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■ The significance of the agreement on Syria by major powers

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The Syrian armed conflict has continued for close to five years now (since March 2011). According to official statistics, the total death toll of this war has exceeded 260,000 (although other sources put it at 470,000). Another ca. 4.5 million Syrians have been forced to flee the country*. The majority of them are living in camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Some have made it to Europe collectively producing the world's largest refugee migration flows since World War II. That is why the Munich agreement by major powers on the "temporary cessation of hostilities in Syria" announced on the morning of 12 February 2016, just before this Bavarian capital kicked off its annual security conference, may be viewed as critical and urgently needed. The plan envisions a nearly immediate (within the space of a week) cessation of all hostilities with the exception of operations against the so called Islamic State and the Al-Kaida-linked al-Nusra Front. The agreement additionally called for the establishing a special UN task force to guarantee that all parties to the conflict facilitate humanitarian access to Syria.

Although the five-hour negotiation involved all representatives of the member states of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the key talks were held between heads of the US and Russian diplomatic corps. The central issue of contention was Moscow's position and having Minister Sergei Lavrov accept the proposals made to him by Secretary of State John F. Kerry. After all, it was the nature and scale of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, directed not only against the Islamic State but also, or in fact primarily, against the forces fighting the Bashar al-Assad's regime and inflicting massive casualties among the civilian population (since Russia's involvement in the conflict

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in the autumn of 2015, the Russian air strike killed approximately 1500 civilians), that escalated the conflict attracting harsh criticism from the West. Moscow was in fact pursuing its own political objectives in the Middle East, which were chiefly to strengthen the Assad regime and entrench itself in the region.

Americans and their allies, in their turn, who have adopted a similar model of military operations in Syria, i.e. to resort to air strikes, with the difference of putting civilian safety first, focused on combatting the self-proclaimed caliphate and other Islamic radicals, partly to support forces opposing Assad's military. Thus, each of the parties engaged in the Syrian war, that is Russia and its ally, the Damascus authorities, as well as the United States and its own allies, were after their own different objectives, which were actually contradictory.

Note also that Russians are closer to accomplishing their mission as their efforts have significantly helped Assad's forces, supported on land by Iranian troops, to succeed in fighting the opposition (as in having besieged and cut off the opposition-controlled city of Aleppo). In their military operations in Syria, Russians proved to be more determined, ruthless and effective. Meanwhile, held back by their upsetting experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other things, Americans failed to display a similar resolve in Syria, which in fact led to their failure: which was to significantly erode the Islamic State, even though some of their agencies were forced to move to Libya and give a boost to the Syrian opposition at the expense of Assad's regime.

It is quite easy to explain the success achieved in cutting a deal with Russia regarding the cessation of hostilities at a time when Moscow had the upper hand militarily and came close to attaining its political objectives. In showing their good intentions and acquiescing to a temporary cessation of hostilities, the Russians risked nothing. Rather, they improved their position in the international community which had recently ostracized it. As could have been foreseen, their actions in Syria changed the perception of Moscow making it come across as an important, if not indispensable, partner in resolving the Syrian conflict. By conceding or at least declaring its willingness to do so, Russia has posed as a power that "one can again do business with" and one moved by the humanitarian crisis to the point of choosing to cease military operations. At a joint press conference with Secretary of State Kerry, Minister Lavrov said: "We should deal with finding solutions to problems, which have become truly existential for the human civilization, rather than just play geopolitical games".

Moscow's playing of the game carries an only minimal risk to it partly because the agreement contains a clause on continuing hostilities against the so called Islamic State and other terrorist groups. The key question, therefore, is whether the Russians, who consider the forces fighting Assad's military as terrorists, will refrain from attacking the opposition. Or will they continue their offensive arguing they are in fact combating terrorism? Perhaps the Assad regime will take advantage of the temporary loss of the military momentum to regain strength so as to ultimately defeat the rebels? Another question is whether the US-supported forces which have been fighting the Assad regime will be willing to cease hostilities and whether Americans will manage to convince them to? Failing that, the Munich agreement will remain "on paper

only”, as in a warning issued by John Kerry at a recent press conference: “What we have here are words on paper”.

In the event, however, that the agreement turns out to have real teeth and if Russia, the Damascus regime and its adversaries do indeed cease hostilities, true success will be achieved. This will be, firstly, success in making the restoration of the Geneva negotiations a realistic prospect. These talks among the parties to the Syrian conflict which had continued for months have become hopelessly deadlocked or in fact broken down after representatives of the forces fighting the Damascus regime walked away from the negotiating table in the early February 2016. They did so in reaction to the siege of Aleppo by the government forces. After all, it was Salim al-Muslat, the spokesman of the Syrian opposition, who suggested a return to the negotiating table in the follow-up to the Munich agreement, which is encouraging.

Secondly, and this appears to be the crucial aspect of the Munich agreement, it will finally become possible to bring humanitarian aid to Syria’s civilian population. Just how urgent such aid has become is evident from the picture of the tragic aftermath of this war which has already gone on for five years. The civilians who were unable to cross the Syrian border have so far been cut off from sufficient humanitarian support. An estimated 8.7 million of the Syrians who have remained in the country are undernourished and unable to secure food (the population that remains in areas directly affected by the armed conflict is in fact at dire risk of starvation). Meanwhile, 70 percent of the people have no access to pure drinking water. Especially tragic is the plight of children who are left defenseless to the spread of diseases (some one million children have not been vaccinated against infectious diseases).

In the early February alone, more than 52,000 people fled Aleppo after the city was besieged by the government. If the fighting does not stop, then, as is anticipated by UN OCHA (the UN agency in charge of coordinating the delivery of humanitarian aid), another 100,000-150,000 are going to flee Aleppo. The only available escape route left to civilians leads through Turkey which is nevertheless temporarily closing its borders to the incoming people. At this juncture, the cessation of hostilities will open a humanitarian window of opportunity allowing the civilians to leave the city. This will not, by any means, resolve the city’s tragic problem as an estimated 300,000 civilians (i.e. close to 1/3 of the city’s total pre-war population) have no intention of leaving, which may actually seal their fates.

Note that the civilians who have left their place of residence but remained in their country, which goes also for the civilians currently fleeing Aleppo, are not entitled to refugee status and, by the same token, to international protection. The responsibility for these people rests with the Damascus administration which, as a party to the conflict, has itself been known to use banned weapons of war to indiscriminately kill or injure both the combatants and the civilians. It is up to the government to facilitate access to humanitarian organizations which so far had to negotiate each entry intended to reach the civilian population. Thanks to the Munich agreement, humanitarian organizations have received legitimate confirmation of their entitlement to bring aid to Syrian territory. The aid is eagerly awaited by ca. 13.5 million people (due to ongoing military operations, access to roughly 4.5 million civilians by humanitarian organizations had been next to impossible). Humanitarian organiza-

tions will nevertheless still find it very difficult to access areas controlled by the Islamic State and Al-Kaida.

The humanitarian community had waited for the cessation of hostilities agreement in full readiness for delivering aid at a moment's notice. A special Task Force on Humanitarian Access in Syria, whose establishment was noted in the Munich agreement, met as early as February 12, less than 24 hours after the announcement of the deal to end hostilities. The meeting was chaired by the diplomat Jan Egeland, a former Head of UN OCHA and UN Under-Secretary, now acting as Senior Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria. It was attended by representatives of every member of the ISSG. This guarantees that the humanitarian aid resolutions committed to paper will actually be implemented. As was reported after the meeting, a demand was sent to all parties involved in the Syrian fighting to provide immediate access to the civilian population. Without waiting for the two-week Munich accord implementation time limit to elapse, the representatives of humanitarian agencies who were already on location in Syria, launched aid delivery. It even became possible to provide aid in previously inaccessible rural areas on the outskirts of Aleppo, as was reported by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

Although many humanitarian organizations emphasize that a cessation of hostilities alone is not enough, doubts arise as to whether civilians will indeed stop becoming collateral damage in the fighting. There is nevertheless hope that effective humanitarian assistance will be brought to the civilian population. It is for this sole reason, if not for any other, that the Munich agreement makes sense and is needed even if it proves to be politically ineffective and if its signatories fail to respect the cessation of hostilities. At any rate, regaining control over the humanitarian disaster observed in Syria is a first step towards the stabilization of the entire conflict region. Failing this, large refugee groups will, within months, set out again on finding safe havens outside of Syria, thereby exacerbating the current refugee crisis.

* The data on Syrian conflict fatalities cited in the article come from the *Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2016-2017 in Response to the Syria Crisis*, London, 4 February 2016.

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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