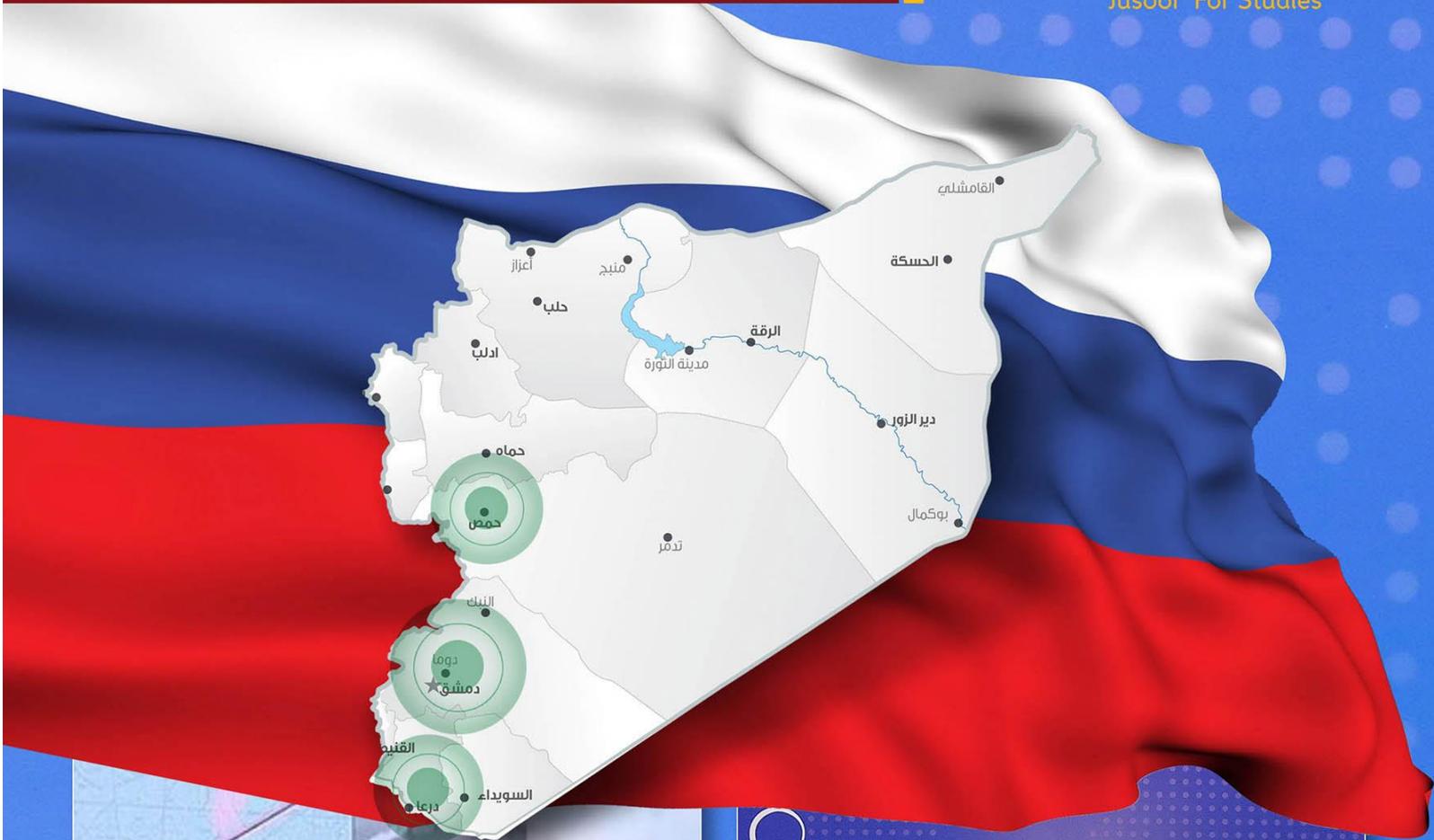


The Implications and Dimensions of the Russian's Policy toward the De-escalation



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Preface

The de-escalation zones agreement from Astana 4 on 4th May 2017 which took place between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, has many significant developments at implementation or text levels. It is possible that the conflict in Syria will move to a total new phase. This agreement is a firm Russian strategy that aims to fulfil a set of interests and goals in the short and long term in Syria.

The agreement states the establishment of four de-escalation zones by the three “guarantor” countries including the regions controlled by the Syrian opposition as follows: **Idlib Governorate** with its surrounding provinces, **Homs northern rural**, **eastern Al Ghouta** in Damascus rural, and the **southern region** (Daraa and Al Quneitra).

The terms of the agreement include a ceasefire between the two conflicting parties in these regions including air strikes along with establishing checkpoints on the borders of these areas for civilians to pass through in addition to control posts to secure the implementation of the agreement. The check points and control post will be manned by troops from the guarantor countries or any other countries willing to participate in controlling the check points and controlling posts. The borders will be delimited between these regions through maps after a compliance between the guarantors alongside granting access for humanitarian aids, ensuring the return back of refugees and displaced to their homes, and rehabilitation of the infrastructure.

The agreement obliges the guarantor countries to continue fighting ISIS, HTS (Al Nusra Front previously), and other armed groups that the Security Council has categorized as terrorist groups inside and outside the de-escalation zones, as well as supporting the Syrian regime and opposition to fight the above-mentioned groups.

The timeline of the agreement (described as a ‘temporary measure’) is six months capable of being extended as per the Guarantors will¹.

July 2017 witnessed important developments first with reaching a De-escalation agreement in the southern region and then in eastern Ghouta and country side of Homs. Despite the fact that, these three regions are

¹ The official text of the De-escalation zones agreement, Russia Today, 6/5/2017: <https://goo.gl/iFIOD8>

included in the Astana De-escalation agreement, the agreement in July took place outside the Astana framework with the absence of two of the three guarantors and the presence of new mediators most prominent among them was Egypt, as well as local actors such most prominent among them Syria Tomorrow movement.

This report tries to analyze the three agreements to understand the Russia's strategy in the de-escalation zones agreement, and the gains and losses for local actors, regional actors and international actors resulting from this strategy.

The Firm Russian Strategy

Before presenting the Russian objectives for implementing this agreement, we should review the firm Russian strategy in Syria, which will illustrate that Russia's suggestion of the de-escalation zones agreement along with it being adopted in Astana is derived from the direct objective of this suggestion. The overall strategy has four pillars which include:

- The First Pillar

Russia's complete bias towards the Syrian regime in order to save what it is left of its pillars, and to present Russia as a mediator or guarantor that can reach out to all sides.

- The Second Pillar

Securing the military gains made by Russia while at the same planning to make more military gains in the future. This explains the variety and sequence of Russia's recommendations since it military intervention on September the 30th 2015, beginning with regional reconciliations, ceasefires, calling for federalism and local administrations, and de-escalation zones. Each ceasefire is usually followed by a military campaign from the regime's forces and militias supporting the regime, in the areas controlled by the opposition.

- The Third Pillar

Demonstrating that Russia has the greatest and strongest influence among its regional and international counterparts in Syria as a leverage in its turbulent relations with the west and in particular the US.

-The Fourth Pillar

Traditional interests related to establishing military bases and securing its long-term military presence in Middle East, as this is first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union that Russia has established a significant military presence in the region.

Russia's Goals from The De-escalation Agreement

In the context of the above-mentioned in regards to Russia's strategy, along with the current political realities on the ground and the outcome of the 'Astana 4' we summarize the Russian objectives in implementing the De-escalation agreement as follows:

1. Buying time and securing field gains

This objective is repeated with every Russian call for a ceasefire or de-escalation, as Moscow seeks to restrain all Syrian groups in order to secure its military gains through use of its air power, paving the way for other gains irrespective of whether regardless of the upcoming phase in Syria.

The Inclusion of Eastern Al Ghouta in the de-escalation zone did not prevent Assad's forces and militia's loyal to the regime from attacking Jobar, Ein Tarma, Zamalka, and Kafr Batna abd and attempting to raid these villages using large military forces, as Russia uses the pretext of fighting HTS.

2. Legitimizing the spread of Russian land military forces in Syria

As per the De-escalation zones agreement, Russia is deploying elements of its military police on the borders of the de-escalation zones. Moscow adopted the same scenario in the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo city which prevented the access of Iranian-backed militias in those areas after displacing the locals in an agreement made with the opposition factions.

The deployment of Russian land forces in different regions in Syria as part of an agreement involving international and regional actors including the U.S, gives Moscow legitimacy despite the fact that, its military presence in Syria is already legitimized with the green light from the Assad Regime which is recognized by the international community as

the official government of Syria. Russia uses this legitimacy to increase its influence in the country and attain more military gains.

The Russian Convergence with the American Strategy along with adopting this strategy

Donald Trump's plan to establish safe zones in Syria was adopted by Moscow despite its vagueness and the absence of any seriousness from the White House to implement it. Russia presented its own model which is remarkably close to the American one, as a tactic to get the U.S. select only one out of the two following options:

- Coordinating with Russia due to the similarity of ideas put forward by the two sides.
- Abandoning the American suggestions after watering their contents down by Russia.

This tactic has great significance with regards to the de-escalation zones agreement, which differs from the US safe zones suggestion. Moscow seeks to provide justifications for the Trump's administration coordinating with Moscow to deflect any accusations of internal patronage. This tactic has achieved its desired goal as can be seen by the de-escalation agreement in the south of Syria.

3. Partners and Allies Deregulation

Russia seeks constantly to limit any restrictions from allies such as Iran by curbing its influence in Syria in order to expand its own influence on the one hand and please regional actors on the other. This has gained the approval and trust from regional actors in particular Saudi Arabia and also pleases Israel given its undeclared role in the de-escalation agreement in the south of Syria.

This Russian policy is not just limited to allies but also extends to its partners in the Astana agreements. The course of implementing the Astana 4 agreement diverges from Ankara's interests and furthers the interests of its regional rivals such as Egypt

Although the agreement permits both Turkey and Russia to deploy troops to control the de-escalation zones, Moscow has managed to constrain Ankara to the Idlib region through sub agreements.

The Idlib Governorate is currently under the complete control of HTS making it a target for the Syrian regime, Russia and even the US, which complicates matters for Turkey.

Winners and Losers

Although the De-escalation zones agreement has been one aspect of Russia's strategy to expand its influence in Syria, it has led to significant changes. It therefore important for us at this point to look the list of winners and losers form this agreement and the extent of the winning and losing for the different actors.

1. International Actors

Russia

Russia is definitely one of the parties that has gained the most from this agreement, as it fulfills Moscow's explicit and implicit objectives effectively. Russia was able to obtain support for some of its policies in Syria away from fighting ISIS from the current American administration. In addition to this Russia has formed the long-awaited partnership with Trump's Administration following accusations of have secret ties with the Kremlin, which some speculate led to Trump winning the elections. Russia also obtained International legitimacy to deploy forces in Syria and establish permanent posts near the frontlines, which means complete control over the Syrian regimes military decisions. This also means limiting Iran's military influence to Al Qalamoun region which is outside of the De-escalation zones agreement.

Israel

Israel is considered the "present absentee" party in the De-escalation zones agreement especially the one in the south of Syria, as it is of great concern to Israel due to the constant shelling and exchange of fire on both sides of the border. Hence, this agreement neutralizes the possibility of fueling conflict on the borders between Syria and Israel.

Furthermore, the agreement fulfills Israel's interest of curtailing Iranian influence in the region to prevent it from being blackmailed by Tehran which will force it to Bargain with Iran.

Iran

Iran is the most notable loser from Russia's De-escalation policy, even though it is likely to make some gains in the mid to long term. Russia's gains in Syria have come at the expense of Iranian ones, as the De-escalation agreement restricts the possibility of deploying its militias in several areas and fronts. Furthermore, it diminishes Iran's influence over the Syrian regime's military and political decisions. This loss has increased since the beginning of Russia's intervention.

Given that Iran is a guarantor in the Astana agreement it can only deploy its forces at some of the lines of contact. However, in practicality this privilege has been overtaken by Russia in accordance with its overall policy of limiting Iranian influence.

In its negotiations with Iran Russia proceeds from the premise that since both sides are in the same camp, it should be the one to take the lead and make decisions because of its International influence which enables Moscow to use veto in the Security Council and its military power.

Iran may have a partial victory in the following situation: continuing the De-escalation zones agreement which means nobody wins the war, and the Syrian regime will continue ruling till the end of the transitional phase. After that, it will proceed with another structure that Iran will be a part of. However, the solution's final form will be far from the Iranian vision.

Turkey

At present Turkey is considered one of the losing sides in the Astana agreement despite the gains that may take place in the long term. The practical implementation of the De-escalation zones agreement has removed Moscow from its previous commitments towards Ankara; the content of the Astana 4 agreement diminishes Turkey's role as a guarantor in the de-escalation zones.

Moreover, the De-escalation agreement favors Russia rather than Turkey or Iran, which means that Turkey is facing the challenge to avoid being the biggest loser from implementing this agreement in the upcoming weeks.

In the long term, the stabilization of the political and security situation in Syria will have direct and profound impacts on Turkey especially at the internal level if Syrian refugees return back to their homes.

Freezing the conflict means diminishing the likelihood of turning the self-governed regions of Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) into an autonomous entity or State despite the fact that, the De-escalation agreement does not include the Kurdish regions. Turkey depends on Aleppo northern rural front along with the southern-eastern rural of the city and Idlib Governorate to penetrate inside Syria. It's worth mentioning that the De-escalation agreement will grant Turkey new tools to prevent the establishment of any Kurdish State.

The Turkish loss could turn into a gain if Turkey abandons its gains from Astana in return for other incentives like having S400 Russian missiles. This scenario is likely to happen, as Turkey does not have any objections towards the declared agreements. Moreover, Turkey doesn't show any desire in sending military forces as interposition force in any region due to the military, political, and security burdens. Thus, it is likely that an agreement under the table was reached between Ankara and Moscow, as the former may have abandoned its gains from the De-escalation zones agreement in return for other objectives.

USA

Gains and losses are hard to be estimated for the U.S in comparison with other actors in Syria. This is not due to complexity of the situation Syria but due to the ambiguity of America's position, the lack of clarity in its objectives and division among US institutions with regards to the most suitable policy for Syria.

However, it is clear that America's strategy in Syria which is shaped by interests outside Syria has not been affected by the latest agreement, including its military presence in the Kurdish regions' and Al Badia. Moreover, American interests outside Syria have benefited from this agreement. This includes improving Security, limiting Iran's Influence in the region and minimizing the gains of its Turkish Ally.

The De-escalation agreement fulfills the American vision of consolidating the efforts of all actors against ISIS, HTS, and other terrorist groups in

Syria according to statement from Rex Wayne Tillerson during the talks with Moscow about the De-escalation agreement in which he stated: "we call on all parties including the Syrian government and its allies, the Syrian opposition, and coalition forces to fight ISIS and avoid any conflict between each other in addition to showing commitment to the geographical borders of the De-escalation zones²".

The American vision in Syria is similar to that of Russia, which is concerned with the necessity of fighting terrorism and extremism as a priority at the expense of people's rights and demands for freedom and democracy.

Egypt

Through this agreement Egypt has acquired the role of mediator between Russia and the opposition's armed factions. Egypt has been able to gain a foothold in the Syrian equation after mediating the negotiations of Eastern Al Ghouta and Homs northern rural. Dispatching Egyptian forces to participate in implementing the De-escalation zones agreement may also take place which will double the gains for Cairo by putting in better situations than its undeclared ally the Syrian regime without having the ability to support it. The presence of its military forces in Syria will also give Egypt a measure of legitimacy without provoking its allies in the Arabian Gulf.

Jordan

Many Strategic objectives were fulfilled by Jordan through the De-escalation agreement in the South of Syria. Jordan has guaranteed the removal of Iran's militias and the Syrian regimes forces from its borders by Russia. The agreement also protects the opposition factions backed by Jordan from being targeted, contrary to what happened in the north.

Finally, the agreement provides a mechanism to open the Nasib crossing on the border between Syria and Jordan, which exempts Jordan from any arrangements against International law. At the Same time, the opening of the Nasib crossed provides an international route between Damascus and Amman that provides rehabilitation, free passage, transport, and access to food and aid. It's worth mentioning, the preferences related to the southern region agreement have not been

² France 24, 6/7/2017: <https://goo.gl/iqMrbr>

disclosed and thus, talking about the advantages of opening Nasib crossing is considered as leaks.

2. Local Actors

The Syrian Opposition

There is no doubt that, the Syrian opposition represented by both its political platforms: The National Coalition, High Negotiations Committee (HNC), and armed military factions, is the biggest loser at the current stage in the conflict militarily and politically. The De-escalation agreement has limited the opposition's control on the ground and eroded its revolutionary and popular legitimacy.

During the course of Astana, the opposition's political institutions had very little influence on the ground and were distant from the public mood inside Syria. The political opposition has supported demands that are not consistent with the political realities on the ground and do not fulfill the aspirations of the locals who want stability and to stop the hostilities against them.

As for the armed opposition who opposes the course of Astana as well as groups that reject the de-escalation agreement, they have lost a lot of their public support. This is because they have been unable to change the realities imposed by Astana and have been unable to undertake any military operations other than confront factions in the Syrian opposition. The De-escalation agreement in Eastern Al Ghouta and North Homs countryside has seen an escalation from the Tomorrow Movement led by Ahmad Al Jarba. This escalation reflects a regional alliance and the coalescing of international interest more than an escalation by Jarba. The Tomorrow Movement reflects an intersection of interests between Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Russia, and USA. It's no coincidence that these countries will be in the list of winners.

The rise of Syria's Tomorrow Movement, in the context of the absence of the HNC from the De-escalation agreement, and whose leader explicitly opposes the HNC, gives indications that there may be attempts to eliminate the HNC or restructure it.

Al Assad Regime

Al Assad's regime emerged as a weak and passive side just like the Syrian opposition. The Syrian regime did not participate in the arrangements leading up to an agreement. The content of the reached agreements shows a Russian desire in removing Al Assad authority from the De-escalation zones by preventing the police and forces of the Syrian regime from entering these zones.

All the rapid developments seem to favor the regime, the facts indicate that it is becoming a marginal actor in the Syrian Arena Even though from the outside the regime appears to be in a better situation than it was in 2011.

With Russia's increasing involvement in Syria and Moocow's intentions to remain in the country for the long term, as well as its strategy, to control all decisions of war and peace away from Iran, Al Assad's regime lost its ability to extract any gains and has become a tool of Russia's strategy.

Having said that The De-escalation agreements give the regime some hope of stability allowing it to rearrange its internal structure and regain its military power which has been exhausted. This will also allow the regime to focus on repositioning itself politically and diplomatically.



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