Fighting continues in Syria after another UN ceasefire

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Fighting continued in Syria over the weekend despite the latest United Nations Security Council ceasefire resolution that is supposed to allow for the evacuation of Ghouta, the eastern suburb of the capital, Damascus.

The draft resolution urging a 30-day ceasefire throughout Syria was delayed from Thursday to Saturday due to Russian objections. Russia argued that the United States had forced delays by opposing amendments allowing for a continued military offensive against Islamist forces loyal to Islamic State and pro-Al Qaeda groups.

Washington has relied on these forces to wage war against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

Saturday's resolution calls on UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to report back to the council in two weeks on whether the terms of the ceasefire have been implemented. However, not only will the Syrian military campaign continue, but so too will fighting throughout the country.

The ceasefire's failure will again be attributed to the Assad regime and its main backer, Russia and used to demand a military response by the Western powers. But Syria's terrible fate has been sealed by the escalating proxy war for its territorial division that has emerged from the civil war instigated by the United States.

Syria continued its Ghouta offensive yesterday, taking advantage of the resolution's failure to state when the 30-day ceasefire, across the whole of Syria, was meant to begin. The Chief of Staff of Iranian Armed Forces, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Hossein Baqeri, has said that Iran and Syria are committed to the UN ceasefire resolution, but the truce does not cover eastern Ghouta and that "mop-up operations" would continue.

Damascus cannot afford to relent on Ghouta and has put the operation under the control of Assad's brother Maher and top Colonel Soheil Hassan. Not only does it lie close to the capital, but victory there would clear the path for opposition forces to be routed elsewhere.

Newsweek cited reports that Damascus had a plan to evacuate children under the age of 12, men over the age of 60 and all women via recently established safe passages, while planning "to go on fighting ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and their allies."

The ceasefire doesn't apply to Syria's offensive against al-Qaeda-linked groups, as all "individuals, groups, undertakings and entities" associated with ISIS or al-Qaeda have been exempted from the truce.

In any event, the Islamist opposition has no intention of leaving Ghouta and likely couldn't even if it wanted to. As Syria expert Haid Haid wrote in the *Middle East Monitor*, "there is no 'convenient' exile for its inhabitants."

The collective hypocrisy over the tragedy of Ghouta cannot conceal the fact that Syria is in the grip of a war that has now claimed 400,000 lives and left the entire country decimated. The brutal struggle for strategic dominance over Syria ensures that the UN resolution will be ignored by all concerned.

Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia warned, "We will not countenance any subjective interpretation of the resolution that has just been adopted" and insisted that this meant Turkey must end its operation in Afrin, near the Turkish border.

However, Turkey has made clear that it does not accept any such cessation. Referring to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), linked to the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey's Foreign Ministry said Ankara will "remain resolute in fighting against the terrorist organizations that threaten the territorial integrity and political unity of Syria."

Above all, Washington will continue its seven years of military violence and political skulduggery aimed at taking control of Syria that has had such devastating consequences.

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Amid the UN Security Council discussions, President Donald Trump felt obliged to claim that the only US goal in Syria was to defeat ISIS. This directly contradicted statements made last month by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that US war aims include combating Iranian influence and bringing down Assad and that its forces will now be stationed permanently.

Tillerson's statements followed the unveiling of a new US security doctrine acknowledging that great power rivalries, rather than terrorism, are viewed by Washington as its main national security threat. It also followed a request from the Pentagon for $1.8 billion in arms to wage war in Syria and Iraq—20 percent more than the entire arms budget for Middle East operations in 2017.

Tillerson boasted during a February 13 visit to Kuwait, "The United States and the coalition forces that are working with us to defeat [IS] today control 30 percent of the Syrian territory and control a large amount of [the] population and control a large amount of Syria's oil fields."

Moves taken in line with the new US posture have accelerated the conflict in Syria and beyond.

The creation of a 30,000-strong border force for Syria including Kurdish YPG militias prompted Turkey's launch of "Operation Olive Branch" against Afrin on January 20, which also threatened the Aleppo Governate city of Manbij. Ankara feared that the US was announcing its de facto military backing for a future Kurdish state as a base for the re-division of the region in its interests that would threaten the territorial integrity of Turkey.

The US also greenlighted Israeli bombing raids and missile attacks on Syrian military facilities on February 10 that Tel Aviv made clear were targeted at Iranian personnel. Since then, Israel has threatened to launch military strikes on Lebanon, while escalating demands for action by the US against Iran.

Friday also saw the US announce that it will bring forward to May 14, 2018 the planned relocation of its embassy to Jerusalem. This is the most provocative date imaginable, marking the 70th anniversary of Israel declaring independence and what the Palestinians know as the Naqba, or "day of catastrophe."

Washington's efforts to preserve its global hegemony are now threatening open conflict with Russia in the Middle East and Europe, as well as with China due to US aggression against North Korea.

In bitter exchanges at the UN Security Council, Nebenzia said of the ceasefire resolution, "The aim of fighting with terrorists should not become a disguise for solving this or that geopolitical issue of doubtful legitimacy, which is exactly what the United States is currently doing in Syria… We insist that the so-called coalition stop its occupational ambitions… we see perfectly well that the propaganda scenario surrounding Eastern Ghouta fully corresponds to the campaign launched during the counter-terrorist operation to liberate East Aleppo in late 2016."

Potential sparks for broader regional war and direct military conflict between the US and Russia are numerous.

In Afrin, Assad has dispatched pro-government militias to back the YPG against an imminent ground invasion by Turkish troops. Here the US finds itself in a position where its Kurdish ally is allied in turn with pro-Assad forces aligned with Russia. The spread of fighting to Manbij could directly involve US Special Forces.

On February 7, the US launched a devastating attack involving Apache helicopters, an AC-130 Spectre gunship, F-15 fighter jets and artillery batteries on a Syrian column in eastern Deir Ezzor. The Russian government admitted last week that the casualties from the US barrage had included dozens of Russian nationals.

The US media has claimed that the bombing was a response to planned advance by Russian mercenary forces on headquarters of the US-proxy Syrian Democratic Forces, made up overwhelmingly of the YPG militia. The Russian mercenaries were said to be employed by Wagner PMC, which reportedly has as many as 2,500 men in Syria.

Details of the incident remain unclear, and Moscow has so far downplayed the clash. But over the weekend, Russia deployed Su-57 fifth-generation fighters to Syria for the first time, sending a signal that it may retaliate against future US airstrikes.

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