



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 14, 2016

## As Cease-fire in Syria Begins, Obama's Own Cabinet Lacks Consensus

The U.S.-Russian-brokered cease-fire agreement between the opposing forces in the Syrian civil war began on September 12, and after the first day, calm prevailed across the embattled nation.

According to the terms of the cease-fire agreement, which was announced in Geneva on September 10 by Secretary of State John Kerry (shown in pink tie) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (shown in red tie), if the cease-fire holds for a week, and both the Assad regime and the opposition allow delivery of aid to areas where it is needed, the U.S. and Russian air forces will work together through a joint operations room to target ISIS and other extremists.



However, reported CNN on September 13, though aid agencies are standing by, prepared to distribute assistance, they have said they are awaiting guarantees of security from all parties before beginning their deliveries to the war-ravaged Syrians — estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry has announced that it refuses any entry of humanitarian aid to the city of Aleppo, which is a priority for aid agencies, unless it is coordinated through the Syrian government and the United Nations. This is especially true for aid coming from Turkey. CNN cited the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency as its source.

CNN also cited International Committee of the Red Cross spokeswoman Krista Armstrong, who said aid supplies were in warehouses ready to be delivered to rebel-held east Aleppo and other areas caught in the middle of the fighting as soon as aid workers were cleared to enter. Between 250,000 and 275,000 people in east Aleppo have been cut off from assistance since early July, according to the UN.

However, Armstrong said, “There hasn’t been a breakthrough in accessing new areas” via guarantees on security.

The *New York Times* quoted a statement from the UN mediator in the Syrian conflict, Staffan de Mistura, who told reporters in Geneva that there had been a “significant drop in violence” since the cease-fire plan took effect at sundown on September 12. But de Mistura said UN relief trucks bound for Aleppo, which lined up at southern Turkey’s border with Syria, had not received assurances of safe travel. De Mistura also said the Syrian government had still not provided required authorizations for deliveries to other locations, “but we are eagerly hoping and expecting the government to issue them very soon.”

As the world waits to see if the cease-fire will hold, and aid agencies wait for clearance to begin their



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much-needed deliveries, the *New York Times* reported about a strong difference between two Obama administration Cabinet members — Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter — on the wisdom of the cease-fire agreement.

Kerry, as we have noted, worked with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to iron out the agreement, and their work was completed in Geneva on September 10. During a White House conference call with Kerry, who spoke from Geneva last week, Carter registered his opposition to the cease-fire agreement, but Kerry prevailed and President Obama approved it.

The *Times* reported that as of September 13, Pentagon officials would not even agree that the Defense Department would implement its part of the agreement on the eighth day if a cessation of violence in Syria lasted for seven days — the first part of the agreement — because it represents an unprecedented collaboration between the United States and Russia and calls for the U.S. military to share information with Moscow on ISIS targets in Syria.

“I’m not saying yes or no,” the *Times* quoted Lt. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigian, commander of the United States Air Forces Central Command, who told reporters during a video conference call, “It would be premature to say that we’re going to jump right into it.”

During a press briefing by White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest on September 12, every time a reporter asked Earnest about the prospects for the cease-fire being worked out successfully, he placed the burden mostly on the Russians and their ability to restrain the Assad regime. He seemed to ignore the role of the anti-Assad opposition groups that the United States has backed, some of which are regarded by our government as “moderate,” but many of which have allied themselves with ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other militant groups that are supposedly the target of the proposed U.S.-Russian intervention. A sampling of Earnest’s comments reveals this apparent prejudice on the part of the Obama administration:

Based on our collective experience here in observing the situation inside of Syria over the last year or two, I think we’d have some reasons to be skeptical that the Russians are able or are willing to implement the arrangement consistent with the way it’s been described. But we’ll see....

So the arrangement as it’s currently structured advances all of our goals, but I think Secretary Kerry would be the first to acknowledge that this arrangement is only going to succeed if the Russians live up to their end of the bargain, and that is at best an open question right now.

When a reporter asked Earnest if he was concerned at all by President Assad’s comments that morning that his goal was to recover all of Syria, Earnest continued:

It is also true that the Russian government exercises at least some leverage over the Assad regime. And in the context of this arrangement, they have made a commitment to exercise that influence in a way that’s consistent with the arrangement, which is essentially to say we’re going to reduce the violence inside of Syria, we need the regime to stop attacking innocent civilians.

It is notable that while Earnest spoke of the Assad regime “attacking innocent civilians,” he said nothing about ISIS or its allies among the anti-Assad opposition doing the same thing. As just one example of the atrocities committed by the opposition rebels in Syria, we offer a report from Human Rights Watch (a respected human rights organization) posted in October 2013. The report (entitled: “You Can Still See Their Blood”) documented serious abuses committed by opposition forces on August 4, 2013, during their attack on more than 10 Alawite villages in the Latakia countryside.



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Human Rights Watch (HRW) visited five of the villages after the government retook control and conducted an in-depth investigation into the events of August 4, 2013 and their aftermath. During their investigations, Human Rights Watch collected the names of 190 civilians who were killed by opposition forces in their offensive on the villages, including 57 women and at least 18 children and 14 elderly men. A doctor working in the National Hospital in Latakia who was receiving the dead and wounded from the Latakia countryside told Human Rights Watch that his facility had received 205 corpses of civilians killed during the August 4-August 18 operation.

The HRW investigation found that at least 20 distinct armed opposition groups participated in the operation they termed the “Campaign of the Descendants of Aisha the Mother of Believers,” the “Barouda Offensive,” or the “Operation to Liberate the Coast,” which lasted from August 4-August 18.

The report noted near its conclusion:

Human Rights Watch has previously documented and condemned executions carried out by opposition fighters in areas under their control in Homs and Aleppo governorates. Human Rights Watch has also documented and condemned summary and extrajudicial executions by government and pro-government forces following ground operations in many parts of Syria, including in Daraya, a suburb of Damascus, Tartous, Homs and Idlib governorates.

Earnest seems unaware, or unwilling to talk about atrocities committed by the anti-Assad opposition, only those committed by the government forces. While it is very likely that innocent civilians have sometimes been killed by government attacks, whether they constitute “collateral damage,” or wanton, indiscriminate killing is difficult to assess

In his briefing, however, Earnest was eager to point the finger at the Assad government and not the rebels. He noted that there was a brief period in February and March when there was a cessation of hostilities, but said that cessation of hostilities had been short-lived. He then went on to say who was to blame for the resumption of hostilities:

But we should just be clear about why that happened. That happened because the Assad regime didn’t live up to the commitments that they made in the context of that Cessation of Hostilities. They continued to provoke and attack opposition forces and, in some cases, innocent civilians. And that wasn’t some kind of secret strategy that was employed by the Assad regime; they were pretty bold about announcing that they were going to go and bomb hospitals, targeting civilians, until they could get some of these groups to surrender.

Setting the immorality of that approach aside, it’s an indication that the Russians were either unable or unwilling to use their influence with the Assad regime to get them to live up to the Cessation of Hostilities.

In other words, if the cease-fire agreement fails, it will unquestionably be the Russians’ fault, or Assad’s fault, or anyone’s fault except the anti-Assad rebels. Which makes one wonder: If the Obama administration distrusts the Russians so much, why are we entering into a joint operation with them?

As noted, Human Rights Watch identified at least 20 distinct armed opposition groups that had engaged in atrocities, and named five groups that were “the key fundraisers, organizers, planners, and executors of the attacks” on the Latakia villages who “were clearly present from the outset of the operation on August 4. Those groups are Ahrar al-Sham, Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, and Suqor al-Izz.



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Human Rights Watch also condemned the countries that supported the attackers: “Arms sales and military assistance to the groups may make the individuals supplying them complicit in crimes they commit.”

An [article posted today by The New American](#) reported that the United States did more than sell arms to the Islamic State, or ISIS. (Though Senator Rand Paul [R-Ky.] warned about arming the rebel forces, as well. In on CBS’s *This Morning* on September 15, 2015, Paul said: “It’s a mistake to arm them. Most of the arms we’ve given to the so-called moderate rebels have wound up in the hands of ISIS, because ISIS simply takes it from them, or it’s given to them, or we mistakenly actually give it to some of the radicals.”)

The incredible news just presented by *The New American* was that Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, who is originally of Tajikistan, and who is the new “minister of war” for ISIS, took over ISIS forces after the [previous U.S. government-trained ISIS military chief](#), Tarkhan Batirashvili (a.k.a. Abu Omar al Shishani), was reportedly killed.

Unbelievably, noted the report:

In a statement, the State Department confirmed its role in training the new ISIS military chief. “From 2003-2014 Colonel Khalimov participated in five counter-terrorism training courses in the United States and in Tajikistan, through the Department of State’s Diplomatic Security/Anti-Terrorism Assistance program,” spokesperson Pooja Jhunjhunwala explained. “All appropriate Leahy vetting was undertaken in advance of this training.” The “Leahy” vetting refers to a law sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) that prohibits U.S. training for military units that violate human rights with impunity....

Khalimov reportedly received U.S. government training in “crisis response, tactical management of special events, tactical leadership training and related issues,” according to a State Department official cited by CNN. In a video posted online, Khalimov bragged about how effective the training he received from Washington, D.C., would be in butchering Americans.

We might term the actions taken by our government to support and train ISIS leaders and the anti-Assad rebels (including elements allied with ISIS) as “insanity,” except that the continuation of such policies have all the hallmarks of a concerted plan to destabilize the Middle East and turn it over to radical militants.

Just as the removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq set the stage for the rise of ISIS, our government’s efforts to neutralize Assad have allowed ISIS to gain control of much of Syria. Russia’s support of Assad may legitimately be viewed with suspicion, but it is still not our concern. Rather than joining Russia in operations in Syria or supporting the anti-Assad rebels, our best course of action would be to cease our intervention in the region entirely. Our intervention has benefited neither the people of Iraq and Syria nor ourselves.

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