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Strategic Insights: Syria Safe Zones

January 9, 2017 | Dr. Azeem Ibrahim

SUMMARY

- Diplomacy has all but failed in Syria, and it is difficult to envisage when and how diplomatic efforts could be restarted in light of the continued difficulties between Russia and the West. With these difficulties, it is imperative to change focus and tackle the one area where the United States might still be able to have a positive impact: the humanitarian situation in Syria.
- The first priority in this regard must be the establishment of safe zones within Syria, where civilian populations who fear being targeted by either side can find safe refuge until the conflict can move toward some kind of resolution.
- Achieving this first priority will require a much more serious commitment than any Western power has yet been willing to make. Failing to do so will carry even higher costs over the medium and long term: the continued migration of refugees into Europe, where the political impact of the migration crisis so far has already had serious political and social costs; as well as the possible spread of the instability contagion to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, and perhaps most seriously, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member Turkey.

WHAT IS REQUIRED

The effect the European migration crisis has had on the political landscape of Europe is familiar. We have seen the rise of extremist right-wing politics, illiberal and anti-democratic, in most European countries. Indeed, some of these worrying instances happened in countries who we normally regard as stalwarts of liberal democracy: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and most clearly, Austria.

Less advertised, but perhaps even more serious, has been the effects of the migration out of Syria (and Iraq) on neighboring countries. Lebanon, a country of 6 million people, has taken in as many as 1.5 million—25 percent of its pre-war population. Jordan, a country of 9.5-10 million people, has taken in somewhere in the region of 1.3 million. Turkey, even though it is a larger country and often merely a transit country for many of the refugees, clocks in between 2.5 and 3 million at any given time. And while it may be true that cultural similarities mean that the impact of the refugee influx is more manageable for these countries from the cultural and political point of view, at least in the short-term, two things remain unavoidable: the economic impact is straining the economic and political infrastructure of these countries; and in the medium to long term, the

demographic changes produced by the movement of refugees in these countries are more likely than not to have a destabilizing effect.

If the current situation is not bad enough, there are still millions of people in Syria who may yet be displaced by the ongoing conflict, or indeed, by the resolution of the conflict in an unsatisfactory manner. The consequences of the refugee crisis so far are serious enough, but both the humanitarian crisis and its repercussions still have plenty of scope to get much, much worse.

In these circumstances, it is imperative to find a way to manage the situation. The ideal solution would be the diplomatic resolution of the conflict, but as things stand, this is off the table for the near future. Neither the Assad regime nor their Russian allies have any interest in compromise at this moment in time. In absence of this, the only alternative is to try to manage the humanitarian crisis. Moreover, to avoid the further risks posed to the political security of our regional allies, we need to try to manage the situation within Syria itself. In other words, we need to create safe zones for the people of Syria within the borders of Syria itself.

WHAT IS NOT FEASIBLE

1) Working with Russia for humanitarian goals.

If Russia's record in the Syrian conflict shows anything, it is that Russia has no concern for the humanitarian aspect of the conflict. To the extent they engage with any concern at all, they do so only insofar as it is necessary to manage perceptions in its diplomatic tug with the West. However, on the ground, Russia's tactics speak for themselves. One moment Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will speak about humanitarian corridors; the next, the Russian Air Force will bomb United Nations (UN) aid convoys.

The fundamental reality is that coordinating with Russia on any humanitarian efforts requires trust on both sides. Moreover, that trust simply does not exist. Even if we generously assumed that Russia's rhetoric was heartfelt, we can take it as a given that they do not trust us—and would not trust us to hold to our end of whatever bargain we would strike. That is why, regardless of what we negotiate, Russia will always be preemptive, assuming that our diplomatic overtures will simply be used by us or our allies as cover so we could cynically pursue our own tactical ends on the ground; and as such, Russia will proceed to try and beat us at what they presume to be our own game.

The bottom line is that, even under the most generous assumptions of Russian intentions, we can reliably expect diplomatic efforts to fail unless backed by force, or the credible threat of force.

Thus, the deployment of force might be the only thing that changes anything on the ground. This reality has been exposed most convincingly by the incident where Turkey shot down a Russian warplane. The Russians were furious. Ultimately, the retaliation amounted to a temporary embargo on agricultural imports from Turkey. In the West, we have been terrified by the potential of direct military engagement with Russia in Syria. What the Turkish warplane episode shows is that Russian President Vladimir Putin is at least as terrified of that prospect as we are. Turkey called Putin's bluff, and reaped the rewards. It was only a few months later that the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Putin made friends again, while Russia has not dared to fly near the Turkish border again. Russia keeps throwing its weight around in Syria on the assumption that the West will stay out of their way. If we were to plant our flags around a safe zone and back it up with a credible commitment, Russia would not dare challenge that.

2) Satisfying both Turkey and the Kurds.

Turkey's convoluted history of engagement in the Syrian conflict reliably indicates their strategic concerns: they care more about the growing power of the Kurds on either side of the border than they care about either Assad or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

This is significant for the "safe zones" question because the Turks and the Kurds are the two main forces active in northern Syria that could enforce a safe zone for civilians from Aleppo and other Sunni areas under attack by Assad and Russian forces. Turkey's recent calculations have changed since ISIS has started waging war against the Turkish state and targeting its civilian population with regular terror attacks. Now, Erdoğan is keen to move into northern Syria and establish these safe zones as a preliminary move to a direct offensive on the ISIS heartlands, for him the Kurdish question still takes precedence. In particular, Erdoğan is as keen on moving into northern Syria so he can push the Syrian Kurds east of the Euphrates, as he is about tackling ISIS.

In this situation, we will have to choose our allies in implementing any safe zones: will it be the Turks, or will it be the Kurds? So far, the Kurds have been our most reliable ally in the fight against ISIS, while Turkey has been ambivalent throughout the duration of the civil war. In addition, since the attempted coup against Erdoğan, Turkey has also moved closer to Russia. Unfortunately, however, Turkey is in a far better position to implement these safe zones, and would require a far lesser degree of involvement by the United States. As things stand, they would be the preferred choice.

As NATO members who have already successfully stared down Putin in this conflict, we know that Turkey could defend safe zones from Russian transgression. Turkey would be less likely to deter Syrian Government forces or ISIS, but they are militarily superior to both; and with U.S. air support, Turkey should be able to resist anyone else who might want to attack the safe zones. The risks, however, are that Turkey would implement these safe zones for their own strategic and tactical purposes, and the United States would have much less leverage over Erdoğan than we would have over the Kurds, especially since the aforementioned coup attempt.

For this reason, we should keep the Kurdish option alive. At the very least, it stands as a threat to Erdoğan to keep him in line, and makes sure the zones he would set up meet the required humanitarian standards—for even though Turkey has carried more than its fair share of the refugee burden, there are also plenty of reports of humanitarian abuses, particularly by Turkish border guards along the Syrian border.

Should our collaboration with Turkey on the safe zones issue fall through, working with the Kurds would still be feasible. We would need to station our own Western troops on the ground to deter Russian direct aggression, as well as provide full air coverage to enforce a no-fly zone; but we can be fully confident that the Kurds would pull their weight. Moreover, we would have much less of a trust problem with them; they have already done most of our heavy lifting in this conflict so far. The disadvantages are that this may require a level of commitment on our part beyond the comfort level of most Western leaders (with the potential exception of former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) and it may drive Turkey further away from the United States and into the Russian sphere of interest. Both of these outcomes are undesirable, but if given no other choice by the Turks, this option should be kept on the table.

WHAT MIGHT BE ACHIEVABLE

We clearly need at least one northern safe zone for the civilians of Aleppo and neighboring regions. We may also need southern safe zones for Shia or other minority civilians who would like to get out of the line of fire. The latter should not be a huge problem to set up, given that the Assad government, Lebanese forces, and Iranian proxies like Hezbollah would be perfectly willing and

able to protect these areas. The idea would be to get Sunni fighters to respect the security of these zones in exchange for the security of Sunni safe zones.

The northern safe zone would be more challenging. However, provided we are able to put NATO troops on the ground, Turkish or Western, and draw a line in the sand across northern Syria, the United States can be confident of direct deterrence against Russian and Iranian attacks. In addition, neither Assad forces nor ISIS forces would pose a credible military threat to these troops.

Yet the more difficult aspect of enforcing any safe zone will be the logistics of keeping the civilian population in these areas safe and in reasonable living conditions. It would be understood that no one except the designated enforcing troops would have access to weapons. However, in the Turkish scenario, that also raises concerns over how they might treat Kurdish civilians or Sunnis they deem to be affiliated with the extremist Sunni militants. This means that even in this scenario, we will need Western and/or UN observers and civil administrators on the ground. Nevertheless, provided we can work out a good plan with a solid distribution of powers and responsibilities between the Turks, UN, and Western parties, a “Northern Safe Zone” north of Aleppo, from the Turkmen northwestern coast at the Mediterranean to the Euphrates in the east, could be established.

HOW TO PURSUE THE TURKISH PLAN

To pursue the Turkish plan, we need to clear a few more obstacles. The first one is the financial aspect of the operation. Clearly, Turkey is already carrying a significant burden in this conflict and in managing the refugee crisis, and they would reasonably expect financial support if they are to be able to enforce the Northern Safe Zone. This is something that Western powers might be able to help with, but that would be a rather poor distribution of capabilities. Western support would be much more useful in terms of military support: enforcing a no-fly zone over the safe zone, and providing backup troops for ground operations when the need arises.

To pay for the civil infrastructure needed within the safe zones, the better candidates would be the Gulf States. They are already implicated in the conflict on the Sunni side, so they are already pouring money into the region. Yet, at the moment, most of their resources go toward arming and financing Sunni militant forces. At least some of that money can be diverted toward safe zones. In addition, we can persuade them to do so in exchange for allowing them to continue their policy of refusing to accept any refugees from the conflict. They have had extremely strict policies in these regards, and have certainly not bore their share of responsibility, especially given their extensive involvement in the civil war. We can demand that they pay at least this price for their policies. Moreover, it would not be difficult to make the case that this is in their interest as well, given that this would bolster their status within the Sunni Muslim world.

Lastly, there will be the matter of the Kurds. If we expect to be able to keep relying on their help, there must be some kind of compensation for giving Turkey sway over northern Syrian territories, many of which are Kurdish areas. We are fortunate in that the Kurds do not have any other apparent possible allies, and so their demands would be limited. But nevertheless, alienating the Kurds just as we would finally be able to march on Raqqa would be disastrous and could risk thwarting the entire long-term strategic aims of our involvement in the area if they decide to back out of the conflict, or indeed, start sabotaging our efforts. That is why it might be necessary to commit to supporting *de jure* autonomy (if not full independence) for Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds know that this would be within our means, given the Iraqi Government’s dependence on us, and they would be certain to demand it in exchange for handing the Syrian north over to Turkey. This is not a commitment we should shy away from. However, it might be something that we would

need to be discreet about while we are working with Turkey in Syria. Turkey would be likely to abandon the entire plan if they think we are aiding the establishment of an independent Kurdistan on their Iraqi border.

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