

A Safe Zone in Southern Syria

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Brief Analysis

As the Assad coalition and the Islamic State turn their attention southward, Jordan and the thousands of displaced Syrians waiting outside its border face an increasingly perilous security situation.

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Last week, Jordanian security forces killed seven militants during a raid on an Islamic State (IS) cell in Irbid, reportedly foiling a terrorist plot against the General Intelligence Directorate. As the war in Syria enters its fifth year, the spillover effects pose a growing threaten to the kingdom, which closed its borders late last year over concerns about the security and economic impact of the nearly 1.4 million Syrian refugees it was hosting. Since then, tens of thousands more refugees have gathered along the frontier, and Amman is pursuing other options to help them. In June 2015, the *Financial Times* reported that Jordan was thinking about establishing a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border -- an IS-free area in which to provide humanitarian support to displaced civilians and train "moderate" rebels. While the kingdom has taken no steps toward creating this zone, it has promoted a de facto area of relative safety along the border. If various pressures in Syria drive more refugees south, support for a true southern safe zone could gain traction in Amman, Washington, and Europe.

BACKGROUND

In November 2011, Jordan's King Abdullah stated that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad should "step down." Within a year, Saudi Arabia was reportedly transferring weapons to Syrian rebels via Jordan, and a year later Amman was said to be cooperating with the CIA in training moderate fighters. In early 2014, however, the Islamic State's execution of two American journalists helped spur a gradual shift in Jordan's focus. That September, the kingdom formally joined the anti-IS coalition, serving as the principal base for air operations against the organization. And after Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh was captured in Syria and burned alive by IS forces in January 2015, the anti-IS campaign replaced the anti-Assad campaign as Amman's top priority, echoing the Obama administration's focus.

Meanwhile, nearly 1.4 million Syrians crossed into Jordan between 2011 and 2015. Hosting these refugees -- less than 10 percent of whom reside in UN-administered camps -- has been a heavy economic burden on the kingdom, which was already suffering from budget deficits and high unemployment before the war. The arrival of so many foreigners has also meant an increase in domestic counterterrorism operations and surveillance, greatly taxing the General Intelligence Directorate. Toward the end of 2015, Jordan had reached the refugee saturation point and began limiting entry to those in urgent need of medical attention. Last month, the king told the BBC that the situation had "gotten to a boiling point...Sooner or later, I think the dam is going to burst."

THE DE FACTO SAFE ZONE

Despite the border closure, Syrians have continued to flow south, with an estimated 20,000 reaching the Jordanian side of the "berm," a sort of no-man's land between the two countries. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Jordanian government are providing them with food, shelter, and medical care. Beyond humanitarian activity near the border, Amman has done much in recent years to prevent IS from establishing a foothold in the south, using a combination of forward-deployed intelligence officers, leveraged tribal contacts, and deals with the Assad regime. Efforts to establish some level of normalcy within twenty kilometers of the border have been successful, but this is largely because the Assad regime has not yet targeted the south in a sustained manner -- whether because it is busy with other fronts or concerned about flying too close to the Jordanian border.

JORDAN'S RUSSIA DILEMMA

Lately, however, the ongoing Russian military intervention that reversed the war's momentum in the north has also been changing the dynamic in the south. In October, Moscow established a deconfliction center in Amman to ensure that Russian air operations would not inadvertently hit Jordanian ground forces in the border region. Around the same time, the kingdom apparently began limiting the flow of weapons to moderate Syrian opposition groups in the south. Depleted of ammunition, some of these groups are now reportedly looking to cut deals with the regime. And in February, Russia provided air cover to a southern offensive led by Hezbollah fighters, Iraqi Shiite militias, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These pro-regime forces recaptured Sheikh Maskin, a strategic southern town a few kilometers north of Deraa that had formerly been controlled by the Free Syrian Army, the most prominent of the moderate rebel groups.

For Amman, coordinating with Moscow and reducing support to the opposition was a pragmatic decision. Given the trajectory on the ground and Washington's shift away from calling for Assad's removal, Jordan arguably had few alternatives. Still, this tack is problematic. Saudi Arabia, one of the kingdom's leading benefactors, remains committed to Assad's removal, so Jordanian ambivalence on the matter could become a potential irritant in the bilateral relationship. The bigger challenge, however, may be dealing with the implications of the Russian-backed regime campaign turning south.

As Moscow's air support for southern operations increases, the number of refugees flowing toward the Jordanian border will grow. At the same time, without external materiel support, moderate Syrian rebels in the area will be forced to choose one of two options: either surrender and accept a Russian-Iranian "transition" plan that keeps Assad in power indefinitely, or join better-resourced but more extreme militias -- a more likely scenario given past precedent. The Islamic State's footprint in the south is currently limited, but in the absence of viable armed opposition groups, it may decide to fill the vacuum. In short, by cutting support to the moderate rebels, Amman risks driving them into the arms of IS. Jordanian intelligence reportedly has contacts with al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist militias in Syria in order to maintain situational awareness, but an IS presence on the border would amount to a worst-case scenario for the kingdom.

TOWARD A SOUTHERN SAFE ZONE?

Last summer, a general in the Jordanian border guard "expressed hope" to journalists that a UN-approved "buffer zone" would eventually be established "on the border between Jordan and Syria," complete with "infrastructure, services, and security" for refugees. Given Russia's seat on the Security Council and its unswerving support for reasserting Assad's control throughout Syria, a UN imprimatur on such an initiative would seem unlikely. As the brewing southern offensives pick up steam, however, the need for a humanitarian safe area on the Syrian side of the border will become increasingly important. As described above, Jordan has established some rudimentary infrastructure for refugees along the frontier, but security remains a critical concern. Absent a change in the status quo, increasing numbers of displaced Syrians will be vulnerable to attack from the Assad regime, Russian aircraft, and the Islamic State.

At the moment, there is little appetite in the West for additional financial or military commitments in the region, but attitudes could shift if Syrian refugees continue flowing into Europe. For its part, Israel would likely insist on flying reconnaissance missions over any safe zone in order to protect its own equities. It will be more difficult to secure Russian acquiescence, as Moscow will be wary of changing a strategically advantageous battlefield. But Washington and its partners should not self-deter. Just as Russia's unilateral deployment created new dynamics on the ground, the deployment of American, Arab, and European forces on the Syrian side of the border would change the equation and be difficult to contest.

Alternatively, some parties may press Jordan to reopen its border and let more refugees in. Although this might alleviate some of the pressure in Syria, the effect would only be temporary, and it could destabilize the kingdom. With no end to the war in sight, Jordan is no longer a practicable destination for Syrian refugees, and Europe is becoming less so by the day. A buffer zone in the south that keeps Syrians safe in Syria could be a good step toward solving this dilemma.

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