Intervention to Assist Fleeing Syrians: Who, What, Where, Why, and How

by Col. Nora Marcos **(/experts/col-nora-marcos)**

Feb 16, 2016
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/altdkhl-lmsadt-alswryyn-alfaryn-man-wmadha-wayn-wlmadha-wkyf)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Col. Nora Marcos (/experts/col-nora-marcos)
Nora Marcos, a colonel in the U.S. Army, was a 2015-16 visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute.

Brief Analysis

Establishment of humanitarian corridors, safe havens, safe zones, or buffer or no-fly zones could turn the tide of Syria's humanitarian crisis, but it could also pose numerous complications and create second- and third-order effects for the region.

*This piece is part of a TWI **series on Syrian safe havens/zones. (/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-syrian-safe-havens-zones)***

Despite Secretary of State John Kerry's recent announcement of a 'cessation of hostilities' in Syria, much work remains to be done to define "progress on the humanitarian front" beyond the intent to "accelerate and expand the delivery of humanitarian aid." While the establishment of humanitarian corridors, safe havens, safe zones, or buffer or no-fly zones could turn the tide of Syria's humanitarian crisis, it could also pose numerous complications and create several second- and third-order effects for the region. Indeed, U.S. policy does not currently support these measures, but humanitarian considerations and concerns over the impact of refugees on U.S. allies -- or else, the refusal of Syria, Russia, and Iran to adhere to a ceasefire -- may force Washington to reconsider its position and reevaluate the who, what, where, why, and potential how of this kind of intervention in Syria. These scenarios are outlined here.

WHO

When asking this question, one must realize the labyrinth of possible answers involved. In no small part, potential players must consider the impact of safe havens or zones on their internal politics. The logical follow-on question involves who would run the safe havens/zones on the ground to ensure internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees are safe, secure, and properly provided for. The regional actors view the situation roughly as

follows:

- Turkey has long supported some such haven or zone, such as in 2012 when it went before the UN Security Council only to have its recommendation rebuffed. Turkey is highly concerned about the potential arrival of many more refugees, as well as the area's complicated ethno-religious politics if Arab refugees move into regions of Syria with predominantly Turkmen or Kurdish populations or into areas of Turkey with large Arab or Kurdish populations.
- Israel has engaged in humanitarian assistance efforts but would have to weigh carefully the impact and limitations of a greater role.
- Jordan, like Turkey, worries about large numbers of additional refugees as well as the domestic impact of refugees on its demographic balance. Jordan has concentrated on appealing for financial aid from the international community, with King Abdullah warning that "sooner or later, the dam is going to burst." According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), nearly 750,000 registered Syrians reside in the kingdom, the second highest per capita refugee rate in the world, after Lebanon.
- Kurds in Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or the emerging de facto Kurdish zone in Syria have been unenthusiastic about accepting large numbers of Arab refugees. That said, the KRG is accommodating more than 1.5 million non-Kurdish IDPs from other parts of Iraq, a heavy burden -- although it is hard to imagine large numbers of Arabs ending up in Kurdish-administered areas of Syria while the conflict continues.

WHAT

Next, there are real differences among the options: safe haven/safe zone; buffer zone; humanitarian corridor; or no-fly zone. And even after these differences are delineated, the mix of missions must be assessed -- whether to stop attacks, deliver humanitarian aid, support the safe zone's logistics, or shelter and train opposition forces. Namely:

- A safe haven, also known as a safe area, is typically a specific place near a conflict-ridden region in which humanitarian aid is delivered and fleeing refugees can reside for an extended period. Establishing such a haven requires providing ground security to ensure safety of operations.
- A buffer zone generally refers to a demilitarized zone from which adversaries have agreed to withdraw, replaced by a neutral observer force such as UN peacekeepers for reporting. The zones between Turkish and Greek Cyprus and between North and South Korea offer examples.
- A humanitarian corridor includes areas where designated personnel -- usually under the UN banner or accepted NGOs -- can pass with humanitarian aid in conflict zones.
- A no-fly zone involves a military effort aimed at keeping a specific area free from hostile aircraft -- both rotary and fixed-wing -- sometimes to protect a given population or to foster ground operations.

WHERE

The politics and geography of potential northern and southern Syrian safe havens/zones merit a detailed examination. Proposals have pointed to locations on Syrian soil, foreign soil, or border zones between the Syrian and foreign-border checkpoints. One set of ideas focuses on the Turkish border with northwest Syria, with most discussion centering on the area north of Aleppo rather than along the Turkish province of Hatay, west of Aleppo. Another set of ideas regards the Islamic State-controlled area northeast of Aleppo, along the Turkish border just west of the Euphrates River. Yet another possibility involves the de facto Kurdish region in northeast Syria, bordering Turkey to the north and the KRG to the east. A final option suggests a zone in southern Syria along the border with Jordan. Not much discussion, meanwhile, has touched on the Syrian border with Israel or Lebanon.

WHY -- OR WHY NOT

Given that refugee flows to Europe are a major Western policy concern, considering the effect of safe havens/zones, buffer zones, or humanitarian corridors on the refugee flow to Europe is essential. An even more ambitious aim of such initiatives would be to convince refugees to *return from* Europe to these areas. Assessing the viability of such a trend is likewise important.

Much can be learned here from the history of safe havens/zones in other conflicts, such as in the former Yugoslavia or Saddam-era Iraq. In this context, one can usefully study the effectiveness of assistance provided via humanitarian corridors to populations in place rather than those fleeing; the former often stand to gain much more from related supports than those fleeing.

Consideration must also be given to reactions by the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran to safe havens/zones. In 2012, regime allies vehemently opposed similar overtures, suggesting a safe zone was a threat to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Planning responses to similar future negative reactions, and evaluating proposals for how to mitigate these reactions, would be highly worthwhile.

Safe havens or zones, buffer zones, or humanitarian corridors also generate a variety of legal issues. The prospects for a new UN Security Council resolution authorizing such an initiative are questionable. This raises the matter of what can be done under existing Security Council resolutions, such as those addressing the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations. And neighboring states, like Turkey and Jordan, are well positioned to claim self-defense as a reason to contribute to a safe zone or related mechanism.

Safe havens/zones could well affect other initiatives to address the Syrian war, whether the Geneva peace talks or prospective local or national ceasefires. In this context, the strength of those initiatives must be assessed as well as the potential harmful or helpful effects on them of a safe haven/zone.

HOW

A safe haven or zone would have many diplomatic, military, economic, and humanitarian requirements. These would include the potential humanitarian role of international organizations and NGOs, including that of UN agencies absent a new Security Council resolution. The nature of needed military and security commitments, either outside the zone to protect it or inside, would then need to be addressed, as well as what party would provide these resources. Of particular interest would be the role of neighbors, regional states, and Syrian locals supported -- e.g., trained, equipped, armed, or financed -- by outsiders either openly or clandestinely.

Before embarking on any initiative, planners must design policies to shape or deter potential responses by the Assad regime and its allies, as well as by the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other groups. Developing exit strategies is also essential.

Moreover, analyzing the safe zone options discussed above is necessary but not sufficient to justify taking action. Planners must also assess the overall situation and the alternatives, such as the likely end state of Syrian refugees without intervention.

As for the overall regional security situation, it has deteriorated dramatically owing to a number of factors: the destabilizing flow of refugees to America's European NATO allies, the emergence of a diplomatic-military alliance among Russia, Iran, Syria, and Shiite groups with at least the potential goal of supplanting the U.S.-led regional security system -- and with significant capability to achieve that end; and the Islamic State's survival, even if contained in Iraq and Syria, in part by spreading elsewhere and threatening states worldwide with terrorist attacks. Accompanying these developments is serious disappointment in Washington from key allies, including Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf states. The U.S. administration's unwillingness to take effective and risky action in almost any

circumstance is seen as enabling the Russia- and Iran-led alliance.

On a psychological level, given perceptions by friend and foe that the United States will not take decisive military action, essentially any U.S. military move, if not pursued recklessly, would reassure regional partners and strike some fear into the Russia-Iran alliance. Alternatively, a reckless or ill-considered U.S. military move could erode U.S. standing in the region, weakening both the United States and its allies.

Nora R. Marcos, a colonel in the U.S. Army, is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)