

Russia, Turkey and Iran agree on the establishment of 'de-escalation zones' in Syria

Witold Rodkiewicz

On 4th May representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey signed in Astana a memorandum to establish 'de-escalation zones' in four areas in Syria still controlled by the Sunni opposition. While the memorandum was approved by the Syrian government, it was rejected by all the Syrian opposition groups. Russia submitted the document to the UN Security Council for approval. The 'de-escalation zones' will include: Idlib province, an enclave north of the town of Homs; the Eastern Ghouta region (the area near Damascus); and areas in southern Syria (along the border with Jordan and Israel). All military operations in these zones, including airstrikes targeting opposition forces which had joined or will join a ceasefire regime, will be halted. Security zones controlled by the forces of the signatory states will be set up at the borders of 'de-escalation zones'. The memorandum also provides, subject to the consent of the signatories, for the possibility of the deployment of third party troops in the security zones.. The signatory states will set up a Joint Working Group tasked with demarcating the borders of the zones by 4th June.

Commentary

- The agreement was proposed by Moscow and was signed at the meeting of the Astana format, set up by Russia, Turkey and Iran in order to oversee the ceasefire brokered by the three states and signed on 30th December in 2016 by the Syrian government and some Sunni armed opposition groups. The ceasefire did not bring a halt to fighting between government forces and the Sunni opposition or to airstrikes on opposition-controlled areas. There are no indications that the new agreement will be more effective. The opposition and Western sources have been reporting ongoing operations carried out by government forces in areas covered by the memorandum.
- The agreement seems to be largely a propaganda exercise and is probably intended at reducing the chances of a US intervention against the Assad regime, such as the missile strike on the Shayrat airbase on 7th April. The memorandum only appears to implement the security zone concepts that has been suggested for many years by Western countries and Turkey and recently also by the US president. Its provisions are beneficial mainly for Assad's forces since it leaves them room for manoeuvre while simultaneously confining the opposition to military passivity in their zones. The fact that the document legitimises the presence of Iranian forces in Syria is unacceptable to the Sunni opposition and

contrary to America's and Israel's interests. Furthermore, under the agreement fighting will be continued against Jaish Fateh al-Sham forces and other groups affiliated with al-Qaida and present in 'de-escalation zones'. This was previously used as a pretext for the regime forces and the Russian Air Force to attack those opposition groups that had joined the Astana ceasefire.

- The memorandum may, however, be a sign that Russia is seeking agreement on Syria with the US by trying to divide the country into spheres of influence. This may be indicated by the fact that Russian diplomacy is interested in talks with Washington on Syria and ready to return to the Russian-American memorandum on flight safety over Syria which was suspended following the airstrike on the Shayrat airbase.