Syrian safe zones: the dangers

Past failure is no excuse for not trying, writes George Graham

Despite a supposed 'ceasefire' in Syria, the daily toll of casualties continues to climb and the international hand-wringing over how to protect civilians in Syria goes on. Against this backdrop, the contentious idea of safe zones is enjoying something of a renaissance. They have been mooted since 2012, when Turkey called for a protected zone on its border with northwest Syria, and support for safe zones or no-fly zones has waxed and waned ever since.

The Trump administration has now proposed a new iteration of the policy. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced in March that the US would work to establish 'interim zones of stability'. This follows Donald Trump's promise on the campaign trail of a 'big, beautiful safe zone' in Syria. Tillerson's more technical approach is still in the 'ideas' phase, but his comments suggest that US moves to create 'safe areas' to facilitate returning refugees are increasingly likely.

At first glance, safe zones would seem to be a good idea. But the reality is more complex, as evident from their chequered history in past conflicts. For every qualified success, such as the 1990s no-fly zone in northern Iraq, there is a Srebrenica or Rwanda. So-called safe zones act as a magnet for families who take risks to reach what they think is a sanctuary – but that sanctuary is too often a dangerous mirage.

Any 'safe zone' in an active conflict will necessarily require a military intervention to enforce it and protect those gathered inside. This raises questions about who can be trusted to protect civilians in a complex conflict such as Syria, where civilian protection has rarely appeared a priority of armed actors. The 'interim zones of stability' proposed by Tillerson appear to have the return of refugees as their primary objective, raising concerns that they could be used to prevent asylum seekers applying for refuge, to push people back

Displaced Syrian children in a camp in Jarablus, close to the Turkish border

illegally and signal a fundamental shift in the US approach to responding to refugee issues.

Syria's neighbours, already overwhelmed by playing host to more than 5 million refugees, have closed their borders and are keen to encourage refugees to return to their homeland as soon as possible – but it is painfully clear that Syria is not a safe place to return to.

Declaring a 'safe zone' can also run the risk of allowing other areas to be perceived as legitimate targets, undermining the norm that all civilians should be protected. Previous experience with humanitarian corridors in Syria has shown that relocation and displacement initiatives can all too readily be used to advance military rather than humanitarian objectives, and can become a pretext to justify continued and increased bombing of

areas held by armed opposition groups. At the start of the year a Foreign Office report was leaked that warned of two million civilians and opposition members becoming 'kettled' in Idlib, many after being previously displaced.

Yet despite all this we should not discount the idea of safe zones altogether. If a number of criteria are met, there is the potential that they could be both legitimate and humanitarian. These would include the basic premise that the main purpose of any safe zone must be to protect civilians from hostilities and to increase humanitarian access. No refugee or internally diplaced person should be involuntarily moved into safe zones and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance must be guaranteed as a core part of any agreement.

The zones must be neutral, demilitarized and civilian in character and set up with the agreement of all parties to the conflict, in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. To monitor that and to ensure the protection of the civilians inside, the safe area should be implemented under UN auspices and protected by a neutral, specially mandated and trained international force.

The proposals for safe zones, no-fly zones and buffer zones put on the table over the course of this conflict have so far failed to meet some or all of these core principles. But the international community's lamentable failure to protect Syrian civilians during more than six years of war cannot be an excuse for further inaction – we can and must do better.

Properly implemented safe zones are one option, but far more important and workable is a lasting ceasefire and humanitarian access to all besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

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