



US-RUSSIA SYRIA TRUCE DEAL TOP THREE OBSTACLES

The complex Syria ceasefire deal aims to enforce a cessation of hostilities and increased aid access to desperate civilians, and lays the groundwork for joint US-Russia military action against jihadists. It is the most important development in Syria since the Russian military intervention on 30 September last year. US and Russia should be in a position to persuade or compel their allies and proxies to abide by a truce, however reluctant they may be to do so. But there remains obstacles:

YEARS OF MISTRUST

Perhaps the most prominent obstacle to the implementation of the deal is deep mistrust between President Bashar al-Assad's forces and rebel groups. After five years of war, each side is sceptical of the other's willingness to adhere to a ceasefire and previously attempted truces have failed. Most recently, a cessation of hostilities brokered by the US and Russia in February led to a drop in violence on major fronts but frayed several weeks later.

REBEL-JIHADIST ALLIANCE

As part of the deal, opposition groups must separate themselves from the powerful jihadists of the Fateh al-Sham Front, which changed its name from Al-Nusra Front after breaking its ties to al-Qaeda. Syria's opposition High Negotiations Committee yesterday said rebels had been forced to ally with jihadists because of the regime's use of siege tactics, but they would break that alliance if the truce held. But experts are more doubtful. Breaking that alliance may mean effectively ceding territory to the regime, they added.

A WEB OF ACTORS

Syria's war has seen the country carved out into zones controlled by competing forces: regime, rebels, Kurds and jihadists. But it has also drawn in a myriad of regional and international powers on different sides of the conflict. The deal won support from Turkey. But steadfast Assad supporter Iran has yet to react. Saudi Arabia is also keeping silence so far. Experts say regional players, specially, Iran's support for the deal is crucial.

PHOTO: AFP

Syrians search for victims at the scene of a reported air strike on the rebel-held northwestern city of Idlib, yesterday. Inset, A man carries a child at the scene of the strike. Air strikes killed at least 50 people in rebel-held areas of Idlib and Aleppo yesterday, just hours after Russia and the US announced a deal intended to put a stop to more than five years of fighting.

THE HAJJ IN NUMBERS

The hajj pilgrimage, which got under way in the Muslim holy places in Saudi Arabia yesterday, is one of the world's largest annual gatherings. Here are some figures illustrating its scale:

- More than 1.4 million pilgrims from abroad are expected to join in excess of 100,000 from inside Saudi Arabia.
- The pilgrims will be transported on 18,000 buses.
- The Saudi hajj and umrah ministry has mobilised some 60,000 staff.
- 158 sickbays along the pilgrimage routes. 25 hospitals and 5,000 hospital beds available.
- Helicopters, 100 ambulances and 51 medical buses on standby.
- 17,000 emergency services

'We must keep US free'

Obama urges Americans to remain united

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday urged Americans to remain united in the face of terrorist attacks, in a barely-veiled jab at Republican White House nominee Donald Trump 15 years after 9/11.

"In the face of terrorism, how we respond matters," Obama said in his weekly radio and online address, delivered on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

"We cannot give in to those who would divide us. We cannot react in ways that erode the fabric of our society," he added.

"Because it's our diversity, our welcoming of all talent, our treating of everybody fairly--no matter their race, gender, ethnicity, or faith--that's part of what makes our country great. It's what makes us resilient," Obama said.

"And if we stay true to those values, we'll uphold the legacy of those we've lost, and keep our nation strong and free."

The Al-Qaeda hijackings of September 11, 2001 -- the first foreign attack on the US mainland in nearly two centuries -- ruptured a sense of safety and plunged the West into wars still being fought today.

More than 2,750 people were killed when two passenger jets destroyed the Twin Towers, the symbol of New York's financial wealth and confidence. Another jet slammed into the Pentagon, and a fourth jet crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after those on board tried to overpower the hijackers.

"We will destroy them. And we'll keep doing everything in our power to protect our homeland," Obama said.



Families now can sue Saudi

House passes bill; Obama to exercise veto

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Friday that would allow the families of victims of the Sept 11 attacks to sue Saudi Arabia's government for damages, despite the White House's threat to veto the measure.

The US Senate in May unanimously passed the "Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act," known as JASTA. The bill's passage in the House by voice vote, two days before the 15th anniversary of the attacks that killed about 3,000 people, was greeted with cheers and applause in the chamber.

"We can no longer allow those who injure and kill Americans to hide behind legal loopholes, denying justice to the victims of terrorism," said Republican Representative Bob Goodlatte, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

Fifteen of the 19 Sept 11 hijackers who crashed airliners in New York, outside Washington and in Pennsylvania were Saudi nationals. The Saudi government, which strongly denies responsibility, has lobbied against the bill.

Opponents of the measure said it could strain relations with Saudi Arabia and lead to retaliatory laws that would allow foreign nationals to sue Americans for alleged involvement in terrorist attacks.

The White House on Friday reiterated that President Obama would veto the bill.

But some members of Congress have become increasingly restive about relations with Saudi Arabia, long an important player in US Middle East policy. On Thursday, four senators introduced a resolution seeking to block a \$1.15 billion arms sale to the kingdom, after 64 House members signed a letter in August asking Obama to delay the sale.

JASTA would remove sovereign immunity, preventing lawsuits against governments, for countries found to be involved in terrorist attacks on US soil. It also would allow survivors, and relatives of those killed in them to seek damages from other countries.

IS blasts near Iraq mall kill 13 people

AFP, Baghdad

Two bomb blasts outside a shopping mall in central Baghdad claimed by the Islamic State group killed at least 13 people, security and medical officials said yesterday.

The bombings were the latest in a series of deadly attacks at Baghdad shopping centres this year that have been claimed by IS, including one that killed more than 300 people in early July.

The jihadist group issued an online statement on the attack, saying it targeted Shias and was carried out by two Iraqi suicide bombers, one of whom wore an explosive belt and another who drove an explosives-rigged vehicle.

IS and other Sunni extremists consider Shia Muslims to be heretics, and frequently target them in bombings.

The blasts, which hit just before midnight (2100 GMT) Friday, shattered windows at the multi-storey Nakheel Mall on Palestine Street in the city centre, and damaged a fence surrounding it.

Nakheel Mall opened last year and shops were likely to have remained open late ahead of the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha which begins tomorrow. The mall also houses one of the city's most popular cinemas.

IS claims most major attacks in Baghdad, including some carried out at shopping centres earlier in the year.

On Tuesday, a car bomb near a hospital killed at least seven people in Baghdad's Karrada district -- an area still reeling from a July 3 suicide bombing that set nearby shopping centres ablaze and left more than 300 people dead.

personnel deployed.

1.5 million containers of water from Makkah's Zamzam spring to be distributed to pilgrims when the hajj reaches its climax today.

23,000 cleaners to keep the Makkah area tidy.

Foreign pilgrims spent almost 20 billion riyals (\$5.3 billion) during the hajj in 2015.

At least 2,297 pilgrims died during the 2015 stampede, according to officials from more than 30 countries. Saudi Arabia never updated an initial toll of AFP

VIOLENCE IN INDIAN KASHMIR

Two more killed as army move in

AGENCIES

Two protesters were killed and at least 100 injured Saturday when anti-India demonstrators clashed with government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir as the region remained locked down for the 64th straight day, officials said.

The deaths came after the army on Friday took up positions in rural areas of four trouble-tossed South Kashmir districts of Pulwama, Shopian, Kulgam and Anantnag, which witnessed the bulk of violence in the last two months. It is the first deployment of army in the volatile region since 2014.

The protests and clashes broke out in at least half a dozen places across the southern and central parts of the Himalayan valley.

"We have reports of more than 100 injured in today's protests. Around 25 of them have bullet wounds," a police officer said. With yesterday's killings the death toll in the unrest, which has entered its third month, climbed to 78.

Thousands of people in Indian Kashmir have been protesting against Indian rule almost daily since the killing of a popular rebel leader in a gun battle with soldiers on July 8, staging "freedom rallies" across large parts of the disputed territory.



South Korean conservative activists set fire to a portrait of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un during a protest denouncing North Korea's nuclear test in Seoul yesterday.

Hillary regrets dishing out at Trump fans

CNN, Online

Hillary Clinton expressed "regret" yesterday for comments in which she said "half" of Donald Trump's supporters are "deplorable," meaning people who are racist, sexist, homophobic or xenophobic.

"Last night I was 'grossly generalistic,' and that's never a good idea. I regret saying 'half' -- that was wrong," Clinton said in a statement in which she also vowed to call out "bigotry" in Trump's campaign.

The Democratic presidential nominee sparked an uproar late Friday when she described Trump's supporters at a fundraiser.

"To just be grossly generalistic, you can put half of Trump supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables," Clinton said.

"Right? Racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it."

She added, "And unfortunately, there are people like that and he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people, now have 11 million. He tweets and retweets offensive, hateful, mean-spirited rhetoric."

Clinton then said some of these people were "irredeemable" and "not America."

She described the rest of his supporters as people who are looking for change in any form because of economic anxiety and urged her supporters to empathize with them.

The Democratic nominee made similar comments in an interview Thursday with an Israeli television station. But when they were widely reported Friday night, Trump and Republicans quickly pounced on the remarks, which drew comparisons to President Barack Obama's comments about clinging to "guns and religion" at a 2008 campaign fundraiser and Mitt Romney's "47 percent" remark in 2012.



'MODERN SLAVERY' IN PRISON SYSTEM

US inmates launch nationwide strike

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Inmates in prisons in as many as 24 states and 40 facilities are refusing to go to work to protest what many believe is "modern-day slavery" and calling for reforms in the US prison system.

The strike comes on the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison uprising, when inmates in the notorious New York correctional facility revolted and demanded better living conditions. But many of the reforms demanded during the Attica protest still remain among the demands of the prisoners today.

Organisers with the Incarcerated Workers Organising Committee and the prisoner-run Free Alabama Movement have helped prisoners band together to decry the state of labour in prison -- for which inmates make only 12 to 40 cents hourly, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

"Slavery is alive and well in the prison system, but by the end of this year, it won't be anymore," the IWOC wrote in a call to action. "This is a call to end slavery in America."

But the prisoners' demands go beyond fair wages for work. Prisoners in various states are calling for wider reforms within the incarceration system.

Nukes defence against US blackmail: N Korea

AGENCIES

North Korea yesterday sought to justify its weapons programme as a defence against US nuclear "blackmail" as world powers debated ways to punish Pyongyang for its fifth and most powerful atomic test.

The United States, Britain and France pushed the United Nations Security Council on Friday to impose new sanctions on North Korea over its fifth and biggest nuclear test as the 15-member council condemned the move by Pyongyang.

The Security Council agreed to start work on just that -- even though five sets of UN sanctions since the first nuclear test a decade ago have failed to halt the North's drive for what it insists are defensive weapons.

The yield from Friday's test, which sparked international shockwaves, was estimated at 10 kilotons -- almost twice as much as the one Pyongyang conducted only eight months ago.

The North also boasted that the test was of a nuclear warhead that could be mounted on a missile.

South Korea, the United States, Japan, Russia and China all condemned the blast at the Punggye-ri nuclear site.

But the North's ruling party newspaper vowed yesterday not to submit to US nuclear "blackmail", and described the South's President Park Geun-Hye as a "dirty prostitute" for working with US forces.

"Gone are the days never to return when the US could make a unilateral nuclear blackmail against the DPRK," said Rodong Sinmun, using the country's official name.

The Security Council met at the request of Japan, South Korea and the United States to agree on a response, despite resistance from Pyongyang's sole ally China to calls for tougher measures.

Beijing strongly condemned the test. But its priority is to avoid the regime's collapse, which would create a crisis on its border and potentially shift the balance of power on the Korean peninsula toward the United States.