Safe Zones in Syria

Yaneer Bar-Yam and Raphael Parens

New England Complex Systems Institute, Cambridge, MA 02139

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In March 2017 at a meeting of 68 countries and organizations, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested that the United States would build "safe zones" in Syria. Such zones are to function as "interim zones of stability, through cease-fires, to allow refugees to return home. [1]" This statement is consistent with a policy proposal to address the challenging conditions in Syria developed by NECSI in 2016 [2]. Our proposal is based on the recognition that much of the conflict in the region stems from ethnic group conflict. Establishing safe zones and creating local autonomy for these different groups can yield peace and stable local governance.

We have previously demonstrated that, where ethnic groups exist in geographic patches of 20-60 km in diameter, there is likely to be conflict [3]. We have also shown that establishing local autonomy through subnational boundaries (as is found in Switzerland) is a means of alleviating conflict [4]. Our analysis suggests that providing some level of local autonomy to ethnic groups would reduce the impetus for local conflict and could serve as a basis for peace and stability [5].

According to our analysis [2], these conditions are relevant to Syria (see Figure 1). The establishment of boundaries between ethnic populations to provide partial local autonomy would increase stability and inhibit current and future conflict. Some suitable natural barriers already exist due to the topography of mountains, lakes, and rivers. However, many boundaries will have to be established through political borders or artificial barriers. Agreements with other national and international forces to protect those boundaries may be needed.

Under the current conditions of fragmentary control and multiple competing groups, implementing a national process to resolve all conflicts is difficult. The complexity of local conflicts, and the many parties involved, will be a barrier to any such comprehensive plan. We proposed a step-by-step bottom up strategy that can provide a useful and robust alternative to a national plan. This strategy requires addressing local problems and building safe zones one at a time, based on ethnic geography. Indeed, in this context, the natural scale of intervention is at the community level. Our analysis should serve as a motivation for local governance creation and maintenance in Syria, rather than a blueprint. The complexity of governance creation on the ground will require adaptation due to the specifics of local conditions.

The greatest challenge may be seeing power as shifting from a national level to a system in which federal and local government balances national power. The current conflict is often seen as an irreconcilable power struggle between local groups and the nation-state, as embodied by its government. Here the objective is to show how local groups can coexist with national power. This coexistence is not about full autonomy. In this context, an international role may be necessary for safe zone implementation. Such a role can be particularly constructive if it serves the purpose of creating local security rather than undermining the national or local authorities.

By focusing on the local nature of interactions, the basis of community governance can be established. The structure
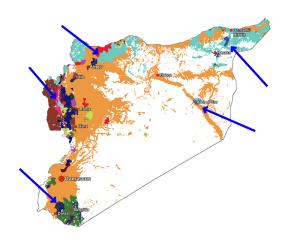

Figure 1: **Ethnic Geography of Syria:** Colors represent different ethnic groups. Blue arrows represent areas where international intervention and safe zones are desirable.

of national power, in whatever form then occurs, becomes secondary as individual day-to-day existence can be primarily determined by the local authority and only secondarily by national governance. Although Secretary Tillerson has discussed regime change [6], we suggest that a concerted effort be pursued immediately at the local level, regardless of political changes at the top. The framework for such developments might be established in North and Northeastern Syrian territories controlled by US allied groups, ideally expanding over time to other areas.

References

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