

Kerry Neither Rules Out nor Supports Safe Zone Concept

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The assertion that such an effort would require up to 30,000 U.S. troops, and that it could risk a direct confrontation with Russia, requires a much closer look.

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The situation in Syria dominated Secretary of State John Kerry's congressional budget testimony this week. Kerry frankly refused to "vouch" for the Russians and others adhering to the ceasefire agreement he had negotiated in Munich on February 13, with a new start date of February 27, moved from a week earlier. But he was under considerable pressure, particularly in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, to explain what would happen if Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah backers did not live up to their side of the agreement. Kerry did repeatedly speak of a Plan B, which he asserted was under "significant discussion" within the administration. When challenged, he argued that it would be a mistake to assume that President Obama would allow these parties "impunity" if they once again violated commitments. But he provided no details on what the Plan B would entail and did not even indicate whether it would be military in nature.

And when pressed on the possibility of a no-fly or safe zone as a component of a Plan B, Kerry argued that to be a "safe zone" it had to be "safe," asserting that this could require taking out Assad regime and presumably Russian air defenses, patrolling the zone with a combat air patrol (CAP), and deploying some ground force to drive out the Islamic State (IS) and then defend the zone. Thereafter, he said that the Pentagon believes this would require "up to" 15,000 or 30,000 troops. He ended the discussion by asking rhetorically whether Congress would be willing to authorize such a U.S. presence.

Assessing Administration Troop Estimates, Russia Claims

This exchange characterizes the "wrestle the greased hog" problem in assessing administration arguments on anything related to military force. Be it a more aggressive posture against IS ("quagmire," thousands of casualties, ten years of war), safe zones (15,000 or 30,000 troops, conflict with Russian aircraft), or arming the anti-Assad opposition (farmers, dentists, and folks who have never fought), the president and his top advisors denigrate any concrete idea, and cite often anonymous "Pentagon findings" or senior generals' assessments, without providing supporting details. Nor does the administration shed any light on the (possibly excessive or unnecessary) political constraints and contingencies the military was tasked to consider in making its assessments. In such a situation, deleterious to political debate, the only course of action is to take the administration at its word and analyze as best one can the validity of its statements.

In the case of the safe or no-fly zone, a good start is with the new figure of "up to" 15,000 or 30,000 troops. The first problem, assuming Kerry was right on the Pentagon figures, is this: on what basis did the Pentagon draw them up? For example, if U.S. forces committed to such a zone were restricted to the same limited rules of engagement that the current anti-IS campaign is under, then a much larger ground force would be needed to ensure force protection. But even in this case, there is a huge difference between "up to 15,000" and a *total* of 30,000 troops. That is, the actual recommendation could be as low as 10,000 troops in some contingencies. Then what are those contingencies?

Furthermore, the Islamic State is now considered by some reports to have only 15,000-plus combat troops under its command spread over thousands of square miles in Syria and Iraq. And it faces hundreds of thousands of Iraqi central government fighters, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga, Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) Kurds, Syrian Democratic Forces' Sunni Arabs, and Assad central government forces. It thus is hard to see why a force about one-third (30,000) the 100,000 Peshmerga troops holding 1,000 kilometer swath of terrain against IS in northern Iraq would be needed along a 90-kilometer stretch between the Kurdish enclave of Afrin and the Euphrates River.

Even more relevant, was the Pentagon talking of U.S. troops -- the impression Kerry gave with his mischievous question to the committee -- or troops from any and all sources? Why, in fact, would this force need to be predominantly American? To be sure, U.S. troops, or other ground forces equally trained, experienced, and equipped, are needed for any serious offensive against IS in dug-in locations such as Mosul, Raqqa, or Fallujah. But there is a major difference between taking ground strongly held and defending ground. Especially with U.S. air

support, local forces considerably less capable than U.S. troops have generally held territory against IS. Why couldn't the ground force to hold the safe zone comprise, to maintain the "up to" 15,000 criteria, several thousand U.S. troops, an equal or perhaps larger contingent of Turkish troops -- Turks have been pushing for such a zone for years -- and levies from the local U.S.-armed Sunni forces, including from the Syrian Kurdish PYD's Syrian Democratic Forces allies. Some other NATO forces might contribute given the growing receptivity to such a zone by European leaders such as German chancellor Angela Merkel. More broadly on this subject, Kerry's assertion that nobody has offered any troops carries no weight. As seen repeatedly in the campaign against IS and many others dating back to the Korean War, only when the United States steps up and in do other countries start volunteering.

Assuming the United States can mobilize such a ground force, Kerry's argument about dealing with the Russians must be answered. First, if the depth of this 90-plus-kilometer zone is 40 kilometers or less from the Turkish border, then "fire support" into as well as defense of the air over the zone could rest primarily with long-range artillery and surface-to-air-missile (SAM) units located in Turkey, rather than aircraft in Syrian airspace. But even if U.S. aircraft were committed to policing the zone or to close air-support missions, what makes the U.S. government think these aircraft would be challenged by Russian aircraft or SAM units? U.S. and coalition units strike Syrian targets daily in range of the Russians without incident. Putin would be highly unlikely to shoot at U.S. aircraft not attacking his units or aircraft.

Important to remember here is that Putin has put a mere thirty-plus aircraft, along with some SAM batteries, into a region dominated by the United and its allies, with their thousand-plus aircraft. Likewise, Putin's deployment put him close to or within range of NATO, U.S., or Israeli SAM batteries to his east (Jordan), north (Turkey), and south (Israel). Meanwhile, to the west, a highly capable U.S. Aegis anti-air-missile-equipped ship is continuously off Israel's coast, while an advanced U.S. phased-array radar in Israel greatly advances U.S. target acquisition and fire control. Putin knew all this but clearly -- and correctly -- did not concern himself with a possible military challenge from Washington. The question follows as to why Washington, with far greater local and global military capabilities, so worries.

Countering Regional Suspicions

Again, if valid military considerations argue against such an assessment, the administration owes the American people -- and its ever more concerned regional allies -- an answer. Absent one, suspicions, already high especially in the region, will grow that the administration really has another rationale. Some of those suspicions focus on a possible U.S. plan enabled by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the Iran nuclear deal is known, to "flip" Tehran into a status quo power and possible informal regional partner.

Another suspicion, fueled in particular by Kerry's comments, is that the administration still thinks the Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria is a quagmire. Kerry returned in his testimony repeatedly to the "they can't win against the Syrian opposition" argument, suggesting that this is his real Plan B -- perhaps with a bit more U.S. weapons deliveries. If Putin and his Iranian and Syrian friends fight the rebels like the United States fights counterinsurgencies, Kerry could be right. But if they fight like Russia did in Chechnya and the Assad regime has in Syria -- carpet bombing, scorched-earth tactics, and mass ethnic cleansing -- they could well win.

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