

# Safety First in Syria

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

**However difficult it might be to implement safe zones after years of inaction, the humanitarian disaster will only grow without them, as will the threat to regional and European stability.**

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The Syrian civil war, already among the worst humanitarian catastrophes since World War II, is about to get worse. The massive tragedy that has claimed over 400,000 lives and displaced over 12 million people has not only destabilized the Middle East, but, according to the German ambassador to the U.S., Peter Wittig, has also become an existential threat to Europe.

In December 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry appeared to move closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin's position of allowing Syrian President Bashar Assad to remain in power. But those who believe that Assad could stabilize Syria in the guise of a "secular dictator," or call for relying on him to end the crisis, are deluding themselves. The atrocities he committed spread rather than smothered the initial uprising, and his presence remains the single greatest recruiting tool for Islamic State radicals. Surely the fact that he continues to starve 40,000 people in Madaya, and appears to be conducting even greater atrocities in Aleppo, should place him well beyond the bounds of polite discourse.

American and European politicians continue to debate their response to the flood of Syrian refugees. But they should focus on stanching the flow at its source. Any serious discussion about ending the Syrian war must begin with alleviating the humanitarian crisis, which will reduce the incentive to flee. Until Syrians feel safe, and until they can meet basic needs for food, water, shelter, and medical treatment, they will have little reason to stay put, let alone be able to contemplate the prospect of a transitional government. A discussion about such a transition can occur only under a guarantee of peace and security.

Such guarantees must necessarily include the establishment of safe zones in northern and perhaps southern Syria. Crucially, such zones should be designed to protect civilians not only from Assad, but also from the Islamic State and Russia. Indeed, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on February 8 that she was "not just appalled but horrified" by Russian air strikes that have targeted civilians and caused tens of thousands to flee the country. As ambassadors James F. Jeffrey and Nicholas Burns have recently argued, safe zones should be militarily enforced by no-fly zones, which will require decisive U.S. leadership to strengthen a coalition of European and Middle Eastern allies to help maintain them.

But it is Assad that constitutes the primary threat to Syria's civilians. Before September 2014, when the United States began air strikes in Syria, the only air force flying over Syria was his. Rather than bomb the Islamic State capital at Raqqa, Assad used it exclusively to target civilians with barrel bombs. This was part of a deliberate strategy aimed at terrorizing the population as well as driving refugees out. Assad is responsible for the majority of civilian casualties as well as for refugee flows out of the country. Indeed, a recent survey of Syrian refugees in Germany found that approximately 70 percent of them are fleeing Assad.

A recently released UN Human Rights Council report

([http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1_en.pdf)), based on over 600 interviews, describes in gruesome detail the Assad regime's torture and murder of detainees since April 2011, one month after the first anti-Assad protests broke out, which were peaceful at the time. According to the report, the regime targeted everyone, including women and children -- some as little as seven years old -- and went to great lengths to conceal the abuses, in some cases by forcing families of victims to sign statements that "terrorists" had killed them. These findings highlight what many analysts have been saying for years: that Assad is not a partner in fighting terrorism, nor is he someone who would contribute to a peaceful solution in Syria unless he steps down. His brutality only strengthens radical forces in Syria and contributes to the humanitarian disaster.

Safe zones should have been set up in 2013, when Assad crossed President Obama's "red lines" and used chemical weapons on his people in March that year, if not even earlier. (And yes, Assad did have a relatively robust air defense system at the time -- but Western forces could undoubtedly have neutralized it, given the chance.) Since then, the crisis has worsened dramatically, reducing U.S. options. The Russian intervention in Syria since September 2015 in particular has made establishing safe zones more difficult by increasing the likelihood of accidental clashes with the Russian air force, and by establishing Russia's own de-facto no-fly zone to protect the Russian air base in Syria.

But safe zones are still possible. A precedent was established in 1991 with Operation Provide Comfort, which saw NATO members, including Turkey, cooperate to protect displaced Iraqi Kurds and prevent further refugee flow into Turkey. However hard it will be to implement safe zones politically and militarily, without them, the humanitarian disaster will only grow. Allowing it to go on will likely entail the further unraveling of the Middle East and the continuing destabilization of Europe.

And this is precisely what Russian President Vladimir Putin wants. Since September 2015, Russian air strikes have saved Assad from a military defeat, and -- despite Moscow's claims to the contrary -- strengthened the Islamic State in the process. At least one thousand civilians, including over 200 children, have died as a result of Russia's air strikes, according to the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Russian airstrikes also target hospitals and other basic infrastructure.

Why would the Russians do such a thing? The answer is simple: Putin wants civilians to flee, so that massive refugee flows will continue to pour into Europe and contribute to the rise of right-wing forces there, which he has supported for years. In this context, safe zones will not only protect civilians from Assad, but also from the Kremlin.

Putin's broader goal in Syria is to present the West with a choice of his own making: either the Islamic State or Assad.

Putin is a thug, an organized crime boss. As such, he wants to create a choice the West cannot refuse. From his perspective, this is simply how international politics works.

Critics may say that safe zones will require greater military commitment to Syria and risk a military clash with Russia -- if, for instance, Putin decides to test the no-fly zone by infringing on it, as he has done for years with the airspace of NATO allies in the Baltics, and more recently in Turkey. These critics may well be right.

But weakness and indecision seldom prevent aggression; instead they encourage it. At this point, an increased possibility of military confrontation is a better option than the alternative, and a risk of confrontation is one that the West must be willing to take. For all of Putin's bluster, he is not irrational. He takes incremental steps to test the West to see how much he can get away with. He continues unless he meets resistance. The more likely scenario is that he will engage in small-scale and low-risk operations as well as a disinformation campaign to undermine the safe zones and seed confusion and doubt. The West can handle that, and should be prepared to do so.

Even if the West successfully implements safe zones, the Syrian crisis will continue. The protection of civilians is only the first step in the search for a solution in a very complex situation made worse by years of Western absence, which allowed Russia and Iran to step in and undermined confidence among regional Western allies. But this is where the search for a solution must begin.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ♦

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