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Syrian De-Escalation Memorandum a Significant Step

On 5 May 2017 following a meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, a memorandum was signed by three of the principal parties involved in the Syrian conflict: Russia, Turkey and the Islamic state of Iran. It represents a significant step in achieving a resolution of the Syrian conflict, which has cost more than 400,000 lives. The reaction to the memorandum, and the lack of reaction in key quarters by other parties to the conflict is also significant.

The memorandum stipulates that it is “guided by the provisions of UNSC resolution 2254 (2015)”. This linkage to a key Security Council resolution is one of the principal reasons it was welcomed both by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and UN Special Envoy for Syria Steffan de Mistura.

A second stipulation in the memorandum was the “strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.” This provision will not be welcomed in Washington and Tel Aviv, where the break up of Syria into small parts has long been a strategic geopolitical goal.

The memorandum creates a series of “de-escalation and security zones.” These are in Idlib province. Parts of neighbouring Latakia, Hama and Aleppo provinces, certain parts north of Homs province, and areas in the south of Syria in Deraa and Al-Quneitra provinces. Precise maps of the affected areas will be published by 4 June 2017.

The significance of the designated areas is that they are all regions that are dominated by jihadi groups under the protection and support of foreign sponsors, notably Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United States and the two small Gulf States, Qatar and the UAE.

The designated security zones and their links to foreign sponsors of the terrorist groups is one factor why both the United States and Saudi Arabia have failed to commit to abiding by the terms of the memorandum. The United States had refused the opportunity to be a party to the negotiations, sending only an observer.

Rather than welcoming what is a significant advance in peace prospects after six years of war, both the United States and Saudi Arabia preferred to denounce the role of Iran, claiming that Iran’s activities have “only contributed to the violence, not stopped it.”

The fact that Iran is involved in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate sovereign government of Syria (unlike the US and its “coalition:” allies) is not mentioned. That the role of the United States and Saudi Arabia as the world’s two greatest sponsors of terrorism is also completely ignored. This selective reporting is a measure of the detachment from reality of much of western mainstream media reporting.

Russia’s chief negotiator at the peace talks, Aleksandr Lavrentyev, emphasized that the safe zones established under the deal would be closed to warplanes of the US led coalition. “In the de-escalation zones, aviation operations, especially by the forces of the international (US) coalition, are absolutely not envisaged, with or without prior notification. The question is closed,” he said.

Apart from the actual signing of the memorandum itself, Mr Lavrentyev’s statement is perhaps the most significant point to emerge from the Astana meeting. It was completely ignored by the coverage of the memorandum in the Australian mainstream media which itself, given Australia’s role in the conflict, was very sparse.

The interpretation placed on Mr Lavrentyev’s statement that the safe zones are closed to warplanes of the US led coalition (which includes Australia) and that it was an issue not open to negotiation, is that coalition warplanes that violate the safe zone air space are liable to be shot down. The United States has stated that it will not respect the zones if they want to carry out attacks in those areas.

The US and its coalition allies have on two previous occasions (September 2016 and January 2017) violated ceasefire

agreements, so it would be unwise to discount the possibility that they will do so again. Quite apart from anything else, it is a further indication that the US (and its allies) do not regard themselves as bound by international law, notwithstanding their frequent invocation of a 'rules based order' as justifying their frequent violations of other's sovereignty.

If US warplanes, and those of its allies, which includes Australia do violate the safe zones and are shot down, then the potential for a major military confrontation between Russia and the US is very real. The recent restoration of the de-confliction hotline between Russia and the US that was suspended following the US missile attack on al Shayrat air base may reduce the risks. The unilateral conduct demonstrated by the US over the alleged sarin gas attack at al Sheikhoun is not however, very encouraging in that regard.

Any US-Russia direct military confrontation would almost certainly involve Australia, given the latter country's adherence to every American military misadventure since World War 2. The almost complete silence of the ABC and the Fairfax media on the memorandum and its implications is therefore all the more puzzling.

The Murdoch media and SBS TV published identically worded statements that were limited to quoting the US's expressed concern over the Astana agreement; the denigration of Iran's role; and the walkout at one point of the Syrian opposition groups. SBS online also reported Guterres's and de Mistura's favourable reactions, but totally failed to mention or consider any implications for the Australian air force's operations in Syria.

As has been previously noted, all of the US coalition's activities in Syria are contrary to international law. This may be the main reason for the very limited reporting and complete absence of parliamentary debate. Given the profound importance of the Russia-Turkey-Iran memorandum and its implications, such silence is no longer appropriate.

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