



THE IMPACT OF “DE-ESCALATION” ZONES IN SYRIA

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The Syrian Civil War has entered its seventh year and has accounted for more than 500,000 killed, over 1 million injured and over 12 million Syrians living as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It started in 2011, partially due to the ripple effect caused by Arab Spring in the nations along the West Asian and North African (WANA) regions, and also due to the resentment of the population to the Syrian regime led by Bashar Al Assad. What began as peaceful protests in March 2011 erupted into violent, brutal attacks, all culminating into the bloodiest conflict in the 21st century, which saw intervention by many State and non-State actors like Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front and the like.¹ The involvement of foreign powers led by the US and its allies in Europe and West Asia exacerbated the situation, when they started arming, funding and training rebels and/or terrorist groups. The other prominent actors like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia supported the rebels and/or terrorist groups, while the Syrian forces were supported by Iran, Iraq and Lebanon-based militia group, Hezbollah, and lately by the Kurdish groups.² In 2015, Russia too intervened in Syria to back the government forces. In April 2017, the US administration carried out its first direct military action against the Syrian government, launching cruise missiles at a Syrian air force base.³

On 4th May 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Iran, Russia and Turkey (IRT) in Astana, regarding the creation of “de-escalation zones”, which came into effect on the next day at around 9pm.⁴ The initiative was proposed by Russia (Syrian Government’s most powerful ally) supported by Turkey and backed by Iran.⁵ The IRT is designated as “Guarantors” and is intended to reduce the military tensions, to bring back the refugees as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stabilise the political condition of Syria. IRT is expected to effectively tackle terrorist groups like ISIL (DAESH), Al-Nusra Front and its affiliates, while continuing efforts to include the groups that haven’t yet joined the ceasefire regime. IRT “have reaffirmed their strong commitment to

the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity” of Syria, as incorporated in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, adopted two years back in December 2015.⁶

The de-escalation zones are areas or regions that are to be marked as separate de-militarised enclosures. The IRT will station their troops here to de-escalate violence as well as to provide security to civilians, and to the military establishments of the Syrian government and the IRT. The ceasefire will be in place for an initial period of six months, which could be prolonged based on the consensus that emerges within IRT. The de-escalation zones include the four areas located across eight of Syria's 14 provinces, which are:

- the first zone includes Idlib, Latakia, Hama and Aleppo and contains regions dominated by Al-Qaeda affiliates, comprising more than one million civilians;
- the second zone is in the Homs province, where approximately 180,000 civilians are located in the Al-Rastan and Talbiseh enclaves but controlled by groups that are predominantly affiliated to al-Qaeda;
- the third zone is the eastern Ghouta (northern part of Damascus), which has around 700,000 civilians, and is prominently controlled by Jaish al-Islam; and
- lastly, the fourth zone comprises Daraa and Quneitra provinces in southern Syria, which is prominently controlled by rebels, with the border being controlled by Jordan. Here civilians amount to around 800,000.⁷

The general overview of “de-escalation zones” articulated by IRT is given in Image1.

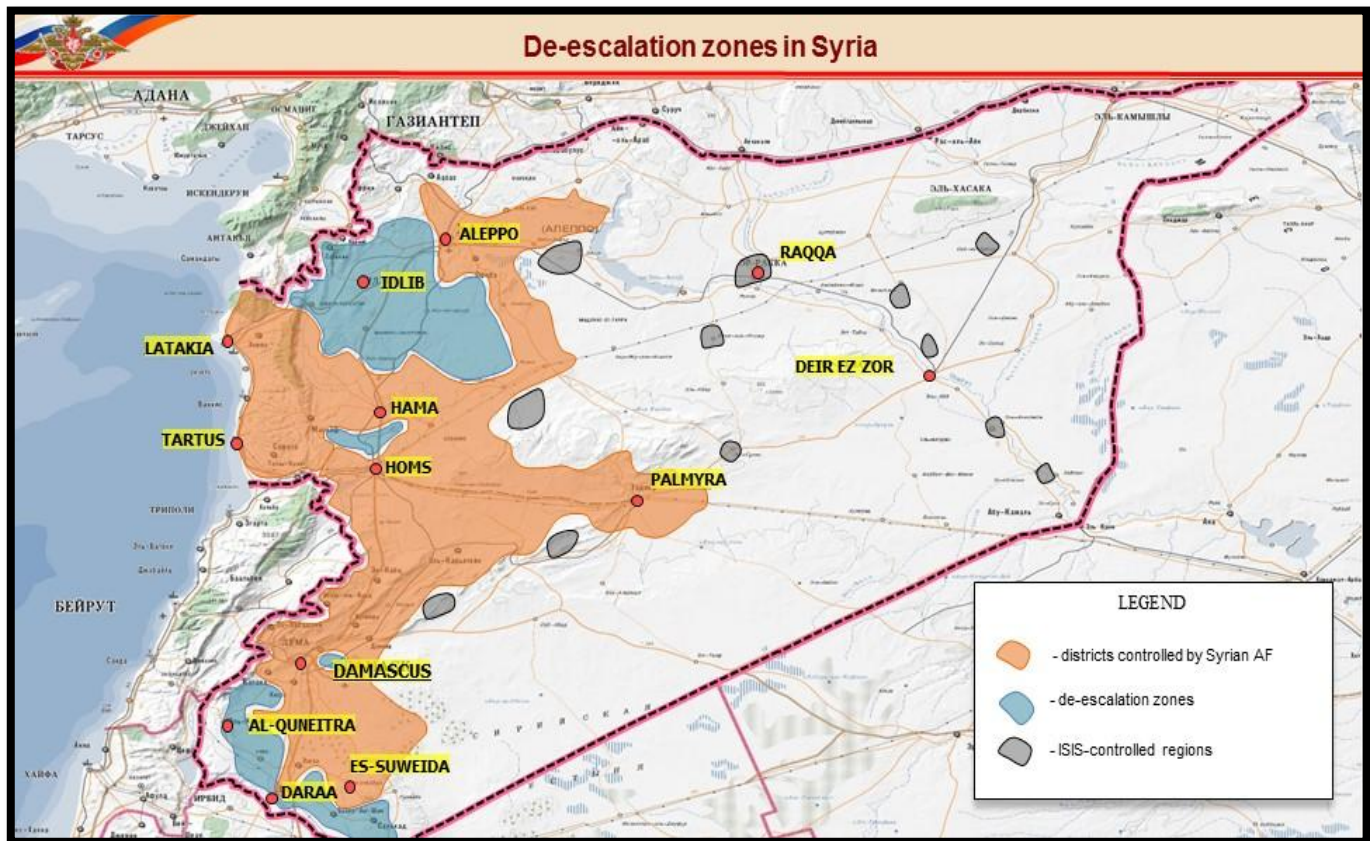


Image1: A map (translated to English) shows the proposed de-escalation zones in Syria.

Source: Denise Simon. *Syria: Memorandum signed, De-escalation Zones are NOT Safe Zones, 2017*. Available online at <http://founderscode.com/syria-memorandum-signed-de-escalation-zones-not-safe-zones/>, accessed on May 21, 2017

After two weeks of signing of the Memorandum, IRT is also expected to form a JWG (joint working group) to delineate the lines of the de-escalation areas and security zones, as well as to resolve other operational and technical issues regarding the implementation. The steps shall be taken by 4th of June 2017 for the preparation of the detailed maps.⁸ The IRT is expected to enable rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access within the de-escalation zones, and provide conditions to restore basic infrastructure facilities, including provision for accessibility to water supply, medical assistance, electricity and distribution networks. There shall be security checkpoints and observation points to ensure compliance of ceasefire.⁹ The details of Joint Working Group (JWG) are also yet to be devised and agreed upon by IRT. While the US reacted with skepticism,¹⁰ there was positive response from the UN¹¹ and the Syrian Government.¹²

However, there is a need for a clear mechanism to resolve conflicts and violations within the de-escalation zones, and that is yet to be clearly articulated. There is also a need to clarify on how and where the troops of IRT are being stationed, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the like.¹³ The MoU doesn't specify an initiation period for implementation of the zones and differences may

arise regarding the involvement of Iran particularly by actors who have been traditionally hostile to Iran, or were ideologically as well as militarily positioned against each other in crisis situations. The effectiveness of the establishment of a no-fly zone is yet to be contemplated, as the both USA and Russia predominantly depended upon bombing of targets to achieve their desired operational results.¹⁴ The manner in which IRT will try to engage the terrorist groups, especially ISIL and other Al-Qaeda affiliates needs to be discerned.

The effectiveness in bringing back refugees and displaced people is a prominent question. This is because large number of the population will lack evidences or documents like passports, property deeds, identity cards, most of which may have been lost during the bombardments, conflicts or during fleeing. These create issues for the verification, validation and certification of Syrian civilians and create problems for transition through the frontline checkpoints and observation posts, where most of the refugees and IDPs will be log jammed and will be unable to enter. This will, in practice, develop issues for an effective implementation of the right to voluntary return, resettlement and repatriation of civilians. There will be problems like lack of property restitution and compensation, coupled with lack of livelihood opportunities or overly dependent population on aid, which will most probably result in related issues like human trafficking, smuggling, drug trafficking and the like.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Guide to the Syrian rebels. Available online at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>, accessed on May 24, 2017

² ANALYSIS: The Kurdish 'frenemies' aiding Assad in Aleppo. Available online at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/what-role-are-kurdish-ypg-forces-playing-aleppo-554547107>, accessed on May 29, 2017

³ The Syrian civil war is the deadliest conflict the 21st century has witnessed so far. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>, accessed on May 23, 2017

⁴ Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2017. Available online at http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041, accessed on May 21, 2017

⁵ Phil Stewart. Defense Secretary Mattis: The 'Devil's in the details' on Syria 'de-escalation zones', 2017. Available online at <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-mattis-idINKBN184165>, accessed on May 24, 2017

⁶No. 3

⁷ Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained, 2017. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html>, accessed on May 21, 2017

⁸No. 3

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰No. 4

¹¹ Regional powers agree on Syria 'de-escalation zones', 2017. Available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/regional-powers-agree-syria-de-escalation-zones-170504121509588.html>, accessed on May 26, 2017

¹² Assad says de-escalation zones chance for rebels to "reconcile", 2017. Available online at <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-assad-idINKBN1872Q2>, accessed on May 26, 2017

¹³No. 7

¹⁴ What are the 'de-escalation zones' agreed for Syria?, 2017. Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4477106/What-escalation-zones-agreed-Syria.html>, accessed on May 21, 2017

