

Why “no-fly zones” or “IS-free zones” are not a solution in Syria

By Hrair Balian

■ Executive summary

There is a renewed push to establish “no-fly” and “IS-free” zones in Syria. An external military intervention to establish such zones, even with the good intention of protecting civilians, is likely to precipitate more chaotic fighting and further harm civilians. Instead, the international community should build a minimum consensus among the “Friends of Syria”, Russia, and Iran to accommodate the interests and concerns of Syria’s external stakeholders, and reconcile the existential fears of various communities and regime supporters in Syria with the aspirations of the country’s majority Sunni population. Once these fundamental issues are addressed, a political solution to the Syrian crisis will become possible.

There is a renewed push in Washington for the U.S. military and its allies to establish no-fly zones in Syria to protect civilians. With well over 200,000 people killed, half the population displaced and no end in sight to the war, the need to safeguard civilians is indeed urgent. However, an external military intervention, even with such a good intention, is likely to precipitate more chaotic fighting, ensure the partition of the country into ungovernable fiefdoms and further harm civilians.

Rather than leading another military intervention in the Middle East, the U.S. should assume the more productive role of working to build a minimum consensus among the “Friends of Syria”, and with Russia and Iran. This consensus must accommodate the interests and concerns of Syria’s external stakeholders, and reconcile the existential fears of various communities and regime supporters in Syria with the aspirations of the country’s majority Sunni population. Once these fundamental issues are addressed, a political solution to the Syrian crisis would become possible.

Politically, the regime’s internal and external support base is eroding, with the business elite, the Alawite community, Russia and Iran questioning the regime’s inability to explore a political compromise to end the war. Militarily, the regime is having difficulty recruiting the foot soldiers needed to pursue the war on all fronts (a fact President Assad admitted in his latest address to the nation), and army commanders are resenting the role that external

forces have assumed in the conflict. Economically, the country has depleted its foreign currency reserves, its national currency is falling in value and credit lines from abroad are drying up.

At the same time, various opposition forces in Syria are on the offensive. Regional powers have tenuously agreed to a common strategy whereby support is channelled to Islamist opposition forces. The strategy has resulted in recent opposition advances against regime positions throughout the country, but has brought the Syrian people no closer to a resolution of the conflict. Independently, the Islamic State (IS) continues to make inroads throughout opposition-held areas. The Turkish government’s announcement of the creation of an IS-free zone along Turkey’s southern border is unlikely either to protect civilians in major Syrian cities or stop the IS advances elsewhere.

Under these circumstances, external military intervention to impose protected zones or no-fly zones has the potential of inducing further opposition advances, leading to ground wars in major cities between and among various opposition and pro-regime forces, causing more casualties and the additional massive displacement of civilians. IS is likely to fill the vacuum when the regime is further weakened. Moreover, a Western-led military intervention in Syria will stiffen internal and external support for the regime, fuelling further militarisation and violence. Military action in the present environment to protect civilians will thus

backfire – and it will largely be civilians who will pay the price.

Pursuing such military action in lieu of political strategy will indefinitely delay – if not altogether destroy – any possibility of developing a sustainable political solution to the Syrian conflict. The U.S. and all other international supporters of various sides in the conflict have common interests in Syria, namely ending the catastrophic levels of violence, preventing state collapse and extremist takeover of the country, and creating an orderly transition to a new government. If external stakeholders are able to coalesce around these common interests they will have a far higher chance of success in negotiating an end to the Syrian conflict. The latest consultations between the U.S., Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council in Doha, and other current discussions taking place in Riyadh, Teheran and elsewhere on Syria are encouraging new developments in the direction of a political solution to end the war.

The proposed external military intervention to secure no-fly or protected zones is yet another band-aid solution to the conflict, just like the formation of an international coalition to fight IS, the creation of a small IS-free zone, the air strikes against al-Qa'ida operatives, the training and equipping of a "moderate" armed opposition, and so on. These measures are politically expedient, but completely ignore the root cause giving rise to the problems that these policies seek to address – the continuing war in Syria.

These lazy solutions ignore the elephant in the room, which is that the Syrian war will endure until the powerful backers of Syria's many antagonists roll up their sleeves and hammer out a compromise between themselves and their Syrian counterparts. Then, and only then, will an international use of force – specifically in defence of an agreement and under a UN Security Council mandate – be justified, productive and legal.

■ THE AUTHOR

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