

SAFE ZONE

## Security in the Aftermath of ISIS

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*The Nineveh Plain Safe Zone would promote security, foster local governance, and revitalize the area's economy. It's time to put it in place.*

President Trump has garnered reams of coverage and criticism for his executive order on refugees, but so far the press has shown little interest in the Administration's professed desire to create safe zones in the Middle East to protect vulnerable civilians from the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. That's a shame, for there is some merit to the idea. In Iraq, in particular, the Administration ought to consider the creation of a safe zone in Nineveh Province's Tal Afar, Sinjar, and Nineveh Plain regions to protect the area's Turkmen, Yazidi, and Christian populations. These three communities have generally lived together in peace but have endured brutal violence in recent years—first at the hands of Saddam's oppressive regime and then from ISIS. They have never had an opportunity to build the stable, self-governing local communities that we take for granted in the United States. A safe zone would give them that opportunity.

Last year, Chris Seiple, Robert Nicholson, and Andrew Doran wrote that decentralized governance, to include the creation of a province for vulnerable minorities in Iraq, could offer a model for stability in Iraq and possibly Syria. Whether one calls it a province, safe haven, safe zone, or protected area, the concept remains the same: decentralized, local governance based on the principle of equal citizenship that protects the interests and integrity of the distinct communities from which it was formed. A federated model is especially necessary where competing sectarian interests and the principles of centralization and pluralism are in conflict, where the idea of the common good doesn't exist, and where sectarian violence is the norm. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al Abadi in 2015 put simply what is on the mind of many in the region: "If we don't decentralize, the country will disintegrate."

Disintegration is indeed often the result where decentralization does not occur, particularly where states are cobbled together without a sense of national identity. It can happen peacefully, as it did in Czechoslovakia, or amid much bloodshed, as it did in the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia, where we can find examples of both failure and success. We believe Bosnia, in fact, provides a model for Iraq, and perhaps Syria and Yemen.

In the Bosnian case, several years of NATO and UN inaction (1992–95) culminated in the summer of 1995 in a bloody massacre at Srebrenica. Even though Srebrenica had been declared a “safe haven” by international peacekeepers, they had no mandate to use force. The peacekeepers therefore could do nothing as Bosnian Serbs moved on the city, slaughtering thousands of civilians, most of them Muslim men and boys.

The term “safe haven” was rightly besmirched in the aftermath of Srebrenica, but the tragedy also became a catalyst for the Dayton Peace Accords (1995), which brought representatives from the warring parties or their proxies to the table (Slobodan Milosevic stood in for Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic). An international implementation force (IFOR) then intervened to create zones of separation along sectarian lines. The “peacekeeping” mandate was replaced with “peace-enforcing.” The operation quickly pacified and stabilized Bosnia. The peace there has held for more than two decades.

Iraqi Kurdistan provides another instance in which international intervention in the 1990s succeeded in protecting a distinct group that had suffered genocide and war crimes at the hands of an oppressive regime. Operation Provide Comfort (known as Operation Haven by the British) in Iraqi Kurdistan involved the deployment of only a few thousand British soldiers to northern Iraq. Security was followed by humanitarian assistance. In the quarter century since, Iraqi Kurdistan has developed into a reliable U.S. ally and an autonomous region with independent elections and greater press freedoms than are enjoyed in surrounding areas.

Bosnia and Kurdistan constitute perhaps the two most successful international interventions since the end of the Cold War. Both ended conflict, protected local populations, and brought stability. Safe zones in the Middle East can achieve these same objectives. It is likely that several will be needed. Like Bosnia and Kurdistan, some combination of boots on the ground and no-fly zones will likely be necessary. Nowhere is the U.S. (and its allies) better situated to create such a safe zone than in northern Iraq—specifically, the Tal Afar, Sinjar, and Nineveh Plain regions of Nineveh Province.

The indigenous inhabitants of this geographically contiguous area—Yazidis, Christians, and Turkmen—have been designated as having suffered genocide at the hands of ISIS by the U.S. government. Not only do these communities yearn for local security, self-governance, and economic self-sufficiency; they are also natural allies. And it’s worth noting that no U.S. troops have ever been attacked by Christians or Yazidis in northern Iraq. Like Bosnia, it is likely that U.S. and allied forces would endure few casualties.

Casualties, more than cost, are the greatest deterrent to military intervention, whether that intervention’s aim is to advance national security, humanitarian objectives, or both. U.S. troops have been deployed in Europe and Asia since the end of World War II, yet this has caused little in the way of fatigue. Why? Because the cost in blood has been

minimal, so the cost in treasure has been overlooked. This proposal for a safe haven in Nineveh Province would likely result in few casualties. It is even possible that it could be undertaken with a token force and few, if any, U.S. troops.

The region's Christians, Turkmen, and Yazidis—like the Kurds—have been reliable allies for the United States in the region and against ISIS in particular, and they are keen to provide for their own security. An international force, supported by close air support (in the unlikely event of an ISIS counter-attack against the area surrounding Mosul), would secure the region, after which it would need humanitarian aid for economic revitalization. Funds have already been allocated in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for “military and other security forces of or associated with the Government of Iraq, including Kurdish and tribal security forces, with a national mission, to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to December 31, 2019.” The NDAA also calls for “a detailed blueprint on how humanitarian, reconstruction, and stabilization assistance will be provided to support a follow on governance structure,” and to support “local security forces that are committed to protecting highly vulnerable ethnic and religious communities, such as Yazidi, Christian, Assyrian, and Turkoman communities, against the ISIL threat.” The indigenous inhabitants of the proposed Nineveh Safe Zone must ultimately provide for their own security. The core contingent of these forces is already constituted for the most part.

How would these communities, whose homes and infrastructure were largely destroyed during the ISIS occupation, revitalize their economies? There are billions of barrels of oil and natural gas in the proposed area. Foreign security and oil firms are eager to extract these resources, and the revenue derived from them, when placed in a transparent and equitably shared sovereign wealth fund could be used to help returning genocide victims rebuild communities and livelihoods.

The Trump Administration has already demonstrated a commitment to private sector growth domestically. The communities of northern Iraq would benefit greatly from this approach. This would require a resurrection of aid models that were abandoned several years ago, such as the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO), which initially met with success in Afghanistan and Iraq. There was much resistance to this private sector approach within the foreign policy bureaucracy (particularly at State and USAID). Aid for the communities in the Nineveh Plain Safe Zone should be structured in the form of economic investment, including microfinance, from firms in North America, Europe, the Gulf States, Lebanon, and elsewhere. The Administration's executive agencies would facilitate economic revitalization and energy extraction to offset the cost of stabilizing the region, relying where possible on private security firms to protect infrastructure, train local security forces (with the oversight of a token international force and civilian advisors), and generally oversee stability and growth.

In addition to traditional U.S. allies such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, France, and Germany, the United States could work to expand membership in the Coalition Against ISIS to include other regional partners such as Georgia and Armenia. (Armenia in particular may be looking to redefine its role in the region in order to build

alliances with the West and get out from under Russia's thumb.) The Gulf States, which were apparently receptive to President Trump's overtures on safe zones for Syria's predominantly Sunni refugees may also be open to the creation of safe zones in which Muslims enjoy the benefits of equal citizenship, as a means of promoting stability in neighboring Iraq.

The ideal time to create the Nineveh Plain Safe Zone is now. In fact, it needs to be incorporated into the larger strategic plan to defeat ISIS and stabilize the Mosul region. Mosul needn't be completely pacified for a safe zone to be established. Ramadi and Fallujah haven't been stable for any meaningful stretch of time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, yet stabilization efforts there continue (as they should). As international, national, and regional forces push ISIS out of Nineveh Province, planning the transition from combat to reconstruction must be a priority. The NDAA already contains a mandate to plan for the rebuilding and pacification of Mosul, and planners would be foolish to ignore the minorities displaced from these newly liberated districts, who will comprise the human foundation for any post-conflict order.

One question looms large in considerations for any such safe zone: Will Baghdad agree to the plan? Decentralization and stability are ultimately in Baghdad's best interests, so it seems likely that Baghdad would follow American leadership if the United States government were to make it clear that this is an American priority, and that goodwill between countries depends upon it. Al-Abadi and other leaders, including the Iraqi Cabinet of Ministers, have acknowledged the need for decentralization for Iraq's minority communities. Any remaining concerns about infringement of Iraqi sovereignty are offset by the fact that there is already an overt military presence to which Baghdad has consented. The U.S. government is already coordinating with the Iraqi government to defeat ISIS, and ongoing U.S. security and economic assistance is not something Iraq can afford to lose.

The Nineveh Plain Safe Zone would promote security, foster local (decentralized) governance by the principle of equal citizenship, and revitalize the area's economy. For the United States, this would, we believe, advance not only humanitarian but also strategic interests in the region. The U.S.-led and supported interventions in Bosnia and Kurdistan in the 1990s ended conflicts targeting minorities, eliminated or reduced conditions favorable to terrorist recruitment, and built security and stability on decentralized, local governance structures in which minorities thrived. This model could work in Nineveh Province. The lessons learned there will provide important insights into the creation of similar (albeit likely more complicated) safe zones in Syria and Yemen.

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