

Press Releases: Background Briefing on the Ceasefire in Syria

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
Washington, DC
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MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, sir. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us for this background call on the southwest Syria ceasefire arrangement. [Senior State Department Official] is joining us on this call.

Earlier today, as many of you are aware, Secretary Tillerson announced a delegation from the United States, Jordan, and Russia, that they finalized arrangements to support a ceasefire and delivery of humanitarian assistance in southwest Syria to begin at noon Damascus time on Sunday, July the 9th.

I'd like to add that this call will be embargoed until the end of the call. You can refer to [Senior State Department Official] as a senior State Department official who was involved in the negotiations.

With that, I'll turn it over to [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks, [Moderator], and thanks, everybody, for joining this afternoon. Sorry I was a little bit late. I want to give you a little bit of background and information about what was announced today, and then take as many of your questions as I have time for.

So you've all probably seen the news about an agreement between the U.S., the Russians, and the Jordanians about a ceasefire in southwest Syria, so let me explain a little bit about what's behind that effort. So this ceasefire agreement was reached today in Amman, Jordan. It's part of our ongoing discussions that we, the U.S., have had with Russia and with Jordan over the past few weeks and months about de-escalating the violence in southern Syria. We envision – I should say this is an important step, but it is a first step in what we envision to be a more complex and robust ceasefire arrangement and de-escalation arrangement in southwest Syria, certainly more complex than ones that we have tried in the past.

There's – as Secretary Tillerson noted today in Hamburg, there's a lot of discussions ahead of us still, including about some very important elements, including how to monitor the ceasefire, the rules that would govern the southwest de-escalation area, all of these – the presence of monitors. All of

this will be the subject of ongoing talks.

So we see this ceasefire that was announced today as an interim step. The idea is it should create a better environment to discuss a broader and more comprehensive southwest de-escalation area in greater detail. We felt that a ceasefire – near-term ceasefire – was important because the violence in the southwest, although historically, over the course of the conflict, it has been – it has been less than other parts of Syria, the violence has steadily increased in the south since February, with both the Syrian regime and opposition defenses threatening to derail any potential for progress there.

So as we began these talks with Russia and Jordan on the southwest, we began pursuing an initiative to lock in what had been a relatively quiet south to stop the violence there, to avoid an escalation of violence, and to see that tamping down of violence as an interim step to create a better environment for a broader and more detailed arrangement.

Now, this has been weeks if not months of discussions, and I expect there's many weeks of discussions ahead of us. It's a multi-step process and there's a lot of elements to it. One of the important elements that we concluded last week was that we were able to come to agreement – the U.S., Russia, and Jordan – on a map of the line of conflict in the southwest. So that is essentially the line of contact between regime forces and opposition forces, and we came to agreement on that map, and once that map was agreed, there was no reason at that point for any of the violence to continue, and given the imperative of stopping the violence as soon as possible, it was followed with this initiative that was announced today.

Now, the agreement – the details of the agreement – it's essentially an undertaking to use our influence, the Jordanians, their influence, the Russians to use their influence with all of the sides of the conflict to stop the fighting, to essentially freeze the conflict. It looks ahead to – it sort of previews additional steps that we think we're going to have to take to strengthen and solidify that ceasefire, and those steps would include potential deployment of monitoring forces to the area, and as Secretary Tillerson noted, that's something that we're close to an understanding on but we're not in a position to announce in detail on that yet; and also formation of an effective monitoring cell, an arrangement by which the parties could participate and monitor the details of the ceasefire and violations.

So it's our expectation that we'll continue the discussions with all the parties, certainly with the Russians and the Jordanians, in the weeks ahead about a more detailed arrangement. And in the meantime, we're hopeful that this agreement will get the violence largely under control.

Now, I want to add a little bit more, which is that in the past, we have pursued efforts towards a nationwide ceasefire, and those have been extraordinarily difficult in large part because the environment, circumstances in different parts of Syria are so profoundly different.

So as we began these discussions with the Russians and the Jordanians some months ago, we made a conscious decision to focus on one part of the conflict

initially, and that was the southwest. For a variety of reasons, it seemed like a more manageable part of the – of a very, very complicated battle space inside of Syria. That doesn't preclude a desire on our part to look at other parts of Syria in the coming weeks and months, and certainly it's a positive signal. I think, as Secretary Tillerson made, the point he made in Hamburg today, which is it's a positive signal about the capacity of the United States and Russia to work in a positive way on something practical where we do have some measure of overlapping perspectives about the course of events.

So it's a very complicated battle space. We are starting with fairly modest ambitions to focus on this one part of Syria, to begin the focus on the southwest of Syria with an effort to stop the violence there and to gradually, as our discussions proceed, to solidify an arrangement that can, number one, end the principal driver of misery for Syrians in that part of the country – the ongoing violence, to set the stage for a more auspicious environment for what we ultimately hope is a productive political process that can – that could lead to a more substantial and permanent resolution of the underlying conflict.

So let me stop there and take as many of your questions as we have time for.

MODERATOR: [Senior State Department Official], thank you so much. Let's start with Josh from the Associated Press.

QUESTION: Thank you so much for doing this. So Foreign Minister Lavrov today said in no uncertain terms that it was Russian military police that will be on the ground monitoring the ceasefire, but you're saying that you don't have an understanding on that. So is that not correct what the Russian diplomat is saying, and is the U.S. open to having it be Russian troops that are policing the truce? And then, secondly, I'm just wondering if you could explain how this interrelates with the Astana agreement, and since we don't have access to the maps, whether this ceasefire overlaps at all with any of the territory that is covered under those de-confliction zones. Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Okay, sure. On your first question, we certainly felt like we had enough shared understanding about this arrangement to move ahead and announce the ceasefire that would start Sunday at noon. As Secretary Tillerson said, the specific details of monitoring arrangements is an extraordinarily complex question and it's something that we hope to have finalized to everybody's satisfaction in the next couple of days. Let me leave it at that.

On the question of Astana, Astana's a separate process. This effort that we've announced today and the discussions that we've had with the Russians and the Jordanians more generally has not been a part of the Astana process. The U.S. attends those Astana meetings as an observer. We're not a participant. The southwest area, as we have discussed it and conceptualized it with Russia and Jordan, is a separate process. So a separate process of delineating the maps and a separate set of negotiations about the details of the ceasefire and eventually the details of the broader de-escalation arrangements.

Astana, since it has started, we – the U.S. has been an observer. We've said publicly that to the extent that it contributes to de-escalation of violence or reduction of violence nationwide and ultimately saving Syrians' lives, we're supportive of that effort. We obviously have concerns about Astana, not least of which is the role of Iran as a guarantor of that process, and that will continue. Our concerns about Iran's role in Astana, our concerns about Iran more generally inside of Syria will continue to inform our approach to all of these discussions going forward.

MODERATOR: From – Yeganeh from Reuters, excuse me.

QUESTION: Thanks so much, and thanks for doing this call. Just a couple quick questions. The U.S. has a lot of influence with the rebel groups in that part of Syria. Do you have the buy-in of the rebel groups there? Can you describe sort of how they've been a part of this process, if at all? And can you describe or explain a little bit more – we've sort of seen these sorts of ceasefires before, but we've also seen that the Russians are either unwilling or incapable of making sure that the Assad government abides by them or doesn't continue to target civilians. What is it that makes you think that they are more willing or more able to do that now? Thank you very much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The basis of the whole understanding is obviously that each side, each party to it uses its influence with those parties on the ground with which we have relationships. So we and Jordan, in particular, have good relationships with the Southern Front, with the principal armed factions in southwest Syria, and we maintain fairly constant contact with those parties and definitely pursued this in large measure because we had a sense that they themselves were supportive of a ceasefire. I think the armed factions and the civilians and the opposition in general throughout most of Syria is dreadfully tired of the violence and is looking for an opportunity where a credible ceasefire – an enduring ceasefire – could be implemented.

So you raise a good point; there's been ceasefires in the past. At the end of the day, this is Syria. It's a very complicated battle space and there are a lot of spoilers on the ground, and we're effectively dependent upon outside parties with influence to ensure the compliance of those with whom they have influence. In the case of the Russians, obviously, that's principally the regime forces; in the case of the U.S., Jordan, it's the forces of the opposition. But again, there are spoilers on the ground. There is the regime, which we hope under Russian pressure will comply. There are jihadis from al-Qaida and from Daesh even in southwest Syria, although smaller in number, that may well have a vested interest in spoiling the ceasefire.

So we're moving ahead both because I think we're morally bound where there's an opportunity to bring about a ceasefire to save people's lives and to de-escalate the violence, but we're trying to do it in a way where we come up with a more detailed de-escalation arrangement, including monitoring arrangements that are more robust and more credible and can lead to a more durable ceasefire.

MODERATOR: (Inaudible) from Fox News. Rich Edson from Fox News.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Thanks very much, [Moderator]. Question – and you alluded a bit to this, but as you noted, it’s a very complicated situation in Syria, particularly even in southwest Syria. Has there been any contact or suggestion from the Iranians, from other groups like al-Nusrah, as to whether there would be attempts to thwart this or maybe even buy into this?

And secondly, on the timing of the announcement, was it a coincidence that it was announced today as President Trump met with President Putin?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: On the first question, we obviously don’t have contact with Nusrah, with the al-Qaida affiliate, nor with – we haven’t discussed this issue with the Iranians. We have no contact with their proxy forces, like Hizballah, on the ground. Iran and Iranian proxy forces, those that are fighting on behalf of the regime – there’s an expectation the Russians will use their influence to ensure that they respect the ceasefire. Nusrah – safe to say nobody credibly really has influence with them, so ultimately there’s no expectation that they are a party to the ceasefire. To the extent there continues to be any sort of military action in the south at all, we would hope it would be directed at expelling or killing the jihadis that are left in that part of the country. So if they choose – anyway, let me leave it at that.

Your second question was about the timing. The timing worked out well, I have to say. We have been under these discussions for quite some weeks, and they’re – it’s a complicated set of discussions, and as we’ve said, we’re not done with it. But it was good timing, I have to say, that we got to this point where we could announce an actual ceasefire at the same time as the meetings in Hamburg. I think ultimately, though, we were determined to complete this as soon as we can and we were determined to get the ceasefire in place as soon as we can, because at that point, it’s when the public – the civilians in particular in that part of Syria – can start to benefit from it.

MODERATOR: Okay. Karen from *The Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Hi, [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hi, Karen.

QUESTION: Just to go back on one of the things you mentioned before, which is the Russians, as you noted, have agreed to similar agreements like this before, and not always on a nationwide basis. I mean, in Aleppo they had agreed to it, and the United States, when they didn’t comply, accused the Russians of not being serious about it. So my first question is: Why do you think the Russians are serious this time when they haven’t been in the past?

And secondly, you spoke about the need to have robust monitoring and how that’s not in place yet. Why start the thing on Sunday when you have no monitoring in place, and doesn’t that sort of set it up for possible failure?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So on the first question about the motivation of the Russians, we began these discussions with them some months ago at the beginning of this new administration to explore whether there was,

in the context of Syria, some scope for some overlapping perspective. And as you point out, we had done this before. We had an unsatisfactory experience a year ago – in fact, most of last year.

Based on the discussions that we've had over the last few months and based on the rather narrow scope of where we are starting, we had the sense that they seriously wanted to pursue this, and it was certainly worth our effort, worth our time, to test them on this to see whether they are capable of ensuring compliance by the parties over which they have influence.

And if there is, if we can get from an announcement to a ceasefire to a real ceasefire and from there to more detailed arrangements for broader de-escalation in the region, I think that bodes well for the possibility of working with the Russians on other aspects of resolution of the Syria conflict. But we're being pretty cautious about it. We're being pretty modest about our objectives early on as we go forward with this.

I'm sorry. Your second part of your question? Maybe you got muted already.

QUESTION: The necessary robust monitoring in place?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. So, in fact, in the past when there have been ceasefire efforts, the absence of credible monitoring, reliable monitoring, has been one of the reasons why – there's been many reasons – that's one of the reasons why the ceasefires haven't held.

Here we have a situation where one of the toughest pieces of these discussions is the thing that we accomplished last week when we agreed on the line of contact between regime and opposition forces. That's not something we had really been able to do in the past. And once that had been done, once we had agreement between us, Jordan, and Russia about where the line of contact was, effectively – and we had a sense from the parties that both sides of the conflict wanted the violence to end, at that point there was no reason for it to continue.

You had a growing level of violence in that part of Syria, north of Daraa in particular, and yet the contact line didn't shift demonstrably. So it became pointless to continue the violence at that point because all it meant was death and destruction but no gains, no demonstrable gains by either side. So at that point there was a certain logic in implementing the ceasefire immediately, and then as quickly – and it's obviously incumbent on us to move as quickly as possible – to try to get in place arrangements that can ensure that it can be durable.

MODERATOR: Kylie from CBS News.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this. So I just want to clarify what you're saying here in the sense that this will go into effect on Sunday at noon, but it could very well go into effect without an agreement on who is enforcing it at this point.

And then my second question is you talked about this being an interim step to broader, more detailed arrangements of de-escalation. Can you give us kind of

a preview into what that could mean? Does that mean more areas that are going to be – come under the ceasefire? Is this no-fly zones? What – what are those options that are on the table at this point? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure. So on your – the first part of your question, the way I think about it is the ceasefire that was announced today and should go into effect on Sunday is basically the first step of a broader process. So if the objective is what we call an interim de-escalation area in southwest Syria, so that is something where you have a freeze of the conflict, you effectively have a freeze in place of forces, you have some monitoring arrangements, you possibly have on-the-ground monitors, you have some sort of a coordination cell in which the various parties can feed information back. You set in place the sort of infrastructure for a durable ceasefire that creates, as I said earlier, kind of a more auspicious environment for a broader political process and hopefully spreading this de-escalation to other parts of the country.

So the ceasefire is the first part of that. And as I said, the first thing that was agreed in the process of these discussions was the line of contact map, so we came to agreement between us and Russia and the Jordanians on that. And at that point, given the urgency of stopping the violence and the apparent willingness of the parties to do so, it made sense to move ahead with the ceasefire immediately.

Now, what we don't want to do is create the sense that this ceasefire is it and we're done and now we move on to some other parts of Syria. It is this ceasefire that sets in place the basis for ongoing discussions about how that is solidified and made durable in southwest Syria. Now, if that works – if that works because of our involvement, perhaps our work with the Russians, the Jordanians, and other parties – it certainly creates, as I was saying earlier, an opportunity for that kind of – that kind of work together in other parts of the country.

I'd caution other parts of the country are dramatically different, so it's not simply that we can say we've done this in southwest and we can take a cookie-cutter approach and apply it to some other part of the country. We have to take into account the different, sometimes dramatically different circumstances in various parts of Syria. But what it does do is it creates a more auspicious environment for those sorts of discussions to take place and for the broader political process to move ahead. Thanks.

MODERATOR: Excuse me. Michelle from CNN. We just have time for two more questions. Michelle, go ahead.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you. I mean, we touched on aspects of this already, I know. My question's a little bit more on the motivation of Russia. Given that they've been so unreliable and untrustworthy here and elsewhere, what do you see their motivation being for at least being – appearing to be serious about this now? And do you have concerns that this is maybe an easy piece for them to make a show of being cooperative? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, it's a fair question and I'm a little

reluctant to try to get in their heads and speculate about their motivation. I think there's a sense that we have and that they have, which is that if there's going to be a resolution of the conflict in Syria, we both need to somehow be involved in it. The Russians are heavily invested in the conflict. We have an interest in finding an end to it – in ending the misery, in ending the violence, in ending the refugee flows and the radicalization that emerges from it.

So there's the sense that both parties feel like the other needs to be involved. And over the course of the last month, there was a sense as these discussions proceeded that perhaps there was scope for us to come to some understanding together. And as I was saying earlier, we started out with fairly modest expectations. It's not a nationwide ceasefire, it's not an immediate move to a conflict-ending political process. We're being pretty realistic about how quickly we can go given that it comes in the context of an otherwise quite difficult relationship between the United States and Russia, which is apparent to anybody.

So we felt as we kind of got into these discussions that it was – it was worth trying. They clearly expressed an interest in pursuing it. They expressed a willingness and an ability to hold up their end of the bargain – that is, of course, to use their influence on principally the regime. And so it opened the door to us at least creating what we've done today, which is an opportunity to test the proposition. It's worth testing.

I said earlier that there's been ceasefires in the past and there's been unsatisfactory efforts with the Russians in the past, but nonetheless, I think if we find ourselves in a situation where both parties, all the parties express an interest in doing that, it's – given the stakes, given the fact that we want the violence to end, we want the misery of the Syrians to end, we want to ensure the – obviously, the security of Syria's neighbors who are our allies, given that there's an opportunity to pursue this and test this, it was worth doing it, but we're doing it with eyes open.

MODERATOR: Okay. Last question, and Nick from Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Hi, [Senior State Department Official]. Apology, this line's not great here in Hamburg. I just have two very quick questions. One is: Has the Russians given you any indication that the Assad regime is willing to go along and do they have any signs from the Syrian Government that it will play ball here? And second: If Assad believes that he's the legitimate leader of Syria, why would he – why would it be in his interests to agree to a ceasefire that would presumably allow the opposition to gain strength? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The answer to your first question is yes. We wouldn't have pursued this if the answer to the question wasn't yes, so – and on the second question, again, reluctant to get into Assad's head about his motivations for doing this, but the idea behind the ceasefire and the freeze of the conflict is neither side uses it to gain advantage. The idea is to freeze in place, freeze forces, stop the violence, and create space for the sort of ultimately – and it might not happen in the near term, but

ultimately, the sort of political discussions that are going to come to some resolution of the conflict. Let me leave it at that.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, everyone, for calling in today. [Senior State Department Official], we know you've been very busy, so thank you so much, [Senior State Department Official], for joining us with this information.

The embargo for this call has now been lifted. As a reminder, we are referring to [Senior State Department Official] as a senior State Department official who has been involved with the negotiations.

Everyone, have a terrific weekend and I'm sure we'll be talking with you soon.

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