U.S.-Russia Ceasefire is a Very Small Step

The Syrian ceasefire agreed by Russia and the U.S. could lead to a stabilization of some portions of Syria and reduce the chances of direct clashes between Russian and American aircraft, but it does not appear that enough of the important factions are currently satisfied with their positions to lay the groundwork for a larger, negotiated settlement.

The United States, Russia, and Jordan reached an agreement for a limited ceasefire in two southern provinces of Syria between Russian-backed forces – namely the Assad regime – and U.S.-backed forces. The limited ceasefire, centered around the city of Daraa, is much more limited in geographic scope than previous international efforts earlier in the civil war, most of which fell apart within days at the most. The ceasefire in this region was relatively easier to accomplish because most of the groups fighting there are potentially more directly under command and control (or at least significant influence) of the Syrian government, Russia, and the United States. Russia and the United States also have agreed to refrain from air strikes in this area. This region also has fewer forces from organizations such as Hezbollah, other Iranian militias, or Al Qaeda affiliates, making it easier to potentially have the ceasefire hold.

This ceasefire serves a number of interests on the part of both Russia and the United States. While there is a competition between the two and their preferred parties in Syria, neither side wants inadvertent escalation between the two great powers. Carving out a section of Syria in which neither side is flying nor feels compelled to use airpower to protect forces on the ground reduces chances of miscalculation or accident. For the United States, the ceasefire also leaves the Syrian-Israeli border in the hands of U.S.-backed forces. For the Trump administration, this provides a visible sign of improving relations with Moscow and looking for ways to work with Russia not only on targeting ISIS but also on a larger set of issues. For Moscow, bilateral agreements with Washington on any issue provide it with prestige globally and also reinforce the Kremlin’s preference that any deal about Syria requires its participation and acquiescence.

The concept of limited, local ceasefires creating the political space for a broader deal on Syrian territorial control and governance – essentially an end to the Syrian civil war – has been put forward and tried several times before. Obviously those attempts failed to produce the requisite momentum for a diplomatic solution, but this approach is also likely still the only way to go. The next likely step is if and when ISIS loses yet more territory in and around Raqqa. The question then becomes whether competing factions – and there are more than simply those backed by the Assad government/Russia and those backed by the United States – can develop a relatively stable control of former ISIS territory in a manner that is easily translatable to a local ceasefire (i.e., clear lines of forces and general agreement on a division of territory). There may also be locations in southeastern Syria near the Iraqi border – in and around Tanf – that may be amenable to local ceasefires.

However, the Russian-backed Syrian regime and the U.S.-backed rebel forces are not the only players in the equation, and the ability of Moscow and Washington to closely control its allies in the country is suspect. Various Gulf Arab states, not always agreeing, continue to back different rebel factions with money and arms. Turkey is also a substantial political-military player with its own interests in Syria, particularly as regards the Kurds. Iran, while backing the Assad regime, has larger ambitions. Finally, ISIS and the Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria also clearly have their own agenda. The ceasefire could lead to a stabilization of some portions of Syria and reduce the chances of direct clashes between Russian and American aircraft, but it does not appear that enough important factions are currently satisfied with their positions enough to lay the groundwork for a larger, negotiated settlement.