

Establishing and Securing Safe Zones in Syria: Historical Lessons

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Brief Analysis

Experience in Iraq, Bosnia, and Libya shows that safe-zone operations require unambiguous legal authorities, clear political and military guidance, robust air and ground forces, and a viable plan for displaced persons and refugees.

Read more articles from the TWI series on Syrian safe zones. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-syrian-safe-havens-zones>)

As the international community continues to discuss the possibility of establishing safe havens in Syria to protect the millions of civilians displaced by the war, a brief survey of recent safe-zone operations provides insight into the challenges and opportunities associated with such efforts.

IRAQ 1991-96

Following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm (January-February 1991), Saddam Hussein's military brutally suppressed Kurdish and Shiite uprisings that broke out in the war's wake. In northern Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Kurds took to the mountains and tried to enter Turkey and Iran for shelter. That April, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 688 authorized a humanitarian relief effort for these displaced Kurds and called on member states to contribute.

In response, the United States organized Operation Provide Comfort, which involved the deployment of 20,000 troops from thirteen countries to secure a safe haven for 500,000-700,000 Kurds in northern Iraq, as well as various forms of assistance from thirty donor nations and nearly fifty international and nongovernmental organizations. Coalition forces had to build a provisional logistical infrastructure to support the humanitarian effort, connecting staging areas with refugee camps. Meanwhile, ground forces carved out a northern safe haven free of Saddam's military, and coalition aircraft patrolled a no-fly zone (NFZ) above the 36th parallel.

By June 1991, nearly all of the displaced Kurds had returned to their homes in northern Iraq, which eventually morphed into the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government that exists today. A small residual coalition force based in northern Iraq and Turkey continued to provide overwatch for the safe haven and support NFZ operations through 1996, when Provide Comfort formally ended. In January 1997, a renamed NFZ enforcement mechanism (Operation Northern Watch) was launched, and it remained in effect until a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003.

BOSNIA 1992-95

As the former Yugoslavia descended into civil war in the early 1990s, the mandate of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) -- then engaged in peacekeeping in Croatia -- was expanded to include a humanitarian mission in Bosnia. In June 1992, UNSCR 758 authorized the force to secure the Sarajevo airport and establish safe corridors for food convoys to the besieged city; this mandate was later extended to escorting aid convoys beyond the capital. In April 1993, UNSCR 819 further expanded UNPROFOR's mandate to protecting civilians fleeing ethnic cleansing in Srebrenica, declaring the town and its environs a "safe area"; the following month, UNSCR 824 extended this protection to five other towns.

Meanwhile, the Security Council had banned military flights in Bosnian airspace via Resolution 781, adopted in September 1992. This measure was repeatedly violated, however, so the council adopted Resolution 816 in March 1993 authorizing nations to "ensure compliance" with the flight ban. In April, NATO launched Operation Deny Flight to enforce the NFZ and, later, to provide close air support for UNPROFOR.

Despite UNPROFOR's growing responsibilities, the UN and participating nations failed to provide it with the political support and military capabilities needed to deal with the worsening security situation on the ground. The force was hindered by inadequate firepower, unclear political guidance, a tangled chain of command, and political constraints that often compelled it to assume a passive defensive posture. Likewise, the confusing and cumbersome "dual key" air tasking process -- which required NATO and UN approval prior to operations -- led to lengthy delays in the provision of air support.

All six safe areas were eventually attacked, and two (Srebrenica and Zepa) were overrun. In July 1995, a small UNPROFOR force in Srebrenica stood aside as 8,000 Muslim males of various ages were separated from the general population and murdered. These tragic policy failures paved the way for NATO's Operation Deliberate Force (August-September 1995) and the Dayton Accords, which ended the war (for additional details, [see PolicyWatch 1898, "Humanitarian Safe Havens: Bosnia's Lessons for Syria" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/humanitarian-safe-havens-bosnias-lessons-for-syria\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/humanitarian-safe-havens-bosnias-lessons-for-syria)).

LIBYA 2011

In 2011, the Qadhafi regime attempted to crush the "Arab Spring" uprising in Libya, spurring the UNSC to adopt two resolutions: 1970, which called on government forces to cease attacks on civilians, and Resolution 1973, which authorized member states to take "all necessary measures" to protect at-risk civilians. Although the latter resolution authorized an NFZ, it excluded a "foreign occupation force."

Subsequently, NATO no-fly operations enabled rebel forces to ensure security in many areas, since Qadhafi's ground forces could no longer conduct major forays far beyond the capital and their strongholds in western and central Libya. While the resolutions fell short on specifying how civilians would be protected from ground attacks, this became a moot point when NFZ operations morphed into offensive air operations that eventually helped the rebels defeat Qadhafi's forces (for additional details, [see PolicyWatch 1765, "Slippery Slope: Libya and the Lessons of Previous No-Fly Zones" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippy-slope-libya-and-the-lessons-of-previous-no-fly-zones\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippy-slope-libya-and-the-lessons-of-previous-no-fly-zones)).

In this case, however, military success did not beget political success. Once Qadhafi was defeated, NATO forces redeployed and left a weak, unstable system that collapsed into the warlordism and chaos that characterizes Libya today.

IMPLICATIONS

In many ways, the current situation in Syria is starkly different from the past conflicts described above, yet each case nevertheless offers important lessons for any future safe-zone efforts in Syria. In particular, a successful operation requires the following:

- *Unambiguous legal mandate and operational guidance.* Whether it comes in the form of a UNSCR or other legal mechanism, the language authorizing the operation should be unequivocally clear. The military rules of engagement will be based on this mandate, and they must be simple, direct, and understood by all participating forces. A clear mandate could also assuage any concerns that Russia and other stakeholders may have regarding the intent of the safe zone ([see PolicyWatch 2564, "Legal Justifications for a Safe Zone in Syria" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/legal-justifications-for-a-safe-zone-in-syria\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/legal-justifications-for-a-safe-zone-in-syria)). In addition, the mandate should not place unnecessary restrictions on the use of forces deployed to secure the safe zone.
- *Clarity on ways, means, and ends.* An attainable end-state and a credible roadmap to achieving it should be identified during the planning phase of any safe-zone operation. The ultimate objective is to ensure the repatriation or resettlement of displaced persons and refugees; for practical and political reasons, the diplomacy surrounding the operation's termination phase may be even more challenging than diplomacy regarding its establishment. Moreover, successful safe-zone operations sometimes require enduring commitments that last beyond the repatriation/resettlement process. In Iraq, Bosnia, and Libya, humanitarian operations ultimately morphed into very different missions with much more expansive goals. The United States spent a decade and billions of dollars enforcing its safe haven and two NFZs in Iraq; regime change eventually became the U.S. exit strategy there, as well as in Libya. And in Bosnia, a faltering humanitarian operation morphed into offensive operations against Serbian forces.
- *A robust, balanced air-ground team.* Although NFZs are an integral part of many safe-zone operations, they are not sufficient on their own to secure a haven against determined hostile ground forces, as seen in Bosnia and Iraq. What worked in Libya from the air will not work in Syria, where a complex welter of rebel and extremist factions are operating on the ground, covering the gamut from friendly to hostile, and where external powers are directly assisting the regime's military operations. To secure safe zones and deter aggression, supporting ground elements would need to be sufficiently large and robust. And even then, deterring terrorist groups and proxy forces could still prove very challenging.
- *Unity of command.* A clear chain of command is essential no matter how complex the force structure. There must be single-point direct communications between ground and air components to ensure timely support, disseminate vital intelligence, prevent fratricide, and protect both ground forces and civilians.
- *A conducive political environment.* Sufficient buy-in by neighboring states and regional partners is crucial to ensure

that spoilers do not disrupt or subvert the mission. For example, Turkey's attacks against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq sometimes complicated Operation Provide Comfort. Likewise, when Saddam's ground forces attacked the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq in 1996, host-nation restrictions on U.S. and British strike aircraft hindered coalition efforts to provide protection. If political buy-in proves impossible for certain actors in Syria, then deterrence would be necessary -- with all the challenges that could entail.

Any safe-zone operation in Syria that ignores the lessons of the past and omits these key elements would risk a greater chance of failure, increased suffering for civilians, and potential mission creep that could lead to even more widespread conflict.

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