

A Safe Zone in Southern Syria: Jordan's Role

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

Feb 27, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/dwr-alardn-fy-aqamt-mntqt-amnt-jnwb-swrya\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

At a time when Russia is firmly in the Syrian driver's seat and Assad shows no sign of going away, brokering a deal to establish a humanitarian buffer area would be one way to address Washington and Amman's pressing concerns about ongoing refugee flows.

In recent weeks, fighting has intensified in southern Syria as Russian warplanes and Bashar al-Assad's forces seek to retake the city of Deraa. Located on the main highway to Damascus, Deraa is only a few miles north of the Jordanian border, a contested pocket amid the rebel-controlled portion of the frontier. The hostilities there underscore the ongoing calls for establishing a safe zone in the south to protect Syrian civilians from the regime and its allies.

Syrians have been asking for safe zones since the war started. Lately, though, the idea has been gaining traction with some of the key actors, including the United States and Jordan. During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump called for "build[ing] a big, beautiful safe zone" in Syria; a year earlier, the general in charge of Jordan's Border Guard said "it would be a good thing if a safe zone was set up." More recently, President Trump and King Abdullah reportedly discussed the possibility during their brief meeting on February 2. If the idea is to be realized, however, the devil will be in the details -- implementing any type of safe zone in the south will be militarily and diplomatically complex.

COMMON INTERESTS

Since 2011, Jordan says it has absorbed 1.4 million Syrian refugees, or more than 13 percent of the kingdom's total population. In addition to the high financial cost of hosting the refugees -- over \$2.5 billion a year, according to the World Bank -- their presence is severely taxing the domestic security apparatus and scarce resources such as

water.

Jordan basically sealed its borders a little more than a year ago, and it continues to reinforce its frontiers with Syria and Iraq in the hope of preventing terrorist infiltration, smuggling, and the undocumented entry of additional refugees. Last month, Border Guard chief Gen. Sami al-Kifawin announced that "half of the kingdom's troops and military resources" were devoted to securing those frontiers. Nevertheless, the kingdom saw a dramatic spike in domestic terrorist activity last year, largely inspired by the Islamic State (IS). Along with addressing these security threats, another top priority for Amman is reopening the borders with Syria and Iraq, its largest trading partners.

The United States also has an interest in limiting the torrential outflow of refugees from Syria. The Trump administration is particularly concerned about the terrorist threat they may pose to Europe and the homeland. As with Amman, sheltering Syrians in place as internally displaced persons (IDPs) until the war ends is an increasingly attractive option for Washington.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

In recent years, Jordanian intelligence has been operating quietly in southern Syria, coordinating with tribes and moderate opposition forces to establish a seventy-kilometer-long buffer zone free of IS and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. This area runs east from the Golan Heights and covers the most densely populated regions along the frontier. As part of this strategy, Amman has been working with rebel units of the Free Syrian Army in the south. Details of these operations are scarce, but according to a recent Emirati interview with a Deraa-based FSA official, Jordan is targeting militants and arms depots belonging to the IS-affiliated Khaled bin al-Walid Army, using warplanes and armed drones to strike border targets in the Yarmouk basin west of Deraa, among other activities.

The kingdom is also increasingly concerned about the movement of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militiamen, and Lebanese Hezbollah to the border area. The problem started in November 2015, when Hezbollah troops aided by Assad regime regulars and Russian air support took the strategically located town of Sheikh Maskin just north of Deraa. Perceiving the offensive as a warning about its limited train-and-equip program with opposition groups, Amman ended the program. Its compliance was rooted in two pressing concerns: (1) that further advances by these Russian-backed forces would drive Islamist militants further south, and (2) that Tehran would essentially be stationed along the kingdom's border if these gains were consolidated. Unlike with jihadis, Jordan could not militarily engage Iranian proxies in Syria -- Amman quickly realized that Russia was the only actor capable of stemming their march toward the border.

RUSSIA'S ROLE

Recognizing the changing dynamics in Syria, Jordan decided to coordinate closely with Moscow beginning in late 2015, opening a joint monitoring center in Amman that October to focus on intelligence sharing and deconfliction. More recently, King Abdullah met with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow last month, not long after Russia had invited Jordan to participate in the Syrian peace negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan. The unstated goal of Jordan's increased collaboration has been to secure guarantees from Moscow that Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias will not deploy south of Damascus, where they would have the opportunity to undermine stability in the kingdom (just as Israel has secured similar Russian understandings intended to counter weapons transfers to Hezbollah and limit Iranian activities in the Golan).

While not publicly discussed in any detail, safe zones remain on the table for both Moscow and Amman. Assad has openly criticized the idea, but Moscow has been less dismissive. After President Trump announced that he had tasked the State and Defense Departments with developing plans toward that end, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov responded by saying Moscow "did not rule out" the establishment of safe zones for IDPs, provided the UN and the Syrian government approved. Yet mentioning Damascus in that formula seemed more like a diplomatic

blandishment than anything else; given the current power dynamics in Syria, Russia need not consult Assad on such a decision.

OPERATIONALIZING A SAFE ZONE

Although it is far from certain that Moscow would consent to a safe zone, closer U.S.-Russian-Jordanian counterterrorism cooperation could make some kind of arrangement possible in the south. The mechanics of securing the zone, which might reach as far as ten miles into Syrian territory, would be fairly straightforward. Assuming Russia was on board -- and dragging Damascus along -- there would be no need to enforce a traditional no-fly zone. Instead, U.S., Jordanian, and other coalition aircraft and drones based in the kingdom would continuously fly reconnaissance and surveillance missions over the humanitarian corridor's perimeter. At the same time, the United States and Jordan would augment the intelligence-gathering capabilities of friendly forces on the ground, better enabling these locals to target Islamist militias and other armed elements attempting to enter the area.

The more difficult task would be reaching understandings about exactly who is responsible for security on the ground. Moscow will insist that any humanitarian zone does not become a training camp for the next rebel offensive against the Assad regime. Yet Jordan is already working with anti-Assad militias in the south, so they are the most likely forces to be tasked with defending civilians in these areas. Currently, around 400,000 people reside there, and tens of thousands of other IDPs might flee to the area once a safe zone is established. Moreover, Jordanian Minister of International Cooperation Imad Fakhoury recently stated that some refugees inside the kingdom would be repatriated to Syria, so an unspecified number of them may wind up in the border zone.

If local forces are deemed diplomatically unacceptable or incapable of securing the zone, then foreign forces would be required for manpower -- most likely hailing from Arab armies. Yet it is unclear which, if any, regional governments would step forward and offer such forces.

Should the Trump administration ask Jordan to deploy troops to Syria, the kingdom would be loath to say no given Washington's ongoing generosity -- Amman received more than \$1.6 billion in U.S. military and economic assistance last year, and it has been pressing Washington to double the baseline commitment from \$1 billion to \$2 billion in 2018. Yet a foreign deployment would entail considerable political risks for King Abdullah. Jordanian Islamists have argued that participation in the anti-IS coalition violates the kingdom's constitution. Moreover, the army is composed almost exclusively of tribal, so-called "East Banker" Jordanians -- traditionally the monarchy's leading supporters -- so any casualties in Syria could quickly become a political problem for the palace. Accordingly, Jordan may be unwilling to provide ground troops for a safe zone, though it would likely offer most any other type of assistance requested.

Beyond the operational issues, an extensive list of administrative questions needs to be addressed in order to move forward on any safe zone proposal. Who, for example, would oversee the zone? Who would be responsible for providing sufficient housing, water, electricity, and sanitation? The UN and other international humanitarian organizations will not enter Syrian territory without consent from Damascus -- will the Assad regime bless what it would undoubtedly view as a violation of its sovereignty? How will the area be provisioned? Will Jordan serve as the entrepot for the zone? Planners must also determine how many people will reside in the area. If the zone is deemed safe, tens of thousands of refugees from Syria and Jordan may flock there -- who will vet these people and determine who can enter? Answering these and other questions will take months, but doing so is an integral part of the planning stage if the zone is to be viable.

THE ART OF THE (SYRIA) DEAL

Admittedly, safe zones remain a distant prospect at the moment. Yet a deal may be possible given the Trump administration's prioritization of counter-IS operations and Washington's closer cooperation with Russia on Syria of late. While the prospect of Assad remaining in power is odious, Russian involvement appears to have made his continued rule inevitable. If the Trump administration acquiesces to Assad staying in Damascus, however, it should get something in return -- namely, Russian acquiescence to a safe zone in the south controlled by the FSA and other non-Islamist militias, even if this essentially relegates Assad's territory to a rump state.

Moscow may push back, but Washington should insist that Western-backed Syrian militias secure the safe zone on the ground. In addition to rebuilding some of the credibility Washington has lost since 2011, helping the rebels protect Syrian civilians would create a better balance of power on the ground between the opposition and a revanchist Assad coalition. Moreover, continued pressure in southern Syria could dissuade Hezbollah and similar groups from other regionally destabilizing activities, such as provoking a war with Israel.

Most important, though, a southern safe zone would facilitate the provision of humanitarian support to Syrians in Syria -- that is, as IDPs inside their own country rather than refugees abroad. While such a deal may not be optimal, it may be the best move for Washington at a time when Russia is firmly in the driver's seat.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Jordan (/policy-analysis/jordan)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)