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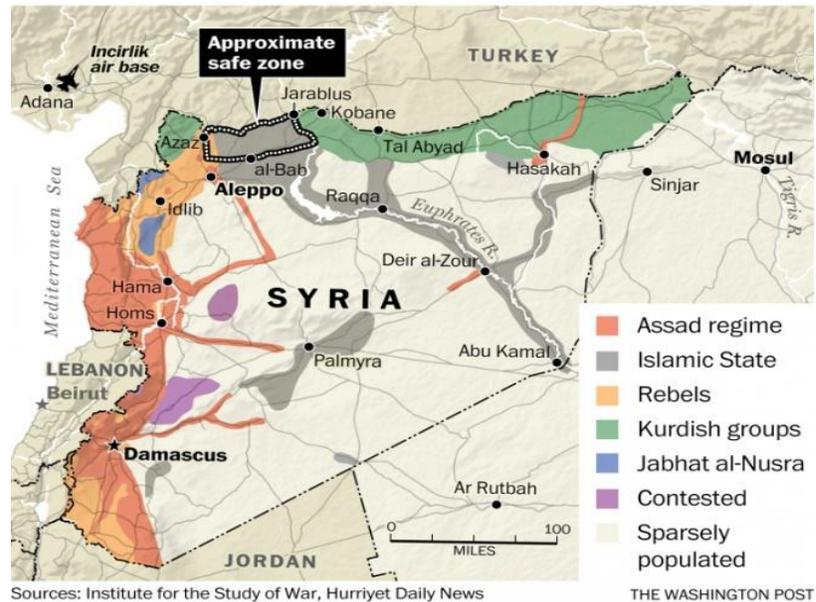
Issue Brief

Safe Zone in Syria

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Donald Trump, the newly elected President of United States said on Thursday, February 02, 2017 that he would establish safe zones in Syria for refugees fleeing violence in the war-torn country.¹ He has been contacting various heads of states in the Middle East to garner support for the creation of safe zones in Syria.²⁻³



The idea of safe zones was first

proposed and implemented in 1990 in Iraq and Bosnia.⁴ In case of Syria, the safe zones were proposed in 2013 by Turkey and Syrian opposition that included some parts of Northern Syria, although the proposal was met with serious opposition by the United States and other Western governments.

During one of his campaign speeches in November 2015, Donald Trump proposed buying large pieces of land in Syria and building safe zones on those purchased lands in a bid to keep the refugees safe and secure in their own homeland. Trump is looking at this matter from Homeland Security perspective now. It is his attempt to keep the refugees away from entering into the US and European countries. Now he is following up on a promise that he made during his campaign.⁵ But Donald Trump's approach is over simplistic and does not take into account the many factors and concerns of other stake holders in the matter, namely Turkey and Russia.

The safe zone in Syria has not been created because of disagreements between US, Russian and Turkish governments. The main dissidence is that who will be the initial actor to be eliminated in Syria. Turkey wants Assad's regime to be in check (or for that matter removed) and keep

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-trump-jordan-idUSKBN15H2YP>

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-trump-jordan-idUSKBN15H2YP>

³ <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201702021050289320-trump-government-syria-safe-zones/>

⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/refugeemag/3b5547d64/refugees-magazine-issue-103-idps-danger-safe-areas.html>

⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/01/trump-real-estate-approach-safe-zones-syria-170130135423734.html>

the Kurdish forces at bay that demand a separate homeland carved out of territories from Turkey, Syria and Iraq. While on the other hand, the US says the war against ISIS is the main objective of US policies in Syria. Russia, however benignly supports the idea of safe zones only if it is created in consultation with the Syrian government and in close cooperation of the UN.

Given the military dynamics in Syria, a safe zone is not achievable without a no-fly zone and it requires significant resources as well as regional buy-in. According to Turkey, the safe zone must include no fly zone while US rejects any possibility to establish a no fly zone. Turkey supports the involvement of Syrian opposition forces in the region after ISIS is eliminated. However, US is reluctant against Syrian opposition for they include a lot of radical Islamist elements.

The regional conditions in Syria are changing at a fast pace. The creation of safe zones can be a game changer for the region. A lot has happened in Syria since the last time that plan was seriously considered. Russia became a force to reckon with since its intervention in September 2015, the Turkish incursion in northern Syria began in August 2016 and Aleppo fell last December into the hands of the Syrian regime.

Turkey is currently shaping a de facto safe zone between Afrin and Jarablus along its border with Syria, part of a demographic battle with the People's Protection Units (YPG) that represents Syrian Kurdish forces.

Turkish troops are struggling to defeat ISIL in al-Bab while the US forces are mediating between Turkey and the YPG to decide who will ultimately take control of Manbij. The mechanism of implementing the safe zone will distract both Turkey and the YPG from their separate fight against ISIL.

It is also useful to remember that the safe-zone proposal between Afrin and Kobane failed in 2015 because the US wanted to exclude ISIL only, while Turkey wanted a zone that also excluded YPG and the Syrian regime.

Simply put, in return for endorsing a safe zone, Turkey wants Washington to cease its support for the YPG, a programme that is widely endorsed across the US bureaucracy. A rash decision to establish a safe

zone in the current political environment will hasten the looming confrontation between Turkey and YPG.⁶

Russia and Iran share similar scepticism towards the safe zone idea. Moscow will seek to maintain leeway in deciding what happens in Syria, while Tehran will try to strengthen its control on the remaining parts of the country.

Russia voiced its concerns about the creation of safe zones in Syria when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday, February 01, 2017 that US President Donald Trump should be more specific about his proposal to set up safe zones in Syria and said attempts to implement a similar policy in Libya had been tragic. He hoped Russia could discuss the issue with the US State Department once it had drawn up more detailed plans for the safe zones.⁷

Russia also made its stance clear on the matter of safe zones by saying that any creation of security zones in Syria would require a practical agreement with the Syrian authorities. Member of the Syrian parliament Mohammed Kheir Jasim has reiterated and endorsed the Russian stance.⁸

Many experts are betting that Trump's approach could lead to disagreement between Moscow and Tehran over Syria, which might be true about tactics but not on the overall strategy.

A safe zone must be part of a Syria policy, as well as the larger picture of how the Trump administration sees its role in the Middle East. It is an end point, not the starting point for that policy debate. The US military has been and remains reluctant to take part in such a plan that carries risks of confrontation by transforming its role from defeating the ISIS to policing a safe zone.

The Pentagon estimated that it will take between 15,000 and 30,000 US troops to secure a safe zone in Syria with a cost of at least \$1bn a month.⁹

Russian apprehensions about the US intentions of making a safe zone are well-supported by experiences in the past when US interest in enforcing such a zones ran out of steam over time and regional players filled in the vacuum and further fed the conflict (Bosnia, Libya and Iraq).

⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/01/trump-real-estate-approach-safe-zones-syria-170130135423734.html>

⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-safezones-idUSKBN15G41U>

⁸ <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201702021050289320-trump-government-syria-safe-zones/>

⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/01/trump-real-estate-approach-safe-zones-syria-170130135423734.html>

The Russian stance regarding the safe zones in Syria that it would support the US safe zones initiative for refugees in Syria as long as the UN cooperated closely and the Syrian regime approved, is logical and practical. This stance is also shared by the UN's Secretary General and UAE's Foreign Minister as well.¹⁰⁻¹¹

US must tread its way very carefully while formulating its Middle East policy as there has been a dynamic shift in global politics. Russia, Turkey and other regional players in the Middle East have already revealed their concern and apprehensions about US involvement in the region when the US was excluded from the Astana Conference which was organised for the sole reason of deciding the future of Syria. President Trump needs to take the concerns of all the parties involved into consideration before taking any decisions regarding the Middle East in general and Syria in particular as any rash decision made unilaterally by the US might lead to yet another wave of violence and bloodshed in the already war-torn Syria.

Any decision of creating a safe zone in Syria (by the US) should be for the purpose of security and rehabilitation of the Syrian refugees and the peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict. All the stakeholders should be consulted and taken into confidence before taking any peace building measures, especially the Syrian authorities.

¹⁰ <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/20170201/sheikh-abdullah-bin-zayed-in-favour-of-safe-zones-for-syrian-refugees>

¹¹ <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201702011050252841-guterres-trump-safe-zones/>