

The Israeli Perspective on Safe Zones in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Despite the potential benefits of a safe zone along the Jordan-Syria border, Russia's presence in the war would probably limit Israel's ability to openly support or contribute to such an initiative.

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Since the beginning of Russia's military intervention in Syria, the humanitarian situation has grown worse. In the northwest, Russian airstrikes and ground advances by the Assad regime and its allies have spurred tens of thousands of Syrians to flee into Turkey. And in the south, similar offensives have pushed more Syrians out of Deraa province and toward Jordan, whose border is effectively closed at the moment. In response, policymakers from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States are once again floating the idea of establishing safe zones inside Syria to mitigate the human suffering and relieve some of the pressure on countries that host the most refugees, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Yet Israel has not publicly participated in this dialogue despite sharing a border with Syria, and the reasons behind this deliberate absence merit a closer look.

WHY ISN'T ISRAEL PART OF THE DISCUSSION?

Historically, Arab countries have often denied any cooperation with Israel, diplomatically or militarily, in large part to avoid domestic criticism from populations that tend to have deeply hostile feelings about the Palestinian situation. Bringing Israel into the safe zone discussion could taint the legitimacy of any such initiative in Arab public opinion, since the Assad regime and its partners would no doubt depict it as part of an Israeli scheme to gain control in Syria.

Thus, despite the numerous scenarios for implementing a safe zone -- including potential military roles for Turkish, Saudi, Jordanian, and NATO forces -- no policymaker has suggested that Israel contribute military assets. If Israel is

not part of the implementation, why would countries want it as part of the planning process? To be sure, Israel could help by sharing intelligence about dynamics on the ground and providing some humanitarian assistance, but it is already doing such things to one degree or another. Moreover, many Israeli decisionmakers believe that a safe zone is not necessarily their business. This line of thought is a direct continuation of Israel's policy toward the civil war thus far -- namely, not taking sides. Supporting a safe zone could entail military action against the Assad regime, which would be perceived as taking sides.

REASONS TO SUPPORT A SAFE ZONE

If outside actors establish a safe zone on their own, how would Israel respond? The answer partly depends on where the zone is located. While Israel would essentially do nothing in response to a northern zone on Turkey's border, it might offer some support for a southern safe zone along the Jordan-Syria border, mostly because of its importance to Amman. The kingdom is having great difficulty coping with the vast number of Syrian refugees already on its territory or waiting outside the border, and another influx would further strain its financial, logistical, and security resources (see [PolicyWatch 2581, "A Safe Zone in Southern Syria" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-safe-zone-in-southern-syria\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-safe-zone-in-southern-syria)). In December, former Israeli national security advisor Yaakov Amidror and former National Security Council deputy Eran Lerman wrote, "Israel has a strategic interest in, and longstanding commitment to, the safety, security, stability, and prosperity of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan...Israeli assistance to Jordan in other forms -- above all, helping Jordan cope in recent years with the immense influx of Syrian refugees -- remains crucial." A southern safe zone could serve all of these interests.

Another reason why Israel might support a zone is that it could have a positive effect on the Syrian opposition. Why would Israel suddenly support a pro-rebel policy when it has studiously avoided taking sides in the war? As Amos Harel noted in a February 21 *Haaretz* article, Israel is concerned that the ongoing regime and Russian victories will strengthen Hezbollah and Iran, thereby increasing the threat to Israel. According to Harel, Israeli leaders now believe that the West must increase its support to the rebels in order to "stop the regime's progress and the rise in Iran's standing." They may therefore support a safe zone if they think it will strengthen the opposition.

THE RUSSIAN FACTOR

Yet before backing any such plan, even covertly, Israel would need to take Russia's potential reaction into account. Since the beginning of Moscow's military intervention in Syria, Israel and Russia have engaged in tactical coordination that allows both countries to operate there without hindering each other's objectives (see [PolicyWatch 2529, "Israeli-Russian Coordination in Syria: So Far So Good?" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-russian-coordination-in-syria-so-far-so-good\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-russian-coordination-in-syria-so-far-so-good)). Israel's main objectives in Syria are twofold: halting any transfers of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, and preventing Iran and Hezbollah from establishing a fighting front against Israel in the Golan Heights. To enforce these redlines, Israel would prefer to maintain good relations with Moscow, since Russian forces could otherwise decide to defend Hezbollah's assets in Syria or share intelligence with their coalition partners about imminent Israeli strikes.

If a safe zone is established in Syria without a UN Security Council mandate, and if it entails a military component such as a no-fly zone, then Russia would probably perceive it as inimical to its own policy, perhaps even taking countermeasures to interfere with it. Russian forces are less focused on southern Syria at the moment, so they might not oppose a safe zone there so vehemently. Yet if moderate rebels use the zone to launch attacks against the regime, Russia would likely act against it no matter where it is located.

Although supporting a southern safe zone that Russia opposes would be problematic for Israeli leaders, their calculations might change if the United States is leading the operation, since that would signal American commitment to the plan and protection for the parties involved. In that case, Israel would feel more confident about

expressing support for the zone and even offering humanitarian assistance and some military coordination as it did in the past (see [PolicyWatch 2323, "Tough Dilemma in Southern Syria"](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tough-dilemma-in-southern-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tough-dilemma-in-southern-syria>)). Yet U.S. leadership would not extend to helping Israel enforce its previously described redlines, so Jerusalem would still need to be careful not to aggravate Russia.

CONCLUSION

Israel's position will not be the deciding factor in the safe zone debate -- the United States, Turkey, Jordan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others will have a much bigger influence because they are more invested in the war. Some of them have already stated their readiness to contribute military assets for such a policy. At the moment, Israel seems committed to staying impartial toward the war and will likely avoid making public statements about any safe zone plan -- some Arab countries would certainly prefer that it keep out of the matter. If Moscow does not oppose the plan, then Israel might change its mind and support it, but any Russian criticism or threats aimed at the zone would likely convince Israel to remain silent. The current leadership believes that as long as they are able to act on Israel's redlines in Syria, then no drastic policy changes are warranted. Although some analysts and former officials have suggested that Israel strengthen its relations with moderate rebels in the south and consider a no-fly zone, most of these recommendations were made before Russia's military intervention, which has deterred many actors from increasing their own involvement in the war. In short, if Russia opposes a safe zone in the south, then Israel is unlikely to assist the effort militarily.

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