

# FIIA 20/2016

# COMMENT

Wolfgang Mühlberger  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## No endgame in Syria: why truces are impracticable and peace negotiations challenging

The September ceasefire in Syria expired after the scheduled duration of a week due to the bombardment of sensitive targets by the brokers – instead of being extended and shored up by a political track. Agreeing on the modalities without the ability or willingness to enforce them, makes ceasefires futile and undermines peace negotiations.

The failure of the second Syria truce in 2016 is a symptom of the underlying conflict constellation and the dynamic it gives rise to. Just as external – regional or international – players are unable to agree on a shared vision for the conflict's settlement, so are the numerous local militias and proxies unwilling to relinquish their embattled positions or to reconsider their tactical coalitions in exchange for the uncertainty of a political transition. In the meantime, the Syrian regime clings to power, recklessly.

Moreover, the central brokers of the truce are trading accusations of non-compliance based on two major incidents: an aerial attack on Syrian army positions by the US air force in the Euphrates valley, and the alleged Russian bombardment of a humanitarian convoy in the vicinity of Aleppo. By extending their antagonism from the battlefield into the UN Security Council, the two powers polarise positions, further reducing the outlook for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, and creating additional tensions in a brittle international environment.

Even the most well-disposed assessment of the Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) agreement will only be able to establish its utter failure. Above all, the bombardment

of military and civilian targets by the very brokers of the agreement demolished the limited mutual trust. Accordingly, the goal of enhanced military cooperation, as envisaged under the US-Russian agreement, has become a distant prospect.

Furthermore, the strict observation of a ceasefire by the signatories was undermined by spoilers either beyond external leverage or unperturbed about the cost of their action. Consequently, enforcement was piecemeal since major armed factions were not participating, yet controlling considerable swaths of territory and waging urban warfare in densely populated areas.

Humanitarian access to besieged or embattled areas was blocked by both the Syrian government as well as numerous jihadist militias. Hence, aid deliveries, a central rationale of the CoH, remained extremely limited. Finally, the required disentanglement of non-jihadist from jihadist militias cannot be achieved in the space of a week – particularly without tangible alternatives for non-jihadist factions.

The implications of the collapse of this tentative truce are twofold. Firstly, it led to the resumption of unlimited, unchecked violence, exemplified by the full-scale regime offensive against Aleppo. This

renewed battle for Aleppo underscores the militarised logic of key actors in the conflict, highlighting their unwillingness to seek a compromise exit strategy.

The second major effect of warfare linked to the end of the truce will be increased fragmentation of the territorial fabric, as continued conflict fuels warlordisation, Sunni militancy and the external mingling of regional players. Even in government-controlled areas, power has been devolved to a multitude of parochial players, tearing apart the Syrian state as a unitary actor. This trend is fuelled by ongoing violence and threats to human safety – making it difficult to imagine how to bring these various empowered actors back under a single state umbrella in a post-conflict scenario.

As Washington backs parts of the armed opposition and ultimately expects Bashar al-Assad's departure from power, whereas the Kremlin continues to support the regime militarily in a convergence of interests with Iran, the search for common ground can only progress around the Assad question. Instead of reinforcing centrifugal forces by using partisan efforts to impose a political presence in Syria's future, both major brokers need to return to the negotiation table without further

---

Finnish Institute of  
International Affairs

---

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

---

POB 400

---

00161 Helsinki

---

Telephone

---

+358 (0)9 432 7000

---

Fax

---

+358 (0)9 432 7799

[www.fiia.fi](http://www.fiia.fi)

*The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decision-making and public debate both nationally and internationally.*

*All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.*

delay, ready to hammer out a compromise based on concessions.

Yet US threats in Moscow's direction are not working. Russia has acquired an enhanced profile on the international scene due to its military engagement in Syria – ridiculing President Barack Obama's comments about Russia's regional power status. But to stay the course, it needs to stay in place. In that sense Russia is bogged down in Syria and can't extricate itself unless it's ready to scale down geopolitically, or forced to withdraw for economic reasons.

Factually, a similar pattern applies to all allies of the Syrian regime, including Iran and the militant organisation Hezbollah. Their entrenchment works to the advantage of Assad's regime, and tends to curtail his supporters' capacity for putting pressure on him.

Nevertheless, a momentous change of attitude towards Assad can only be brought about by Moscow, and to a lesser extent Tehran.

Washington will therefore have to accommodate some of their requests. The reversal of the mischievous insertion of salafi-jihadi actors, such as Mohammed Alloush and his Jaysh al-Islam, into the Supreme Negotiation Committee (HNC) would be a first step, in order to create an incentive for Damascus to return to

the Geneva format of negotiations. Generally speaking, the exclusion of Sunni extremist groups from political negotiations should be a minimum standard requirement. Indeed, the Sunni majority in the country should be represented in the political track according to its demographic weight – not by jihadist forces falsely claiming to represent their demands. Accordingly, as much as the Kremlin must exert pressure on Assad to negotiate and compromise, so should the US use its leverage on its regional allies to stop their support for hardline jihadist factions.

In view of a renewed focus on the symbolic and strategic significance of Aleppo by the warring parties, it seems reasonable to assume, however, that a new impetus in the search for a political solution will be deferred until a new US administration is put in place.