

# The Syrian Revolution: "Safe Zones" and Considerations for the Future

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### Brief Analysis

Six years after unrest in Dar‘a sparked what has metastasized into a civil war and multilateral regional conflict, the Syrian opposition may have to contend with the painful, yet undeniable truth that Russia has prevailed in Syria. It is not the ipso facto end of the Syrian revolution, but it is a moment of reconsideration and reorientation, lest the sacrifice of the millions killed, injured, and displaced is wasted. While it is up to the Syrians themselves to shape a new strategy or to conceive of a new paradigm in seeking to rebuild their homeland, sober realism points in directions that have so far largely been discounted. As Washington seeks to shape its “safe zones” approach, it may be time for forward thinking in Syrian opposition circles.

It is a Russian victory — for as long as it lasts. Even while mobilizing all of its resources, the Assad regime could not achieve battlefield supremacy. The injection of Iran-supported militias and Iranian funds, rather, extended the regime’s lifespan, but failed to push it beyond the tipping point. Only with a vigorous and ruthless Russian effort did the balance of power shift in the regime’s favor. The implication of this is that unless Russia cements its tactical victory by altering the underlying dynamic that it has disrupted — that of a recurrent insurgency beyond the native capacity of the regime to contain — no meaningful “pacification” of Syria could ensue.

Russia maintains a fundamental misunderstanding of the Syrian revolution as an outside aggression. Its approach has therefore been twofold: (1) to disrupt the local proxies of the external actors, by segregating and co-opting various factions, while seeking to eliminate others; and (2) to dismantle the loose alliance of outside powers with enmity to the regime through bilateral arrangements that subvert their common purpose. The fact, however, is that while the contribution of outside actors may have amplified (but also diverted) the Syrian revolution, the uprising at its core was a domestic conception.. Convinced of the opposite, Russia will not adequately seek to address and diffuse the root causes of the insurgency — namely, oppression and perceived minority rule.

The regional supporters of the Syrian opposition are in disarray. At various times over the past six years, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan each committed resources to support both the political opposition and the armed insurgency. In retrospect, much of this support was ad hoc, short-sighted, and at cross purposes. To variable degrees, each of these external actors has engaged in a rhetorical retreat from the original commitment to regime change. Post – coup attempt Turkey has engaged in the most dramatic shift, aligning its

tactics with Russia, while reconsidering its strategy to focus on concerns of immediate impact, namely hampering Kurdish autonomy and containing the “Islamic State”. Equally notable since the fall of Aleppo in 2016 is the collective revision of the discourse of Arab actors — editing out calls for Assad’s departure and deferring to particular wings of the opposition on putative concessions. The near total exclusion of the Syrian regime from the Arab political order, as enacted in 2011, has effectively collapsed. Lebanon and Iraq have been reliable Iranian satrapies, delivering a consistent dissenting voice to that push in its heyday and Algeria has long opted for a neutrality that favored Damascus. With Egypt adopting a similar posture, and with GCC states acquiescing to the Russian upgraded role in Syria, the regime’s isolation has effectively ended.

The regime approach for defusing the revolution was “productive” — but its success will backfire. The regime cannot claim credit for its own “victory”. It can, however, boast of having successfully derailed the main thrust of the revolution from civil demands to military action, and from a national outlook to a sectarian and radical one. Many factors contributed to this development, many intrinsic to Syrian society; the regime, however, was the primary agent in ushering the revolution towards an objectionable form, from both local and international perspectives. The damage inflicted on Syrian infrastructure and Syrians themselves by these actions will be long-lasting. The main outcome, however, is while the transformation has branded the revolution as deplorable in the eyes of many, it has rendered Syria permanently ungovernable by the regime — which, notably through its reliance on overtly sectarian militias, has increasingly been identified with a minority. The regime may have avoided an imminent fall, but has effectively locked itself out of being able to rule an acutely hostile population.

The polarization and radicalization of the Arab Sunni population in Syria have reached alarming levels. Syrian Sunnis have been targeted by the regime and subjected to mass brutalization, victimization, and displacement. Yet, the only explicit consideration of their plight as a collective has been in radical Islamist narratives that threaten carnage in revenge and promise totalitarian regimentation as a sought-after outcome. The monopoly of Islamism on Sunni expression has engendered an attitude of political nihilism that favors further radicalization. With substantive consideration accorded to Syrian Kurdish, Alawi, and Druze concerns, Syrian Sunnis (and at a lesser scale, Syrian Christians) have yet to see a political proposition that acknowledges their suffering while offering a positive forward path. The severe disconnect between opposition personalities and groups in exile adhering to a non-sectarian discourse and the sectarian-minded multitude of militant organizations fighting against the regime from within a dystopian framework is detrimental to both Syria as a commonwealth and to the Syrian revolution as a putative force of transformation. Many, maybe most, Sunni Syrians understand the detrimental role assumed by Islamism in all of its current variations in subverting, derailing, and ultimately driving the Syrian revolution to defeat. Most, however, also recognize that, as Sunnis, they only had Islamists to carry their cause. It was and still is a vicious circle. To rescue both Syria and its revolution, a formula of recognizing Sunni grievances and aspirations, within and beyond the context of a national program, ought to be pursued. In particular, disengaging Sunni grievances from the Islamist stranglehold, whether radical or non-radical, may be the first order of business.

There is no credible path for an armed revolution to topple the Damascus regime; also, however, there is no credible path for the Damascus regime to regain and maintain control of the totality of Syria. This reality may translate into a continuing civil war that further submits Syrian society to irreversible attrition. This reality could also be a reason to conceive and implement a multinational or international mandate for the management of a pacified, zoned, Syria. The primary risk associated with temporary arrangements is that they have the tendency of gaining permanence. Conceding to the reality that the regime cannot be readily defeated may be equated to accepting the partition of Syria. In fact, the painful truth is that six years of conflict have created a de facto partition. Against the backdrop of a Syrian population neglected by the world community, and ill-served by the fluctuating positions of its external backers, a settlement built upon President Trump’s call for “safe zones” may level the field and provide the opportunity to build valid alternatives to today’s grim options.

Russia can manage Syria for a while, but only the United States can oversee a sustainable resolution of the Syrian crisis. By refraining from action when a comparatively modest involvement may have helped avoid the calamity, the former US administration has asserted its detachment from the role of a global police force — a position that the current US administration vocally maintains. But by witnessing the Syrian situation free-fall into a regional conflict and a global refugee crisis, Washington has proven itself to be an indispensable actor in the Syrian conflict. The shape and content of the “safe zones” considered by President Trump have not been delineated. In light of the new realities on the ground, and the stage at which the Astana and Geneva talks have been framed by Moscow, these “safe zones” can be reworked to provide an arrangement along the lines of the Dayton agreement that stabilized the Bosnian conflict.

The US-proposed “safe zones” may be the cornerstone of a future Syria. In 1995, the “General Framework Agreement” signed by the Bosnia-Herzegovina warring parties managed to end the bloodshed by accepting the presence, if not the permanence, of on-the-ground realities. Establishing safe zones in Syria could help lay the groundwork for an agreement modeled after the Dayton Accords, which was not aimed at resolving the Bosnia dilemma but at avoiding further attrition. Prior to intervention, Bosnia suffered from a complex geography of warfare and a severely wounded national identity; so does Syria today. Russia’s resistance to “safe zones” in Syria date back to a period when such zones were conceived as launching pads for anti-regime action. Rethought as administrative areas outside of the authority of the regime, the new “safe zones” may amount to a formalization of the approach that Russia, with Turkey, has been pursuing through Astana. A Dayton-like agreement on Syria, far from meeting the desired outcome sought by the revolution, will deny the regime the unfair advantage it currently has, and will end the military phase of the conflict — allowing the resumption of the drive towards change, without the diversion and subversion suffered through dystopian radicalism. The path of a political and social opposition forging convincing local models that press for change nationally may be the only viable option to safeguard the legacy of Syria’s battered revolution. Re-engaging the United States in Syria will provide a much needed opportunity for the opposition to correct the imbalance externally, as a pre-requisite of gaining leverage for change internally. In Washington, it is increasingly clear that it is in US self-interest to recognize that the Russian fix for the Syrian tragedy is not tenable, to usher the majority Syrian Sunni population away from radicalism, and to ultimately act in Syria. ❖

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