Russia and Turkey broker ceasefire in Syria

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A ceasefire brokered by the governments of Russia and Turkey went into effect at the beginning of Friday, December 30, with the Syrian army announcing that it had "declared a comprehensive cessation of hostilities across all the territories of the Syrian Arab Republic."

The ceasefire deal comes just one week after the Syrian army and allied militias restored government control over all of Aleppo, depriving militias led by the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, formerly known as the Al Nusra Front, of their last urban stronghold, the eastern sector of the city, which they had held since 2012.

The retaking of Aleppo was a strategic defeat for the United States and its regional allies, which orchestrated, armed and supported the Islamist militias that served as their proxy forces in a nearly six-year-old war aimed at regime change.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the agreement Thursday in a meeting with the Russian foreign and defense ministers. He said that three documents had been accepted by the government of President Bashar al-Assad and seven armed opposition groups. The first was an agreement to cease hostilities; the second to develop means of monitoring and enforcing the ceasefire; and the third to prepare for peace talks to be held in Kazakhstan early in the new year.

While the deal may lead to an end to hostilities in some areas of Syria, it hardly signals a full halt to the violence that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and driven some 11 million people, half the country's population, from their homes.

Like earlier abortive ceasefire deals brokered between Washington and Moscow, the latest agreement excludes those organizations classified by the United Nations as "terrorist," including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al Nusra Front, Syria's Al Qaeda affiliate). These two groups have been the most active fighting forces in the war against the Assad government, with the latter having fought in close alliance with weaker so-called "moderate rebels" backed by the CIA, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil monarchies.

This means that fighting will certainly continue in the areas controlled by ISIS, which are under siege by not only the Syrian government, but also US-backed Kurdish fighters as well as Turkey and militias that it is backing.

The Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), is apparently not a party to the agreements. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavu?o?lu acknowledged Thursday that there was not an agreement on Ankara's labeling of the YPG as a "terrorist" organization. He insisted, however, that the Kurdish group and its political arm, the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), would be excluded from the peace talks in Astana. Ankara considers the Syrian Kurdish groups to be an extension of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, against which it has waged a protracted counterinsurgency campaign.

The status of the YPG is a subject of substantial friction between Washington and Ankara. The Pentagon has funneled arms and aid to the Syrian Kurdish militia and has deployed US special operations troops to support it, even as the Turkish government has vowed to carry out military action to prevent the YPG from consolidating control over a de facto Kurdish state on its border.

The possibility that the ceasefire has been reached at the expense of the Kurdish factions appeared likely with the report by Turkey's Dogan news agency that Russian warplanes had launched airstrikes for the first time against ISIS positions around the Syrian town of Al-Bab. Turkish forces have launched an offensive aimed at preventing the Kurdish militia from taking the town and thereby furthering their aim of linking up two

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separate Kurdish-held zones.

A rapprochement began earlier this year between Turkey and Russia. This followed a sharp deterioration of relations after Turkish warplanes shot down a Russian jet carrying out airstrikes on the Syrian-Turkish border in November 2015, raising the specter of war between the NATO member and Russia. Relations grew closer after an abortive military coup last July which Turkish officials blamed on Washington.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday that seven separate "rebel" groups comprising 60,000 fighters had signed onto the ceasefire deal. Later in the day, however, one of these groups, Ahrar al-Sham, a hardline Islamist faction that had been closely aligned with Al Qaeda, denied it had accepted the agreement stating unspecified reservations.

The exclusion of the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate from the ceasefire also raises serious questions as to its future. Strikes against it are likely to also affect so-called "moderates" who are allied with and fight closely alongside it. This was a continuous subject of conflict in previous ceasefire deals between Moscow and Washington. Russia demanded that the US carry through on its promise to separate its "moderates" from Al Nusra, while the State Department claimed this was nearly impossible because these US-backed factions had become "marbleized" with the Al Qaeda affiliate.

The Syrian government Thursday said that the truce agreement excluded ISIS, the Al Nusra Front and "groups linked to them." It also stressed the obligation of groups that had signed the deal to separate themselves from these two Islamist factions.

Çavu?o?lu, meanwhile, said that his government would refuse to negotiate with representatives of Syria's Assad government in any peace talks and that it had reached an agreement with Russia to "leave aside for now" the future of the Syrian president. Previously, Ankara has insisted that any settlement must include Assad's removal from the Syrian presidency.

Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem, meanwhile, told the state news agency Sana that while Damascus accepted Moscow as a guarantor of the ceasefire, "We don't trust the Turkish role," because of Ankara's backing for the Islamist militias.

A State Department official Thursday described the ceasefire as a "positive development," but clearly the exclusion of Washington from the deal--Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov said that the incoming Trump administration could participate--reflects the failure of the US policy of regime change in Syria and a reversal in its drive for hegemony over the entire region.

The US ruling establishment will continue to be racked by recriminations over who lost Syria even after the change of administration, laying the foundations for a new upsurge of US militarism in the Middle East.

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