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US, Russia work to hold fragile Syria cease-fire together

09/05/2016



The chief architects of the fragile truce, Washington and Moscow used a joint statement to show they're still committed to resuming peace talks to end Syria's civil war, despite unmitigated differences over a role for Syrian President Bashar Assad in a future government. Russia, Assad's close ally, said it would work with the Syrian government to minimize flights over civilian areas where opposition groups and rights activists have claimed that Syria's military has violated the cease-fire.

The display of unity came as leaders of nations supporting the Western-backed opposition coalition gathered in Paris to meet with the coalition's head, Riad Hijab, in a bid to keep the cease-fire alive and relaunch faltering peace talks. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was attending the meeting alongside representatives of Britain, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and the European Union. Kerry planned to brief the leaders on U.S.-Russia efforts and the status of the truce, formally described as a "cessation of hostilities."

In their statement, the U.S. and Russia also said they are also committed to developing a "shared understanding" of where the Islamic State and the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front hold territory. The groups are excluded from the cease-fire, meaning continuing Syrian and Russian strikes against them don't technically breach the agreement. Yet in many places those groups are fighting alongside Western-backed rebels, leading to accusations of violations that allowed the cease-fire to slowly unravel.

The U.S. and Russia have been working to put the truce back together, and in particular to extend it to areas where heavy fighting has broken out, including Aleppo, Syria's largest city. A five-day cease-fire there expired just after midnight, but the U.S. and Russia said they were working to "improve and sustain" the broader truce.

Yet in a reminder of the ongoing violence, there were reports of multiple air raids on a rebel-held area and shelling of government-controlled parts of Aleppo on Monday, two opposition monitoring groups said. Those came a day after opposition fighters shelled the government-held neighborhood of Midan, killing a child, according to state media and activists.

While in Paris, Kerry also met with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, a U.S. ally eager to help Syria's opposition by bolstering their military capability. The State Department said Kerry and al-Jubeir "stressed the importance of all sides fully respecting the cessation of hostilities" and also consulted on the U.S.-led fight against the Islamic State group.

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