

Commentary

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Establish violence-free zones in Syria

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The eyes of the world are on Syria and Iraq. This is a time for carefully considered options. As part of the discussion over the most appropriate strategy, we propose to establish one or more exclusion zones along Syria's borders – free from both the violence of the Assad regime and that of extreme Islamists – in which human rights monitors would be deployed. For civilians to recover their lives in Syria any strategy must address the immense contradictions of sectarianism and extremism.

To combat extremism, we need to first acknowledge, and then remove from the political scene, those who turned Syria and Iraq into a prime terrain for crimes against humanity. This includes Syrian President Bashar Assad, ISIS, most Islamist factions, and until recently Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. To combat sectarianism, we need to acknowledge the divisive, immensely sectarian legacy of the Middle East, which sees minorities behave according to their sectarian identities whenever they feel threatened.

In Iraq, Maliki is finally out of power. His sectarian excesses created fertile ground for the revolt in Sunni-majority parts of the country. As a next step, the key to freeing Mosul and Anbar from ISIS control is to bolster the locals and closely coordinate with them. This was effective in 2007-09 and reunited Iraq until Maliki began his authoritarian drive shortly thereafter. This seems to be U.S. policy and should work if the new government acts, with Sunni leaders taking the lead, especially Salim Jiburi, the parliament speaker.

Syria is more complicated, but Iraq will fail again if the Syrian dimension of the strategy is not properly addressed. This is where new ideas are needed. Like Maliki, Assad is the problem and can hardly be part of the solution. For the moment, the American approach to Syria has failed to address Assad's responsibility for Syria's descent into the inferno. Since it is unlikely that he will leave power voluntarily, key members of his constituency must be won over in the future.

Assad's power base is primarily in the Alawite community, which is terrified of the prospect of Sunnis taking over the country, irrespective of who they may be. This is where the missing link in the haphazard international strategy needs to be filled in.

In recent days, the Turkish government has expressed its willingness to consider creating safe havens, or violence-free zones, in Syria. Looking at the map of northern Syria, an exclusion zone can be created roughly at the 36th parallel. The zone could extend along the Turkish-Syrian border to include the whole of Aleppo, Raqqa, Kurdish areas of Syria in the east, and a good part of the Alawite zone on the Mediterranean.

If the U.S.-led coalition is ready to take this option seriously, it must eventually pursue the idea with the Alawite community. Such zones could eventually encompass Alawites in order to protect them if the regime begins to collapse. This would underscore that foreign intervention is not sectarian and that Alawite districts will not become the target of mass revenge. That is why the exclusion zones in general must reflect the full diversity of Syrian society, as a model for the future.

With respect to Syria's Kurdish areas, there must be an active contribution to such a project from the president of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq, Massoud Barzani, and Iraq's enlightened new president, Fouad Maasoum, also a Kurd. Both men could go a long way toward assuaging Turkish fears of the more extreme PKK supporters among the Syrian Kurds.

However, the biggest challenge will be including Alawites in the western part of the zone. This will not be easy, nor can it happen today. But there are many figures in the Alawite community who have borne the burnt of cruel Baathist rule. More importantly, Alawites have suffered many casualties in the Syrian conflict. Almost every Alawite family has lost a family member since the conflict started in 2011. A key aim in creating a safe area would be to end the suffering of the Alawite community, which may have lost at least a fifth of its men between the ages of 16 and 50.

The zone can be established step by step and be replicated elsewhere, especially south of the 33rd parallel along the Jordanian border, and perhaps along the Lebanese border at some stage, to allow most Syrian refugees to return home. As both ISIS and Assad's army and militias are prevented from entering such zones, toward which civilians and refugees will gravitate, an alternative to one-man rule in Damascus and to violent jihadism will become more realistic.

Governance of the exclusion zones is also key. The plan will succeed only if the Syrian opposition government in the zone projects diversity. In such exclusion zones that spare Syrians from daily brutality, the nucleus of a Syrian nonviolent future beckons.

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