
TURKEY AND RUSSIA SKEPTICAL OF TRUMP'S PLAN TO CREATE SAFE HAVENS IN SYRIA

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US presidents proposal met with caution from Russian and Turkish officials over northern safe zones as others fear possible intention to keep refugees out of US

Donald Trumps proposal to set up safe havens in northern Syria has been met with caution by his allies and skepticism by others who fear the plan is aimed more at keeping refugees out of the US than providing for humanitarian needs.

Turkey and Russia, on whom such a plan would heavily depend, on Thursday said they had not been consulted, hours after the US president pledged to absolutely do safe zones in Syria for the people. Moscow said it was important not to exacerbate the situation, while Ankara said a safe zone had already been set up under its auspices.

Trumps comments followed the release of a draft executive order, which ordered a study of how safe zones in highly volatile northern Syria could protect Syrian nationals awaiting resettlement. Speaking to ABC News, he gave the proposal significant impetus, but offered no clarity on how, or when, such a move might happen.

Safe zones have been a core demand of the Syrian opposition and were central to Turkey's Syria policy for much of the past five years. Barack Obama refused to commit resources, arguing that the US would get bogged down in an intractable conflict and could be drawn into clashes with regional powers, including Russia.

The Russian intervention in Syria to save Bashar al-Assad in September 2015 gave Russian jets primacy over the skies of the north. Turkey, which shot down a Russian jet later that year, found rapprochement with Russia six months later and the resulting alliance has made it impossible for the US or any other country to unilaterally impose itself.

Other obstacles appear just as difficult – in particular the reluctance of refugees who have already fled Syria to return and live in a war zone. At the time of the Russian intervention, about 2.8 million Syrians had fled to the relative safety of neighbouring Turkey and up to half a million are were thought to remain displaced in the north. Since then, large numbers of evacuees from Aleppo have added to the exodus, while thousands more have fled fighting between Turkish-backed Syrian forces and the Islamic State (Isis) terror group.

A senior rebel official said a safe-zone plan was probably unworkable at this stage in the Syrian

conflict. I think its too late, this is not its time, he said. Its time was four years ago.

The official said the US would need to offer more clarifications on such a plan before it can be conclusively ruled out as impractical, however, such as the size of the safe zone, whether it would include a no-fly zone as well, whether it would be enforced on the ground by Syrian opposition forces, among other issues.

He said any such move would face opposition from the US-backed Kurds if it is created in northern Syria, given their desire for their own autonomous zone. A safe zone in the south would also be unworkable because of Jordanian restrictions on movement across that border.

Turkey has set up its own zone of influence – a de facto safe zone – between the Kurdish enclaves of Jarablus and Irfin, which is aimed primarily at keeping Syrian Kurds from forming a presence along the entire length of its border with Syria, but is also being used as a refuge by some fleeing civilians.

The opposition official said a new zone could increase the problems of forced displacement and the redrawing of Syrias demographic map, a contentious issue that has come to the fore with the predominance of Shia militias fighting for the Assad regime.

Safe zones with the ethnic cleansing of the regime and the Iranians is not a positive development at the moment, he said. It will alter the demographic balance.

As a candidate, Trump did not present a consistent position on the use of US power to protect beleaguered Syrian civilians. While Hillary Clinton enthusiastically backed establishing no-fly zones, Trump called the proposal a blueprint for world war three.

Clintons proposal, Trump argued, would pit US pilots against Russian ones, creating a risk for miscalculation and escalation, as well as potentially miring US forces policing safe zones against Assads troops and the groups fighting them, with no clear endgame.

Yet Trump also explicitly backed safe zones as a measure to keep the US from admitting Syrian refugees. We have enough problems in this country. I believe in building safe zones, Trump said in a 10 October debate, without elaborating on how such a proposal could avoid the pitfalls he identified in Clintons earlier suggestion.

The about-face seems rooted in executive orders that the new president is expected to sign as early as this week, which would temporarily ban refugees from Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq and Syria. Trump has proposed outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood, a group to which significant numbers of Sunni Muslims pay heed.

Trump had earlier also appeared to fall into line with Russias approach towards Syria, which had been to bomb the anti-Assad opposition into submission, before turning its attention towards a mutual foe, Isis.