

# A Turkish 'Secure Strip' in Syria: Domestic Concerns and Foreign Limitations

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Brief Analysis

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**Although Ankara has the necessary parliamentary authorization and professional military capacity to establish a safe zone, it would still need Western intelligence help, air support, and diplomatic backing to cover the operation and deter Russian retaliation.**

**T**his PolicyWatch is part of a TWI *series on Syrian safe zones* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-syrian-safe-havens-zones>).

On February 17, Turkish deputy prime minister Yalcin Akdogan stated that Ankara wants to create a ten-kilometer-wide "secure strip" inside Syria. The proposed strip would serve several goals: to prevent further advances in the north by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Turkey opposes politically; to allow for humanitarian relief and the hosting of future refugee flows on Syrian territory, which would help alleviate Turkey and Europe's massive refugee problem; and to provide a staging ground for Ankara-backed rebels currently buckling under Russian airstrikes and ground advances by the Assad regime and its allies.

Thus far, Germany has voiced support for a Syrian no-fly zone near the Turkish border, but Ankara has yet to convince the United States and other NATO allies on the matter. Assuming it can clear the various international hurdles ([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>), what are Turkey's main domestic concerns and limitations regarding the creation of such a strip?

# PARLIAMENTARY AUTHORIZATION

**A** Turkish safe zone would require protection by forces from the Turkish military as well as allied countries and potentially like-minded Arab states (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Qatar). According to Article 92 of the Turkish constitution, the parliament must approve any deployment of the Turkish Armed Forces outside the country's borders. A simple legislative majority (276 votes) is needed for the authorization to pass. Currently, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) holds 317 seats in the 550-member parliament, so it does not need opposition party support to win such authorization.

Moreover, the AKP government already has an authorization in hand for deploying troops to Syria and Iraq. Passed on September 3, 2015, and effective until October 2016, this authorization states that "the Syrian regime's policies of violence, support to terrorist groups, and provocation of ethnic and sectarian differences continue to be risks and threats to humanity, security, and regional stability for the fifth year of the civil war." It also notes the importance of "carrying out activities and operations as part of the international coalition against [the Islamic State] and similar groups." In addition, it highlights the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) threat: "Armed PKK terrorist units continue to occupy territory in northern Iraq. A rise in other terror elements and the threat they put forward is also evident in Iraq and Syria."

The authorization concludes with the following declaration: "In light of these circumstances, to take necessary precautions to protect Turkey's national security against any terrorism and security threats within international law, to eliminate any attacks now or in the future from terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq, to continue our national security against potential risks such as mass migration, to protect Turkey's interests effectively during these developments, and to help implement policies in a fast and dynamic manner that will prevent Turkey from being put in a difficult position depending on regional developments, the Turkish Armed Forces, if need be, have been authorized to carry out cross-border operations, deploy military personnel to foreign countries, and also welcome foreign armed forces if they are serving the same purpose, with their boundaries, extent, timing, and size to be decided by the government."

The AKP first received parliamentary approval to send troops to Iraq in 2007, to counter the PKK threat. The constitution stipulates that such authorizations be renewed annually. In 2012, Syria was added to the authorization. During last September's renewal vote, only one party rejected the motion: the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which holds 59 seats. The two other opposition factions voted in favor of it: the Republican People's Party (CHP, with 134 seats) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP, with 40 seats).

## DOMESTIC DEBATE

**T**he AKP has been leading the charge in advocating a "secure strip." Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu hopes that his government's plan will ensure that "refugees are able to stay and live in their own country." He also believes it will protect civilians in the area by preventing certain groups that "can carry out terror attacks" from entering the zone.

The pro-Kurdish HDP has presented the strongest domestic and parliamentary objections to cross-border deployments. It voted against the most recent authorization because it believes the AKP will use such license to deploy troops against positions held by the PYD and its military wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG), in Syria (both connected to the PKK), as well as against PKK targets in Iraq. During the September renewal vote, party member Mithat Sancar told fellow legislators, "If you authorize deployment against the Syrian Kurds, you can't convince the Kurds at home that we are all brothers who can live together." And party member Hasip Kaplan argued that a safe zone would "weaken the resistance put up by Kurds in northern Syria." Although the HDP lacks the parliamentary strength to sway the next renewal vote later this year, it can make things difficult for the AKP by holding anti-

authorization demonstrations in Kurdish-majority towns.

Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the secular-leftist CHP, voted for the authorization last year after rejecting it in 2014. According to party officials, they voted against the 2014 authorization because it directly mentioned action against the Assad regime, while the 2015 authorization focused on PKK and Islamic State threats in Syria and Iraq. Besides approving military deployment, the CHP also supports the creation of a safe zone, but only under certain conditions -- namely, if "the Syrian regime permits it" (a restriction that almost renders the idea moot), and if international coalition powers support it.

The smallest bloc in parliament, the Turkish ultranationalist MHP, may be an even stronger advocate of cross-border deployments and a "secure strip" than the AKP itself. According to party leader Devlet Bahçeli, "The PYD's plan to have a Kurdish corridor along the border [is] a direct attack against Turkey's territorial unity and national existence," so Ankara has an "urgent need to build a safe zone in Turkey's southern borders to protect its national security." Needless to say, the government will find unequivocal support for operations in Syria from the nationalist bloc.

## ANKARA NEEDS WASHINGTON ON BOARD

The Turkish government recently rejected claims that it was readying a military incursion into Syria in coordination with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Arab states. The AKP is aware that any significant deployment inside Syria would be immediately targeted by Russia. Moscow not only opposes Ankara's policy of backing anti-Assad rebels, it also wants to retaliate for Turkey's November shutdown of a Russian plane that violated its airspace. To be sure, the AKP has the necessary parliamentary backing to deploy troops, and its military has the professional capacity to do the heavy lifting in establishing a "secure strip" (the Turkish Armed Forces are NATO's second largest contingent). Yet Ankara would still need U.S. and NATO intelligence and air support to effectively carry out such an operation and deter Russian retaliation, as well as Washington's diplomatic backing at the United Nations.

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