

US and Russia discuss “safe zones” in Syria

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US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, discussed a proposal Tuesday for the creation of “safe zones,” or “de-escalation zones,” in Syria.

The conversation was the first between the two heads of state since the Pentagon on April 7 rained 59 cruise missiles on a Syrian air base where Russian troops were deployed. The attack was carried out on the pretext of retaliating for a chemical weapons attack that Washington blamed—without providing any substantive evidence—on Syrian government forces. Moscow denounced the strike as an act of aggression and broke off its contact with the US military command overseeing American operations in Syria.

The White House described the conversation between Trump and Putin as “very good,” saying it “included the discussion of safe, or de-escalation, zones to achieve lasting peace for humanitarian and many other reasons.” The Kremlin merely characterized the phone call as “businesslike” and “constructive.”

In apparent response to the discussion, Washington, for the first time, dispatched a senior-level official to the Syrian peace talks being held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, which are jointly sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Stuart Jones arrived at the talks on Wednesday. Previously, Washington sent only its ambassador to Kazakhstan as an observer.

Putin’s conversation with Trump followed on the heels of talks he held the same day in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which also touched on the Syria question, as well as Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a surprise visit to Sochi, where he joined Putin in supporting the creation of de-escalation zones. The Turkish daily *Hürriyet* quoted sources familiar with the talks as saying that Putin had urged Erdogan to

deploy Turkish troops alongside Russian forces as part of a truce-monitoring mission.

Putin announced at the meeting that full relations between Russia and Turkey had been restored for the first time since the 2015 Turkish shoot-down of a Russian fighter jet on the Syrian-Turkish border. Erdogan was reportedly pushing for a full lifting of Russian sanctions imposed after the military action, which brought nuclear-armed Russia and Turkey, a member of the US-led NATO alliance, to the brink of war. Restrictions on Turkish agricultural exports as well on Russian visas for Turkish citizens, however, remain in place.

A memorandum on the creation of the de-escalation zones was discussed Wednesday at the talks in Astana, and there were reports that an agreement could be reached on Thursday.

The zones would reportedly be set up in areas held by Western-backed “rebels” in northwestern Idlib province, Homs province in western Syria, the East Ghouta suburb of the Syrian capital of Damascus and southern Syria.

Despite the apparent agreement between Moscow, Washington and Ankara on the creation of so-called safe zones as a path toward ending the six-year-old Syrian war, which has killed hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees, the opposing interests of the Russian, US and Turkish states make it highly improbable that they genuinely concur on either the character or the purpose of such zones.

Washington and its allies incited and orchestrated the war for regime-change in Syria, funneling arms, money and foreign fighters to Islamist militias, including those affiliated with Al Qaeda, which served as proxy forces in the drive to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad and install a more pliant puppet regime.

Turkey played a key role in supporting the so-called

rebels, who moved freely across its border with Syria. At the same time, Ankara has intervened militarily in Syria to attack the Kurdish militia, the YPG, in a bid to prevent the consolidation of an autonomous Kurdish region on its southern border. The Turkish government has charged that the YPG is a “terrorist” organization, a branch of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, which is outlawed in Turkey. The Pentagon, meanwhile, has relied on the YPG as its main ground force in the US-led campaign against ISIS.

The tensions between the two NATO allies have risen sharply with Washington’s deployment of US Army Rangers equipped with Stryker armored combat vehicles in northern Syria to act as a buffer between Turkish forces and the YPG.

Erdogan publicly protested the presence of US armored vehicles flying the American flag and intermingling with the Kurdish militia. A sense of Ankara’s increasing hostility was provided by Ilnur Cevic, chief adviser to the Turkish president, who told a radio interviewer that “if our forces push far enough [into Syria], and US armored vehicles are already there...[y]ou may see several missiles accidentally hitting them.”

The interviewer, taken aback, commented that the advisor had expressed himself “in a very severe manner.” Cevic stood by his comment, declaring, “If they act in this way, what would you do?”

Two of the areas where the proposed de-escalation zones would be established have been dominated in recent days by violent clashes between rival Islamist militias fighting for control. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) announced Tuesday that it was suspending its activities in the “rebel”-held Damascus suburb of East Ghouta after armed Islamist militants stormed its hospital there, seeking out wounded rival militants to kill and stealing the facility’s ambulance.

It was reported Monday that the “rebels” opened fire on civilian demonstrators calling for an end to the fighting, which has killed dozens. Similar clashes have erupted in the northwestern province of Idlib.

These clashes are symptomatic of the disintegration of the Islamist forces upon which Washington and its allies relied in their bid to effect regime-change. With the fall of eastern Aleppo at the end of last year, they control no urban areas and have continued to lose ground to Syrian government forces backed by Russia

and Iran.

Notwithstanding Washington’s expression of support for Russia’s proposed safe zones—and Trump’s on-again, off-again expressions of hope for improved ties with Moscow—US imperialism is by no means resigned to ceding Syria, not to mention the broader Middle East, to Iran and Russia. If the Pentagon becomes involved in the creation of such zones, it will be for the purpose of expanding US military operations in Syria and potentially partitioning the country as part of a broader campaign to militarily impose US hegemony over the region.



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