

Humanitarian Safe Havens: Bosnia's Lessons for Syria

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Brief Analysis

Humanitarian safe havens can protect vulnerable civilians only if backed up with sufficient power.

The uprising in Syria has reached a critical stage. As the brutality of the regime has increased, defectors from the military and local groups akin to civilian defense are "liberating," but not permanently securing, parts of the country. This new dynamic offers a potential opportunity for increased international engagement in Syria that can be informed by the experience in Bosnia in the 1990s.

In Bosnia, the international community designated areas of the country liberated by Bosnian civilian defense as safe havens, vowing to protect them against the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitary forces. The JNA, however, overran some of these areas, including Srebrenica in 1995, killing many civilians. Such actions precipitated deeper international engagement in Bosnia, with NATO eventually intervening against the JNA to bring an end to the Bosnian War.

The Bosnian trajectory from internationally designated safe havens to intervention offers lessons for any international engagement in Syria, as well as pitfalls to be avoided.

Syria's "Liberated" Areas

Following peaceful protests, the Syrian uprising has taken a new turn: after months of suffering as a result of the regime's brutal crackdown, local residents are taking up arms to defend peaceful protestors and are joining the "Free Syrian Army" (FSA), a loose association of defector battalions from the Syrian military who refused orders to

fire on protestors. Together, the FSA battalions are "liberating," but not permanently securing, areas of the country, including Zabadani, along the Syria-Lebanon frontier, as well as districts of the Homs and Idlib governorates. These operations are largely made possible by weapons secured in Syria -- captured from regime arms depots -- and to some extent by arms smuggled from neighboring Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. Some local defense groups seem to be operating under the FSA flag, although without falling strictly under the FSA's seemingly loose command structure.

Recently, Bashar al-Assad's regime, desperate to show it remains strong, has carried out military assaults on enclaves under FSA control, including eastern neighborhoods of Damascus and areas around Homs, with death tolls reaching into the hundreds per day. Nevertheless, protestors continue to come out in the streets. With little sign that the international community is willing to intervene militarily, the regime's "security solution" is likely to remain akin to a game of Whac-A-Mole, rapidly driving up death tolls and potentially turning what is now a broad armed insurrection into a civil/sectarian war.

Lessons from Bosnia

Any international groups looking to provide humanitarian intervention to protect vulnerable civilians in enclaves "liberated" by the opposition should draw on lessons from Bosnia in the 1990s:

- *Designate liberated areas as safe havens.* In Bosnia, the civilians were outgunned by the superior JNA and its allies, which occupied the country following the breakup of Yugoslavia. The Muslim Bosnians (Bosniacs) then formed civilian defense units, bolstered by Bosniac defectors from the JNA. These units liberated parts of the country, such as Bihac in western Bosnia, the capital city, Sarajevo, and the eastern Bosnian towns of Zepa, Gorazde, and Srebrenica. When civilians in these areas came under JNA attack, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 757 on May 15, 1992, calling for the JNA to disarm. Today in Syria, as noted before, areas of the country are being "liberated," though thus far not permanently, by forces composed of military defectors and locals operating under the FSA banner. Similar to Bosnia in the 1990s, the civilian-defense units and any future "liberated" areas in Syria will be outgunned by the superior Syrian army.
- *Do not send in peacekeepers without a strong mandate for them to shoot back.* In Bosnia, to alleviate the problem of liberated areas being overrun by the JNA, UN Security Council Resolution 819 of April 16, 1993, designated these areas as safe havens. To protect these enclaves, the UN sent a small number of peacekeeping troops, who were allowed to use force only in self-defense. Not surprisingly, the JNA quickly overwhelmed the peacekeepers, invading three enclaves as the peacekeepers stood by. In the most infamous case, in 1995, Dutch peacekeepers watched as Serb paramilitaries and the JNA occupied Srebrenica, killing more than eight thousand of its inhabitants. This incident provides a lesson for Syria: small numbers of lightly armed ground-based peacekeepers are more likely to turn into hostages in the hands of the Assad regime than they are to act as protectors of safe havens.
- *Use airpower to protect the enclaves and maintain humanitarian corridors.* In the end, the international community's designation of safe havens produced positive results, paving the way for NATO-led military action against the JNA and bringing the Bosnian War to an end in 1995. In this regard, international outrage at the massacre in Srebrenica helped build public support for an air campaign. If any safe havens are declared in Syria, the international community could consider using airpower to protect them.

Role for Regional Countries and the International Community

Turkey. Turkey has been at the forefront of international criticism of Assad's crackdown, and the regime's brutality, broadcast daily on prime time news, has created anti-Assad sentiments across Turkish society.

Moreover, the Bosnia-Syria analogy seems to be making inroads among leaders in Turkey, a key country in potential

international operations in Syria, including with the country's powerful foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu. On January 25, Davutoglu commented that "instead of becoming like [pro-reform Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev, Assad has become like [Serb dictator Slobodan] Milosevic."

If the fighting escalates and more civilians die, at some point Turkey, a NATO member and U.S. ally, might support a humanitarian intervention in Syria, as well as the designation of safe havens. Unlike what occurred in Bosnia, however, Ankara will try to ensure that international intervention does not appear to be "made by NATO." Over the past decade, Turkey has built a new image in the Middle East, casting itself as a regional power whose identity transcends Ankara's traditional Western alliances. Ankara will therefore strive to maintain this key aspect of Turkey's new Middle East role in any intervention in Syria.

Jordan and other Arab countries. Arab countries could play a key logistical and supply role in creating and supporting safe havens for Syrians. In particular, neighboring Arab countries could provide overland conduits for humanitarian supplies paid for by their wealthy brethren in the Arab Gulf states. This assistance would be greatly appreciated by everyday Syrians, whose pan-Arab pride is well known.

Europe and NATO. These two entities could offer crucial background support to any operation, for instance, providing key intelligence, including satellite and signals, to air and land operations to support safe havens. One way to structure a humanitarian intervention while addressing Turkish concerns could be to assign a Turkish general to lead the operation run from the NATO headquarters. A successful precedent exists for a Turkish general leading a NATO operation in a predominantly Muslim country: over the past decade, Turkish commanders have led NATO operations in Afghanistan numerous times.

Conclusion

The Bosnian War and the conflict in Syria are different in nature. However, as the international community seeks ways to diminish civilian casualties in Syria as well as cripple the regime's hold on power, the Bosnia trajectory from civilian-defense-unit-liberated areas to internationally designated enclaves provides food for thought in Syria.

The Bosnia trajectory also offers pitfalls to be avoided, such as designating safe havens without a credible military structure to protect them. In Bosnia, the international community's designation of safe havens ultimately gave way to a much larger air campaign. A well-designed humanitarian intervention in Syria would hopefully protect vulnerable civilians without ultimately requiring such escalation.

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