

COMMENTARY

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No Turkish Safe Zone in Syria

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Press reports that the U.S. and Turkey are at last agreed on creating a “de facto” safe zone in Syria, in which internally displaced Syrians can receive humanitarian assistance and protection from attack by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, have generated justified excitement. But a closer look at the details of what is supposedly being proposed indicate something considerably less than a functioning safe zone in which a large civilian population of displaced persons and, as some unofficial sources suggest, refugees returning from Turkey can be concentrated.

The supposed agreement hinges on two assumptions: that Islamic State (IS) forces will be cleared of an area of some 7,000 square kilometres without direct ground intervention by Turkish or other non-Syrian forces, and that the resulting safe zone can then be adequately protected by a combination of Syrian rebels working under U.S. and Turkish air cover. Both assumptions are dubious, if not fallacious, and the suggestion that a safe zone will emerge “naturally” is misleading. No less problematic is the obvious implication that the safe zone will not encompass the main existing concentrations of internally displaced persons and large population centres of Aleppo and Idlib provinces that are most at risk from regime attack.

What the U.S.-Turkish understanding reveals is that Turkey has abandoned its longstanding demand for the establishment of a safe zone in Syria. This comes even as the Turkish government steps up military strikes and security sweeps against the IS and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and undertakes other defensive measures along its border with Syria. Turkey’s pivot brings it closer in line with the U.S., which has consistently pushed back against Turkish pressure to commit to establishing a safe zone and which, according to the latest

revelations, will not designate areas cleared of IS forces as a protected zone, obviating any formal obligation to enforce its status as a haven for civilians.

For over a year, Turkey resisted U.S.-led calls to join the military campaign against the IS by insisting that the anti-IS coalition also undertake parallel action against the Assad regime. The Turkish demand for a border safe zone inside Syria became a centre-piece of negotiations with the U.S. over joining the anti-IS campaign and also over hosting an expanded U.S. training program for Syrian rebels in Turkey. However, despite its strident public rhetoric, it is by no means certain that Turkey ever viewed a safe zone as a realistic proposition. Its invocation of the NATO Treaty to secure the deployment of Patriot air defence batteries along its border with Syria in January 2013 effectively constrained the Turkish armed forces from operating across the border, since doing so under a NATO shield intended for purely defensive purposes would implicate the Alliance and trigger a vigorous Russian response.

Recent Turkish moves strongly suggest a similar logic, since their main effect is to consolidate defences and improve border security facing Syria, rather than prepare for offensive action or for the projection of a protective umbrella that would be necessary to secure a safe zone inside Syria. Most notably, the Turkish government is close to approving a new “Syrian Border Physical Security System” comprising a concrete wall, watchtowers, and dedicated ground and aerial border surveillance units along the 911 kilometres of common border. Turkey’s request on 26 July 2015, for a meeting of its NATO partners on the basis of Article 4 of the treaty, which requires collective defence of member-states whose territorial integrity or security is threatened, once again constrains unilateral action outside of what NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called the “NATO borders of Turkey.”

That a safe zone is no longer on the official Turkish agenda, contrary to what amounts to official propaganda, was signalled clearly on 25 July, when Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu suggested that areas of northern Syria cleared of IS fighters would become “natural” safe zones, in which displaced Syrians “can be placed.” There was no suggestion of a direct Turkish role in creating these zones, or of extending cross-border military protection in order to maintain them once they have been established by whatever means. Indeed, Turkish authorities pointedly underlined that aircraft attacking an ISIS border position on 24 July in retaliation for the death of a Turkish soldier had not entered Syrian airspace to do so.

Turkey is almost certain to conduct further cross-border military operations against IS and PKK targets, as it did in northern Iraq on 27 July. This comes against a backdrop of warnings from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan since 26 June, when he declared that “we will never allow the establishment of a new [Kurdish] state on our southern frontier in the north of Syria.” Local media reports of the massing of Turkish troops to create an anti-IS “security zone” in

Syria, and senior officials talk of moving from “passive” to “active” defence against perceived threats, especially from the PKK and its allied Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

But intensification of Turkish military action against the IS and PKK (and possibly the PYD) does not translate into establishing a safe zone in Syria, despite the unambiguous imputation that it will do just that. Quite the contrary, the prospect of being drawn into active conflict with both the IS and the Kurds, each of which pose a domestic security challenge to Turkey as well as a cross-border one, complicates Turkish options for pursuing a meaningful safe zone as well. This moreover takes place in a context of deep political uncertainty in Turkey: difficulty in forming a coalition government may lead to early elections, and impedes undertaking major military commitments in neighbouring countries that are likely to be both complex and long term.

And even if Turkish ground forces do eventually take direct part in creating an anti-IS “security zone” in Syria, this will not provide adequate protection to the majority of Syrians living in other areas targeted daily by the regime. Nor does it address the many practical challenges that must be resolved in order to establish a haven capable of attracting internally displaced persons from other parts of Syria – presumably including government-held areas – let alone of refugees now residing in Turkey.

The pivot to a “de facto” safe zone obscures the very real questions that would have to be resolved in order to establish a safe zone in Syria’s more heavily populated northwest (or along its southern border with Jordan). Would safe zones under foreign protection be allowed to become sanctuaries for Syrian rebel groups? If not, then who would police them? Would rebel groups that accepted international guidelines for maintaining the neutrality of safe zones help enforce them in the face of recalcitrant groups? How, in particular, to manage safe zones in ways that comply with U.S. insistence that Jabhat al-Nusra not be allowed to benefit from external support given to other groups? And how likely are the Syrian opposition and local administrative structures to assume the main burden of coordinating international assistance on the ground and developing effective systems of governance, policing, and dispute resolution in place of the various rebel groups that currently undertake most of these tasks?

Although the idea of a safe zone acquired a high profile thanks to official Turkish endorsement over the past year, there has been little or no public discussion of these or other practical questions. The U.S. and, despite its rhetoric to the contrary, Turkey have surely been aware of them all along, explaining why prospects for a genuine safe zone have always been tragically low. The de facto “natural” safe zone they now appear to be opting for is a cheap version, a “safe zone-light.”

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