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Issue Brief

Joint Plan for the Establishment of New Safe Zones in Syria

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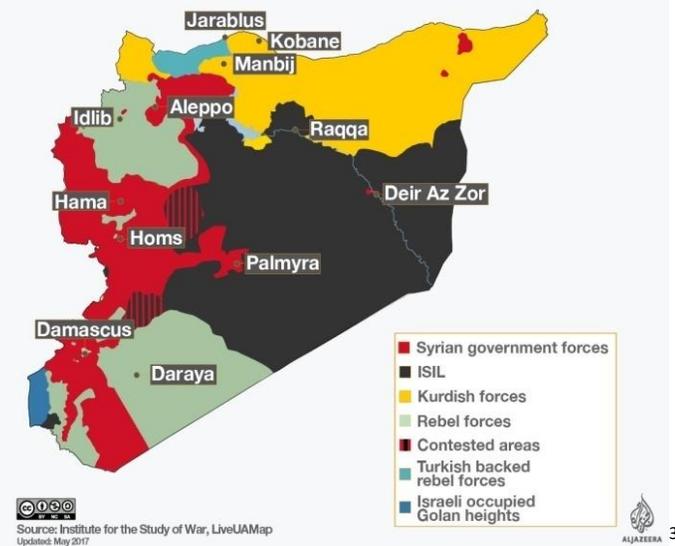
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An agreement to set up "de-escalation zones" in Syria came into effect at midnight on May 5, 2017, but it will be at least another month before all the details are worked out and the safe areas are fully established, according to Russian officials.¹ According to the plan for the safe zones released by the Russian Defence Ministry, 4 "de-escalation" zones would be set up across the north, central, and southern parts of Syria.

FOUR 'DE-ESCALATION ZONES' IN SYRIA:

- The first one includes Idlib, as well as northeastern areas of Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and northern areas of Hama province. There are more than one million people in the zone.
- The second one is in the north of Homs province. It includes al-Rastan and Talbiseh, as well as nearby areas controlled by the opposition groups. There are about 180,000 civilians in the zone.
- The third one is eastern Ghouta, home to about 690,000 civilians. This zone does not include the area of Qaboun.
- The fourth zone is located in the south of Syria and includes areas of Deraa and Quneitra provinces. Up to 800,000 civilians live there.

Syria: Who controls what?



The plan was proposed and agreed upon by Russia, Iran and Turkey on May 04, 2017 while highly opposed by the Syrian opposition (rebel groups) who were apprehensive and rejected Iran's role in the peace making process. In theory, the creation of these de-escalation zones will provide relief to hundreds and thousands of Syrian civilians and also encourage the refugees to return home who fled due to the ongoing civil war in the country. However, the rebel opposition groups and the United States of America have their reservations about these safe zones.

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-syrian-safe-zones-plan-takes-effect-midnight-170505185444598.html>

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-turkey-push-safe-zones-syria-170504053138097.html>

The opposition rebel groups and the US have serious concerns regarding these safe zones being 'no-flight zones' for all the parties involved except for Syrian government and Russian forces who will still carry out operations in these safe zones to counter all sorts of threats by UN declared terrorist outfits. The US is of the view that it mainly targets ISIS hideouts and militants that are located in the eastern side of the country while the proposed safe zones are mainly located in the western side of the country. US has also made its position clear that this plan will not change its strategy of targeting ISIS in any way.⁴

The surprising fact about the creation of the safe zones is that the Syrian government has not signed the plans for creation of safe zones although it has announced its support for the plan.⁵ The opposition rebel forces however have out rightly rejected the creation of safe zones and declared them as "vague and illegitimate".⁶ Both the US and the rebel opposition forces have expressed their concerns explicitly regarding Iran being one of the sponsors of the safe zones in Syria stating that the country has only contributed to the violence, not stopped it".⁷

In response to reservations voiced by the US and opposition rebel groups, President Putin said Russian and Syrian government jets would halt flights over the specified zones if all sides respect the ceasefire. The Russian President also assured that the main purpose of creating the safe zones is "provide the conditions for the safe, voluntary return of refugees" in addition to the speedy provision of relief supplies and medical aid.⁸ Russian Ministry of Defence have also set out some of the details that would be established next for example, including making specific maps of the zones, establishing coordinates, and setting up buffer strips and checkpoints which would allow civilians freedom of movement and the access of humanitarian aid.

The prospects for the successful creation and effective existence of the de-escalation zones in Syria seem to be bright after the US State Department announced its support for "any effort" that can genuinely move towards the creation of peace in Syria.⁹ However, more efforts are required to bring all

⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-syrian-safe-zones-plan-takes-effect-midnight-170505185444598.html>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39823236>

⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-syrian-safe-zones-plan-takes-effect-midnight-170505185444598.html>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39823236>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-syrian-safe-zones-plan-takes-effect-midnight-170505185444598.html>

parties on board and taken into confidence if this plan for the creation of safe zones is to materialize in real sense.

All the sponsors of the de-escalation zones, especially Russia needs to ensure that there are is no military activity after the creation of these zones which would have serious repercussions for the peace process. The commitment of all the involved parties needs to be guaranteed in order to reduce violence and build confidence amongst the stake holders. The sponsors need to enforce the agreement on the safe zones with more confidence building measures and further agreements. According to the director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, "in order to make these areas in any way safe on the ground, you're going to need a significant military deployment and you're probably going to need third parties who will have the trust of all sides."¹⁰

The US and the opposition rebel groups need to take a pragmatic approach towards the establishment of safe zones in Syria and stop viewing the situation as a zero-sum game. Any step towards the establishment of peace in the war-torn country should be supplemented with tangible positive steps. Shared goal of all stake holders should ultimately be the establishment of peace in Syria to avoid further loss of innocent human lives.

¹⁰ Ibid.