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COMMENTARY

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Safely Ambivalent

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U.S. President Donald Trump appeared to fulfil one of his many campaign promises last week. A draft of his executive order on immigration appeared on January 25 and raised the possibility of U.S. action to set up safe zones for displaced Syrians. Trump confirmed this in a television interview the same day, saying "I'll absolutely do safe zones in Syria for the people."

Reactions varied. Members of the Syrian opposition cautiously welcomed anything that would reduce the bloodshed in their country, while in Moscow a Kremlin spokesperson warned the proposal might "further aggravate the situation with refugees."

The flurry of excitement was cut short, however, as the final version of the executive order published on January 27 dropped all mention of safe zones. And yet Trump returned to the theme two days later during phone calls to Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed, in which he requested their support for safe zones in Syria (and Yemen) according to an official White House statement.

What are Trump's real intentions? More importantly, who will police a safe zone if one is established?

Safe Zone Semantics

The initial draft of the executive order gave some clues. Most significant was the proposal "to provide safe areas in Syria and in the surrounding region." This suggested a rebranding exercise, in which refugee concentrations in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon or their absorption in Gulf states would be labelled "safe zones." Expediently for Trump, this would remove the

burden of financial outlay from U.S. shoulders, while precluding any need for military action to protect refugees inside Syria.

Furthermore, even if the original draft of the executive order had been preserved, it only directed the secretaries of state and defence to "produce a plan." But contingency planning does not commit the U.S. administration to any course of action, nor does it make action probable. The Pentagon commenced planning for intervention in Syria, whether to protect refugees, prevent a security vacuum, or eliminate Syrian chemical weapons as early as February 2012. But it also voiced growing concern about the risks, which were shared by the Obama administration, and no action was ever taken.

Advocates of U.S. action have generally focused on the feasibility of using long-range or stand-off weapon systems such as precision-guided cruise missiles or high-altitude aircraft to enforce a safe- or no-fly zone in Syria. Conversely, opponents have stressed the threat to U.S. pilots and aircraft posed by Syrian air defences and, worse, the risk of global conflagration resulting from direct encounters with Russian aircraft.

But while the debate has focused on protecting safe zones from attack by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, it has been largely silent on the more complex challenge of how to deal with armed opposition groups present in areas that are designated as safe zones. Some might agree to cease combat and other military operations such as training, resupply of arms and equipment, and building new fortifications. But other armed groups would not be so compliant. The U.S. or other intervening powers would then have not only to protect safe zones from regime attack, but also to police them from within. Safe zones would also need protecting from the Islamic State, which might regard them as offering both a soft target and an opportunity to inflict casualties on U.S. and other foreign personnel.

A Looming Test Case in Idlib

A U.S.-protected safe zone inside Syria will not materialize, for all these reasons. More interesting is to observe developments in Idlib province, which is the main stronghold of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Al-Qaeda affiliate). Idlib also contains the largest concentration of hardened fighters and weapons and ammunition stores belonging to the rest of the armed opposition groups, which are backed by Turkey. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was excluded from the ceasefire brokered by Turkey and Russia last month, and so its continued presence permits Russia and the Assad regime—as well the U.S.-led coalition—to mount air attacks throughout the province, endangering one of the opposition's last territorial footholds in the country.

Hence the urgent need for "policing." Turkey appears convinced that eliminating Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is necessary in order to preserve the ceasefire and the political process it launched jointly with Russia at the Astana talks on January 23. Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesman Huseyin Muftuoglu lent weight to this interpretation by warning on January 26 that his country "won't allow those called 'spoilers' … to overshadow the efforts that are being undertaken."

The Syrian opposition has been preparing its supporters for a showdown, accusing Jabhat Fatah al-Sham of waging a "war of elimination" against its competitors. Reading the trend, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham pre-emptively attacked several Turkish-backed groups on January 23, and formed a new framework called Al-Sham Liberation Body with four other armed groups* on January 28. On the other side, several small groups have merged into the powerful Islamist Ahrar al-Sham movement, which is shifting closer to Turkey following the defection of several of its hardline leaders and independent jihadist clerics to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham over the past few days.

All-out confrontation may yet be averted. But if not, and should the Turkish-backed opposition come out the winner, it will argue that the current ceasefire is being fully policed in Idlib province. This would not make for a classic safe zone, but it would enable Turkey to argue in favour of an end to all air strikes and for an unfettered flow of humanitarian assistance into the area.

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