

## „NO” TO NO-FLY ZONES IN SYRIA

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**Abstract:** This study argues that the United States should not support the creation of safe havens/ no fly zones in Syria. It does not have fundamental national interests in the Syrian civil war, the use of American military power to protect civilians has many risks, and any effort to create no-fly zones diverts American attention and resources from the battle against the Islamic State. There is also no guarantee that safe havens actually provide safety to those inside them.

**Keywords:** no-fly zone, safe haven, Syria, victims of mass atrocities

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary wars in Syria: the civil war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) have created the greatest humanitarian tragedy of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the United Nations, at the end of 2016 there were 4.9 million Syrian refugees, 6.3 million Internally Displaced Persons, and more than thirteen million persons were in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup> The United States has been the largest single contributor of humanitarian aid, providing a total of 6.5 billion USD from the beginning of the civil war in 2011 through March 2017. Approximately half of that amount has been spent in Syria, itself, in support of the needs of the displaced, while neighboring countries have received extensive aid to support their efforts to deal with the large influx of refugees.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Working Towards a Better Future: UNHCR Syria End of Year Report 2016* “UNHCR” (2017) available at <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/End%20of%20year%202016%20.pdf>, [access 23.04.2017].

<sup>2</sup> *Fact Sheet: U.S. Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Syrian Crisis*, “Department of State” (5 April 2017) available at [www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/factsheets/2017/269469.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/factsheets/2017/269469.htm), [access 23.04.2017].

Unfortunately, the war continues, the number of victims grows, and their needs increase, leading to demands for both intensified efforts and different kinds of efforts to deal with the crisis. The best solution, logically, is to end the war and allow refugees and displaced persons to return home. There have been many efforts to do so, but other than local and temporary ceasefires, there has been little progress, nor is progress likely in the near future. The comments of Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations and the UN's first peace envoy to Syria, at the time of his August 2012 resignation, remain valid today: "As an envoy, I can't want peace more than the protagonists, more than the Security Council or the international community, for that matter."<sup>3</sup>

The plight of those in need and the failure of political efforts have led some in the United States to argue that it should use its military power to protect the war's victims. (Almost no one in the U.S. advocates direct American intervention into the war, itself). A very common proposal is to create "safe havens" or "no-kill zones" in Syria, i.e., areas to which those in danger can flee. Because the mere announcement of a safe haven does not create a safe haven, advocates usually call for the creation of no-fly zones over the territories, to be enforced by American air power. Any safe havens would probably be located in northern Syria along the Turkish border and/or in southern Syria along the Jordanian border. There have been many proposals, differing largely in terms of the geographical size of the safe haven and the military means used to protect it.<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration consistently rejected these appeals, but the new Trump administration has expressed support. During his first week in office, the President declared "I'll absolutely do safe zones in Syria for the people," while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in late March that the U.S. would establish "interim zones of stability" to help refugees return home, although neither provided any details nor followed up in the weeks following.<sup>5</sup>

There is widespread support for this idea among leading American public figures from across the political spectrum, including Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, David Petraeus – the former commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and former Secretary of State – Hillary Clinton. This brief study

<sup>3</sup> Annan quoted in C. Doyle, *Kofi Annan's resignation is no surprise, his Syria peace plan undermined*, "Guardian," (2 August 2012) available at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/02/kofi-annan-resignation-syria-peace-plan](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/02/kofi-annan-resignation-syria-peace-plan), [access 27.08.2016].

<sup>4</sup> M. Kaldor, *A Humanitarian Strategy Focused on Syrian Civilians*, in N. Hashemi and D. Postel, ed., "The Syrian Dilemma" (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2013), pp. 147–59; C. Harmer, *Backgrounder: U.S. Options for a Syria No-Fly Zone*, "Institute for the Study of War (4 November 2015) available at [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/U.S.%20Options%20For%20A%20Syria%20No%20Fly%20Zone\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/U.S.%20Options%20For%20A%20Syria%20No%20Fly%20Zone_0.pdf), [accessed on 22.04.2017].

<sup>5</sup> Trump quoted in J. E. Ainsley and M. Spetalnik, *Trump Says He Will Order 'Safe Zones' for Syria*, "Reuters" (25 January 2017) available at [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-syria-safezones-idUSKBN159208](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-syria-safezones-idUSKBN159208), [access 31.03. 2017]; Tillerson quoted in *Rex Tillerson says US will set up safe zones for refugees from ISIS*, "Guardian" (22 March 2017) available at [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/22/rex-tillerson-us-safe-zones-refugees-isis](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/22/rex-tillerson-us-safe-zones-refugees-isis), [access 31.03. 2017].

argues, in contrast, against the creation of safe havens and no-fly zones, because doing so is not in the interests of the United States and their creation does not necessarily protect atrocity victims. Before beginning, there is a need to clarify terms. “Safe haven” and “no fly zone” will be used interchangeably, because the primary means being discussed to defend any safe havens is a no-fly zone. The people to be protected include those who are refugees, those might become refugees, internally displaced persons, and other victims of mass atrocity crimes.

### RISKS TO THE UNITED STATES

Stephen Walt, a prominent American realist, has written that “Ever since the initial protests broke out, I’ve believed [the Syrian] conflict was not of vital strategic interest to the United States and that overt U.S. intervention was likely to cause more harm than good”.<sup>6</sup> There is much evidence for both of these claims. The U.S. has few interests in Syria, reflected in the fact that it has severed diplomatic relations with the country several times, most recently in 2014. The U.S. has long been critical of Syria’s foreign and domestic policies. It was a Soviet ally during the cold war and remained friendly with Russia after 1991, hosting the only Russian naval base in the region and buying Russian arms. It has long been hostile to Israel. The U.S. has identified Syria as a “state sponsor of terrorism” since 1979. There is little trade between the two countries: bilateral trade averaged only \$642 million per year in the five years preceding the outbreak of the civil war. The U.S. has also criticized many of the government’s domestic practices, for example, in the last pre-civil war reports on the country’s human rights record, efforts to stem human trafficking, and religious freedom.<sup>7</sup> As for Walt’s concern that military action would do more harm than good, one need only look at what followed American military action in Iraq and Libya. The Libyan case is especially relevant, because American action there occurred concurrently with the debates about a military intervention in Syria, took the form of a no-fly zone, and was

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<sup>6</sup> S. M. Walt, *Could We Have Stopped This Tragedy?* “Foreign Policy” (21 September 2015) available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/21/could-we-have-stopped-this-tragedy-syria-intervention-realist/>, [access 24.04.2017].

<sup>7</sup> *A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, Since 1776: Syria*, “Department of State” available at <https://history.state.gov/countries/syria>, [access 27.04.2017]; *Trade in Goods with Syria*, “United States Census Bureau” available at [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html), [access 27.04.2017]; *State Sponsors of Terrorism*, “Department of State” available at [www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm), [access 27.04.2017]; *2010 Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, “Department of State” available at [www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/index.htm), [access 27.04.2017]; *Trafficking in Persons Report, 2010*, “Department of State” available at [www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/index.htm), [access 27.04.2017]; *July-December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report*, “Department of State” available at [www.state.gov/documents/organization/171745.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171745.pdf), [access 27.04.2017].

justified in the name of protecting civilians. In the months that followed, however, the lives of civilians were at even greater risk.<sup>8</sup>

The Obama administration implicitly agreed with Walt's assessment. It "came to office with a conviction that reducing the United States' massive military and political involvement in the Middle East was a vital national security interest in its own right."<sup>9</sup> It wanted to improve America's image in the region and among Muslims and to "pivot" America's political and military focus to Asia, a region deemed more important. Military action in Syria would constitute yet another war and yet another war in a Muslim country; as Defense Secretary Robert Gates said at the time, "Can I just finish the two wars we're already in before you go looking for new ones."<sup>10</sup> Obama also worried about the unpredictable consequences of military action. He told West Point graduates in May 2014 that, "Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventure – without thinking through the consequences."<sup>11</sup> Given these concerns, the American response to the Syrian civil war was limited. While it did begin to provide some military aid to select members of the Syrian opposition by 2012, that aid was belated and modest. Creating no-fly zones was explicitly rejected.<sup>12</sup>

None of this is to suggest that Obama opposed all military action in support of humanitarian goals. He had, after all, argued in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize that, "There will be times when nation, acting individually or in concert, will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified," participated in a UN-endorsed no-fly zone over Libya, and appointed Samantha Power, a journalist who had written a well-regarded book that was very critical of past American failures to respond to mass atrocity crimes, to a position in the White House and, later, the U.N.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian case was just too hard; Obama

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<sup>8</sup> A. J. Kuperman, *Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure*, "Foreign Affairs" (March/April 2015) available at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/obamas-libya-debacle](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/obamas-libya-debacle), [access 28.04.2017]; D. Chollette and B. Fishman, *Who Lost Libya? Obama's Intervention in Retrospect*, "Foreign Affairs" (May/June 2015) available at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya), [access 28.04.2017].

<sup>9</sup> M. Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, "Foreign Affairs" (September/October 2015) available at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east), [access 13.02.2017].

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage, 2015), pp. 511–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony*, "White House" (28 May 2014) available at [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony), [access 8.09.2016].

<sup>12</sup> D. Jervis, *Barack Obama, Syria, and the Exertion of American Military Power*, "TEKA" (forthcoming, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize*, *op. cit.*; Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

lamented, “As frustrating as it is, there are no easy answers, no military solution [in Syria] that can eliminate the terrible suffering anytime soon.”<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of Obama’s willingness to use military force in the region is his August 2014 decision to fight the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, a threat which, unlike the Syria civil war, was thought to be a threat to American interests. While few believed ISIS was capable of a direct attack upon the United States, there were fears that it could inspire, support, and direct attacks in the U.S. Moreover, its military success might inspire other *jihadi* groups and foreign fighters as well as providing locations for training and plotting. To fight ISIS, the U.S. has assembled a multinational coalition, relied largely on bombing, and with only a very modest presence on the ground, i.e., it has employed the kinds of military assets necessary to create a no-fly zone.<sup>15</sup> However, creating a no-fly zone would divert American attention and American resources from a mission deemed very important to one deemed less important. It also might delay the defeat of ISIS, one of the sources of mass atrocities in both Syria and Iraq.

The U.S. military has no interest in the creation of safe-havens in Syria. When supporters used the precedent of American action in Libya as justification, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, dismissed the idea. Creation of a Syrian no-fly zone would be more difficult, because Syrian air defense capabilities were far superior to Libya’s and included significant Russian-made surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery. Efforts to destroy these would undoubtedly result in civilian casualties. Moreover, establishing a no-fly zone would require the deployment of “thousands” of American forces, create risks such as “the loss of U.S. aircraft, which would require us to insert personnel recovery forces,” and might not even have much of an impact because the Syrian government relied largely on land-based forces.<sup>16</sup> The military’s doubts only grew following the introduction of Russian forces into the Syrian civil war in 2015. Testifying before Congress later that year, Paul Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, identified a number of old and new risks: “Are we willing to engage the potential of a direct conflict with the Syrian integrated air defense

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<sup>14</sup> *Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony, op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> C. M. Blanchard and C. E. Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, “Congressional Research Service” (2 February 2017) available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>, [access 28.04.2017]; *Special Report: Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Strikes Against ISIL Terrorists*, “Department of Defense” available at [www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve), [access 28.04.2017].

<sup>16</sup> Dempsey quoted in G. Lubold, *Breaking: Every Military Option in Syria Sucks*, “Foreign Policy” (23 July 2013) available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/23/breaking-every-military-option-in-syria-sucks/>, [access 1.05.2017]; M. Landler and T. Shanker, *Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria*, “New York Times,” (22 July 2013) available at [www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outlining-options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outlining-options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html?pagewanted=all); M. Zenko, *The No Plan Zone* “Foreign Policy” (5 June 2013) available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/05/the-no-plan-zone/>, [access 1.05.2017].

system or Syrian forces or, by corollary, a confrontation with the Russians, should they choose to contest the no-fly zone”? Given those risks, the military had “not recommended [creation of no-fly zones] because the political situation on the ground and the potential for miscalculation and loss of American life in the air in an attempt to defend the no-fly zone don’t warrant the no-fly zone.”<sup>17</sup>

Another reason to oppose the creation of safe havens is the risk of “mission creep,” i.e., the expansion of an initially limited military operation to a broader one in the face of unexpected circumstances and difficulties. In such circumstances, the U.S. is forced to either admit failure and withdraw its military forces or do more to try to achieve its goals. The typical response has been to do more, increasing the American commitment beyond what had initially been intended. In the Syrian case, the result could be increased military effort to achieve what had initially been defined as a less important goal, certainly compared to the fight against ISIS. That is, in practice, creating a no-fly zone would carry the “potential for open-ended commitment with no significant change in the situation on the ground.”<sup>18</sup> It is easy to imagine risks associated with establishing safe havens in Syria. Most fundamentally, what happens if they do not work? Would that failure impose pressure to increase the military effort, perhaps in terms of more U.S. military activity or expanding the geographical territory to be protected? A different risk is that people inside the safe haven are attacked not from the air but by Syrian ground forces; would the U.S. respond in kind? Suppose it is Russian planes, not Syrian planes, that attack the safe havens; does the U.S. shoot down Russian planes? Does the creation of safe havens increase the movement of displaced Syrians toward them, inviting attacks on them before they arrive? Suppose Jordan or Turkey, the countries immediately adjacent to the safe havens come under attack; does the U.S. assume an obligation to protect them, a question more pertinent to Jordan since Turkey is a NATO ally. None of these scenarios may be likely, but the fact that so many can be imagine, and what scenarios have not been imagined, should be a source of concern.

Finally, the American public opposes the creation of no-fly zones. Americans are wary of military involvement in Syria’s civil war. Even after the Assad government’s use of chemical weapons in April 2017, only 44% of the public believed it was in the national interest of the U.S. to be involved in Syria, with 49% opposed, and, when asked about possible military options, only 18% endorsed the use of ground troops and 30% endorsed the use of air strikes only, both of which would be needed to establish and enforce a no-fly zone. Regarding no-fly zones,

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<sup>17</sup> Selva quoted in P. D. Shinkman, *Pentagon Admits Syrian, Russian Opposition Scuttles No-Fly Zone*, “U.S. News and World Report” (9 December 2015) available at [www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/12/09/pentagon-admits-syrian-russian-opposition-scuttles-no-fly-zone](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/12/09/pentagon-admits-syrian-russian-opposition-scuttles-no-fly-zone), [access 23.04.2017].

<sup>18</sup> D. Wood, *Should the U.S. Double-Down in Syria with a No-Fly Zone*, “Huffington Post” (4 October 2016) available at [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-no-fly-zone\\_us\\_57f29ecee4b082aad9bc832b](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-no-fly-zone_us_57f29ecee4b082aad9bc832b), [access 22.04.2017].



specifically, an August 2016 poll found that only slightly more than 50% of the public supported “enforcing a no-fly zone over parts of Syria, including bombing Syrian air defenses.”<sup>19</sup>

### RISKS TO THE VICTIMS OF MASS ATROCITIES

While it seems counterintuitive, there is much historical evidence that suggests that safe havens and no-fly zones may not be safe for those inside them. Regarding Trump’s proposals, for instance, Bill Frelick, Director of the Refugee Rights Project at Human Rights Watch, contends that there “seems to be some sort of magical, wishful thinking at work here” and describes Trump’s proposal as a “half-cocked idea.” Julien Barnes-Dacey of the European Council of Foreign Relations adds specific concerns: the “areas will not be safe, nor offer sustainable living conditions, and there are real concerns that they will be used to force refugees back into Syria against their will.”<sup>20</sup>

What evidence can be provided in support of the claim that safe havens do not work? The classic example of failure is Srebrenica in Bosnia, a city declared a safe haven by the United Nations and protected by a small number of peacekeepers. However, facing Serbian threats, the peacekeepers stood aside while Serb forces entered the city in July 1995 and killed more than 8,000 people. In comments that could easily apply to other cases, a U.S. commander in Bosnia later reflected, “It sounds good – ‘safe areas’, but the truth is the ‘safe areas’ were always a myth.”<sup>21</sup> This is not the only example of failure. The French established safe havens in southern Rwanda near the end of that country’s genocide, but the Hutu-led government was still in control there and could continue its massacres of Tutsis. Safe havens created in Sri Lanka in 2009 and the Central African Republic in 2014 were not completely successful.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> D. Smeltz, C. Kafura, and K. Martin, *Americans Support Limited Military Action in Syria against ISIS*, “Chicago Council on Foreign Relations” (15 August 2016) available at [www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/americans-support-limited-military-action-syria-against-isis](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/americans-support-limited-military-action-syria-against-isis), [access 22.04.2017]; *Syria*, “pollingreport.com” available at [www.pollingreport.com/syria.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/syria.htm), [access 23.04.2017].

<sup>20</sup> Frelick quoted in L. Wolfe, *There Are No Real ‘Safe Zones’ and There Never Have Been*, “Foreign Policy” (30 March 2017) available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/30/there-are-no-real-safe-zones-and-there-never-have-been-syria-iraq-bosnia-rwanda/>, [access 31.03.2017]; J. Barnes-Dacey, *Six problems with Trump’s anti-ISIS strategy*, “European Council on Foreign Relations” (28 March 2017) available at [www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_six\\_problems\\_with-trumps\\_anti\\_isis\\_strategy\\_7257](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_six_problems_with-trumps_anti_isis_strategy_7257), [access 2.04.2017].

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in *Srebrenica: A U.N. ‘Safe Haven’ That Soon Was Not*, “New York Times” (29 October 1995) available at [www.nytimes.com/1995/10/29/world/srebrenica-a-un-safe-haven-that-soon-was-not.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/29/world/srebrenica-a-un-safe-haven-that-soon-was-not.html), [access 24.04.2017]; see also, D. Rohde, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica, Europe’s Worst Massacre Since World War II* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, *op. cit.*

An insufficient number of peacekeepers is one reason why those in no-fly zones are not always safe, but there are other dangers. The nature of the threat may change: “protecting civilian populations from one form of lethality – in this case, airpower – may incentivize governments to attack adversaries with other combat arms, like artillery, armor, and infantry.” This is what happened in Iraq, where no-fly zones over the northern and southern parts of the country following the first Persian Gulf war did not prevent Saddam Hussein from using his ground forces to target the country’s Kurds and Shia. Similarly, in 2011 many criticized the proposed creation of a no-fly zone in Libya because the primary risk to threatened individuals was the government’s army.<sup>23</sup> A very different safety issue concerns the provision of the basic needs – shelter, food, sanitation, health, and other – to those who arrive. With respect to Syria, these needs are not being adequately met by the international community. In 2016, the UN estimated total needs to be 379,801,175 USD yet it received only 124,280,594 USD approximately one-third of what was needed, something that “hampered [its] overall scope of interventions inside Syria and resulted in a fewer number of beneficiaries targeted with humanitarian assistance.” Moreover, the percentage of total needs being met by international donors has been declining, from nearly 50% in 2013 to 47% in 2014 and 43% in 2015.<sup>24</sup> Advocates of Syrian safe havens undoubtedly expect that many people will arrive in them, but there are legitimate concerns whether their needs will be met.

Yet another reason for the limited success of no-fly zones has been that their creators have multiple motives. Protecting people is certainly one motive. Because countries typically act on behalf of their national interests, however, and employing military power to save people victimized by wars in remote countries is rarely sufficient to justify military action, there are almost certainly additional motives. In the case of the United States, “every NFZ that the United States has imposed, whether in Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, or Libya, was expanded to support military and political objectives that had nothing to do with how they were initially justified.”<sup>25</sup> This general point is true not only for the United States. The commander of the French action in Rwanda later “admitted that the safe zone was intended to keep alive the Hutu government in the hope that it would deny the [Rwandan Patriotic Front] total victory and international recognition as the rulers of Rwanda. It was also an opportunity for France to help leading

<sup>23</sup> Quotations from M. Zenko, *A No-Fly Doesn’t Mean a No-War Zone*, “Foreign Policy” (6 September 2016) available at [foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/a-no-fly-zone-doesnt-mean-a-no-war-zone-iraq-syria-kurds-saddam-hussein/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/a-no-fly-zone-doesnt-mean-a-no-war-zone-iraq-syria-kurds-saddam-hussein/), [access 22.04.2017]; see also, D. Byman, *What the no-fly zone in Iraq reveals about the challenges of Libya*, “Washington Post” (25 March 2011) available at [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-no-fly-zone-in-iraq-should-have-taught-us-about-the-challenges-in-libya/2011/03/23/AFk2t9VB\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.184f84d4f134](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-no-fly-zone-in-iraq-should-have-taught-us-about-the-challenges-in-libya/2011/03/23/AFk2t9VB_story.html?utm_term=.184f84d4f134), [access 24.04.2017].

<sup>24</sup> *Working Towards a Better Future: UNHCR Syria End of Year Report 2016*, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> M. Zenko, *A No-Fly Doesn’t Mean a No-War Zone*, *op. cit.*



members of the regime to flee.” The UN’s declaration of safe havens in Bosnia may have been due as much to great power desire to avoid more robust military efforts to end the fighting as to protecting civilians. In Libya, to cite a more recent example, the “big lie” about the NATO effort was that its most important purpose was to protect citizens rather than regime change.<sup>26</sup> A likely consequence of the existence of multiple motives is that those most related to a country’s national interests will receive priority, while secondary motives such as protecting people will receive less.

What other motives might the U.S. have for creating Syrian safe havens? One is that their creation could influence the course of the Syrian civil war. For instance, Hillary Clinton, as both Secretary of State and 2016 presidential candidate, argued that creation of no-fly zones could save lives and also “hasten the end of the conflict,” because they would give the U.S. “leverage” with the Syrian government and its Russian supporters. A commentary published by the Institute for the Study of War makes a similar point: while Assad currently has no interest in a political solution to the conflict, “establishing a No-Fly Zone could have the strategic impact of forcing Assad and his outside supporters to recalculate politically.”<sup>27</sup> An unstated motive might be to keep those displaced by the Syrian war in Syria, itself, rather than having them flee to neighboring countries, Europe, or the United States.

Some might argue that important reasons for previous failures were that the implementers of those safe havens were poorly-trained troops, that they were too small in number, that they did not have a robust enough mission, and/or that there was inadequate funding to realize their goals. Recent American military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq address each of these claims, yet the situation for many Afghans and Iraqis following the large and lengthy U.S. intervention actually got worse. While there was some progress for victims of mass atrocity crimes in the first year or two after the U.S. invasion, things soon deteriorated. Consider refugees: while some returned to their homeland in the first year or two following the invasion, there was little change from that point for the remainder of the American occupation. Thus, in Afghanistan, the total number of refugees in 2003, 2.1 million, increased to 2.6 million by 2014, while in Iraq, the number increased from 311,000 in 2004 to 1.4 million in 2011. There were also far more internally displaced persons at the end of the American combat presence than at the beginning: in Afghanistan, the total increased from 185,000 in 2003 to 805,000

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<sup>26</sup> French commander Jean- Claude LoFourcade quoted in Wolfe, *op. cit.*; M. Zenko, *The Big Lie About the Libyan War*, “Foreign Policy” (22 March 2016) available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/22/libya-and-the-myth-of-humanitarian-intervention/>, [access 1.05.2017].

<sup>27</sup> Clinton quoted in D. Marans, *Hillary Clinton Goes All-In on Syria No-Fly Zone*, “Huffington Post” (20 October 2016) available at [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clinton-syria-no-fly-zone-third-debate\\_us\\_58084280e4b0180a36e91a53](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clinton-syria-no-fly-zone-third-debate_us_58084280e4b0180a36e91a53), [access 24.04.2017]; *U.S. Options for a Syrian No-Fly Zone*, Institute for the Study of War (3 November 2015) available at [www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/us-options-syrian-no-fly-zone](http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/us-options-syrian-no-fly-zone), [access 24.04.2017].

in 2014 and from near zero in Iraq in 2004 to 1.3 million in 2011.<sup>28</sup> These societies also remained very violent: the “Costs of War” project estimates that more than 31,000 Afghan civilians and between 137,000–165,000 Iraqi civilians were “direct war casualties” between October 2001 and July 2016.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, the Americans had not brought security – a crucial factor for the behavior of refugees and the internally displaced to either country. Moreover, their military presence did not have a positive impact on the extent of political persecution, another factor influencing refugee and IDP behavior. A composite of three indicators of the Fragile States Index that seem most relevant to human rights and political persecution “group grievance,” “human rights/rule of law,” and “security apparatus” all worsened from the time of the Americans’ arrival to their departure.<sup>30</sup> The primary reason these indicators became worse was the inability of the United States to solve the political/military conflict that forced people to flee their homes. Given these experiences, it is optimistic in the extreme to predict believe that Syrian no-fly zones created with less of a commitment, using fewer American forces and in an infinitely more complex political environment will ease, much less solve, the calamitous situation faced by the Syrian population.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified a number of reasons why the United States should say “no” to a no-fly zone/safe haven in Syria. The civil war there, while tragic, does not represent a direct threat to the United States, there are risks associated with the exertion of American military power and uncertainties about whether a limited use of force can achieve the objectives set for it. There are also doubts whether safe havens do, in fact, keep people safe.

What can the United States say “yes” to in Syria? There are a number of things it can do, in the region and in Washington, to ease the situation for Syrian victims. The United States should continue to fight the Islamic State; defeating it removes one threat to Syrian civilians, although not the major threat. Progress is being made: ISIS lost 14% of its territory in 2015 and another 25% in 2016 and has also lost some of its sources of funding.<sup>31</sup> With respect to the Syrian civil war,

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<sup>28</sup> *Refugee and Asylum Seeker Populations by Country of Origin and Destination, 2000–2015*, “Migration Policy Institute” available at [www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-populations-country-origin-and-destination](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-populations-country-origin-and-destination), [access 20.04.2017].

<sup>29</sup> *Costs of War* “Brown University Watson Institute” (August 2016) available at <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2016/direct-war-death-toll-iraq-afghanistan-and-pakistan-2001–370000>, [access 9.04.2017].

<sup>30</sup> *The Fragile States Index* “Fund for Peace” available at <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2016>, [access 21.04.2017].

<sup>31</sup> *Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps*, “BBC” (28 April 2017) available at [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034), [access 2.05.2017].

while the U.S. cannot end the war, it can work to affect how it is being fought, e.g., by supporting current efforts to create local “de-escalation zones,” local cease-fires, or evacuating civilians from combat zones. These might have the effect of making some Syrian civilians relatively “safer.” The U.S. should also increase its funding for humanitarian efforts inside and outside Syria.

The United States should also increase the number of Syrian refugees it admits. It has a very poor record in this regard. In the first three fiscal years (FY) following the beginning of the civil war (FY 2012–14), just 172 Syrian refugees were admitted to the United States. That total saw a large increase in percentage terms in FY 2015, but the total was still only 1,682. The Obama administration pledged to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees in FY 2016, a goal it realized with the admission of 12,587. Another 3,566 were admitted in the first quarter of FY 2017 (October 1–December 31, 2016), but President Trump has promised to reduce overall refugee admissions and has suspended refugee admissions from Syria. What the U.S. should be doing is emulating its neighbor, Canada, which admitted more than 40,000 Syrian refugees between November 4, 2015 and January 29, 2017.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the U.S. should use the enormity of the Syrian humanitarian crisis as an impetus to prepare to mitigate the next one. It and many other members of the international community always promise “never again” when dealing with today’s humanitarian crisis, but typically do not change their behavior when tomorrow’s humanitarian crisis happens. Obama created the Atrocities Prevention Board, the United Nations has created an Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, and numerous non-governmental organizations have studied the causes and course of mass atrocity crimes, and proposed methods for dealing with them.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the very calamitousness of the Syrian crisis, a war that “changed the world,”<sup>34</sup> and impacted countries and institutions far and wide, will induce the United States and others to place more emphasis on such efforts.

### **Tytuł: ‘Nie’ dla stref zakazu lotów w Syrii**

**Streszczenie.** W niniejszym artykule stwierdzono, że Stany Zjednoczone nie powinny wspierać tworzenia bezpiecznych przystani / nie ma stref w Syrii. Nie ma fundamentalnych interesów narodowych w wojnie domowej w Syrii, używanie amerykańskiej

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<sup>32</sup> J. Zong and J. Batalova, *Syrian Refugees in the United States*, “Migration Policy Institute” (12 January 2017) available at [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states), [access 2.05.2017]; #WelcomRefugees: Key Figures, “Government of Canada” available at <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/milestones.asp>, [access 2.05.2017].

<sup>33</sup> *Atrocities Prevention*, “Department of State” available at [www.state.gov/j/atrocitiesprevention/](http://www.state.gov/j/atrocitiesprevention/), [access 2.05.2017]; *Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect*, “United Nations” available at [www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/index.html](http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/index.html), [access 2.05.2017].

<sup>34</sup> A. Barnard, *Syria Changed the World*, “New York Times” (21 April 2017) available at [www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/sunday-review/one-countrys-war-changed-the-world.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/sunday-review/one-countrys-war-changed-the-world.html), [access 2.05.2017].

siły militarnej w celu ochrony cywilów ma wiele zagrożeń, a wszelkie wysiłki na rzecz utworzenia stref lotnych odbijają amerykańską uwagę i zasoby z walki z islamskim państwem. Nie ma też gwarancji, że bezpieczne schronienie rzeczywiście zapewnia bezpieczeństwo tym, którzy są w środku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** strefy zakazu lotów, strefy bezpieczeństwa, Syria, ofiary masowej przemocy

