is no consensus on the YPG yet. Some

countries are trying to benefit from the PYD against Daesh,” Çavuşoğlu said, employing the name used for IS in Turkey.

Finally, the cease-fire deal will provoke bitter opposition from Washington. The Obama administration has supported the YPG as the key force in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia it uses as its main proxy in Syria against IS. The Russian-Turkish move to exclude Washington from talks on a key Middle East peace deal has angered the US foreign policy establishment, sections of which are pushing for an even more aggressive policy in Syria after Donald Trump’s inauguration as US president next month.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) signed by Obama on December 23 contains provisions for a reckless escalation of the US intervention in Syria by sanctioning the provision of portable antiaircraft missiles to opposition militias within the country. This would allow US-backed opposition forces to shoot down Russian aircraft carrying out ground support missions for Syrian army units.

Such a policy could provoke a direct clash between the United States and Russia, particularly if Moscow tries to protect its aircraft by forcibly preventing delivery of US weapons to the opposition.

The NDAA drew sharp criticisms from Moscow, where Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it would put these weapons “in the hands of jihadists with whom the sham ‘moderate’ opposition have long acted jointly. Such a decision is a direct threat to the Russian air force, to other Russian military personnel, and to our embassy in Syria, which has come under fire more than once. We therefore view this step as a hostile one.”

Nonetheless, key sections of the US foreign policy establishment are calling for an aggressive intervention in Syria to reverse the string of defeats suffered by the US-backed opposition this year.

Richard Haass, the president of the US Council on Foreign Relations, penned a column titled “Aleppo’s sobering lessons” in which he predicted increased fighting against al-Nusra forces in Idlib province near Aleppo and criticized Obama for not going to war against the Assad regime in 2013, when the US nearly bombed Damascus based on bogus claims that Assad had used chemical weapons.

Haass wrote: “The next major battle will be fought in

Idlib province; the only question is when. And even after that, the war will continue to fester in various parts of what will remain a divided country.” He went on to add that “not acting in Syria has proved to be as consequential as acting. At no point was this clearer than when the United States did not fulfill its threat to make Assad’s government pay for its use of chemical weapons. That proved to be a missed opportunity...to alter the momentum of the conflict...”

Tensions between Washington and Ankara have mounted in the wake of the failed US- and German-backed coup on July 15 that nearly succeeded in toppling the AKP government and assassinating Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As Ankara attempted to sideline the Kurdish nationalist groups in talks with Moscow and Tehran, Erdogan denounced Washington for supporting Kurdish nationalist groups in Syria in the strongest terms, accusing it of backing terrorist groups.

Erdogan attacked US officials, declaring that “it is all obvious and clear that they are giving support to terrorist organizations, to the YPG and PYD and also including Daesh.” He continued, “We have in our hands confirmed evidence in photos, pictures and footage for all of this. As I have previously said, we will take matters into our own hands, one way or another.”



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