

Turkey's Buffer Zone in Northern Syria and Its Impact on Irregular Migration

ÖMER YILMAZ

Ministry of Internal Affairs, Turkey
ORCID No: 0000-0001-5257-4653

ABSTRACT *This commentary examines Ankara's 'safe zones' in Northern Syria, as well as elaborating on whether creating safe zones in response to the war in Syria and the subsequent humanitarian catastrophe was a choice or a requirement for Ankara in terms of irregular migration and border security. Turkey has declared multiple safe zones within Syria's borders, using its right to self-defense under international law, to battle terrorist organizations that have taken advantage of the rising authority vacuum on Syrian land to put Turkish borders and nationals in danger. After an examination of the critical turning points in the Syrian civil war, the paper proposes that the safe zones serve three preemptive and prospective functions by providing a safe haven for the civilian population, by paving a step forward in the counter-terrorism campaign, and attempts to stop irregular migration and finally, by allowing Syrians to return to their homeland.*

Keywords: Syria, Turkey, Safe Zones, Refugees

Insight Turkey 2022
Vol. 24 / No. 1 / pp. 55-71

Received Date: 01/02/2022 • Accepted Date: 03/10/2022 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2022241.4

Introduction

Irregular migration has certainly been one of the most important items on the global political agenda in the 21st century. Fleeing war, instability, and economic underdevelopment, many people take huge risks to pursue a safer and more prosperous future by leaving their native lands and relocating to other countries. Turkey's neighborhood has witnessed some of the most striking and tragic repercussions of that development in recent years. Experiencing economic and political instability as well as security problems due to war or internal conflict, many people from countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have been trying to migrate to safer and more prosperous nations in the West. Without a doubt, Turkey has been the most frequently targeted country as part of those migratory movements stemming from the Middle East. In addition to being located on an ancient migration route between the East and the West, the country's stable and robust state structure, together with its history and cultural background, make it a convenient choice for refugees looking for a sanctuary.

In the wake of internal strife, which began in the summer of 2011, Syria emerged as the leading source of migrants trying to relocate to other countries. As domestic tensions further escalated over the following years, the clashes between the regime and the opposition took a violent turn. At the same time, terrorist organizations gained significant power and room for maneuver. According

to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (OHCHR), more than 350,000 people have lost their lives¹ due to the fighting, as instability –together with the power vacuum and the worsening economic situation– forced many to relocate to other parts of Syria or other countries altogether. Accordingly, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 6.6 million Syrians have left their country since the summer of 2011 to become refugees elsewhere, whereas 6.7 million Syrian nationals were internally displaced. Furthermore, 13.4 million Syrians became dependent on humanitarian aid and protection.² This humanitarian disaster in Syria clearly accounts for the fact that the country remains the main source of migrants around the world.

Turkey, which shares the longest land border with Syria among the country's neighbors, was affected by the unfolding tragedy and migratory movements more than any other nation. From the civil war's early days, Ankara implemented an 'open-door' policy toward Syrians fleeing war and acts of terrorism.³ At the same time, it attempted to persuade the Coalition, which was formed under U.S. leadership to intervene in the Syrian civil war, and eliminate the ISIS threat, and to establish a 'safe zone' in Northern Syria.⁴ However, this was to no avail. Indeed, the Obama Administration announced that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would be Washington's 'red line'⁵ –which it then failed to enforce in the wake of a chemical attack, making no attempt

to step in and protect the civilian population.⁶ Ultimately, due to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, close to four million Syrians sought refuge in Turkey.⁷

Meanwhile, the so-called ISIS gained major influence in Turkey's southern neighbors, whilst carrying out a series of bombings, suicide attacks, and mass shootings on Turkish soil between late 2015 and early 2017. In addition to 13 members of Turkey's security forces, these acts of terrorism claimed 315 civilian lives and injured 1,206 people. In response to the group's deliberate targeting of Kilis, a Turkish city near the Syrian border, with rockets and mortars within the first eight months of 2016 and the resulting deaths of 24 people (13 Turks and 11 Syrians),⁸ Ankara launched Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24, 2016.⁹ The stated purpose of that operation was to protect the lives of Turkish citizens within Turkey's borders, to remove all terrorist groups from the border, and to prevent the 'terror corridor' that the terrorist organization PKK's Syrian component, PYD, attempted to create in northern Syria by linking its 'cantons' to the east of the Euphrates River and the Afrin region.¹⁰ The operation was completed on March 29, 2017, resulting in the killing of more than 3,000 terrorists and the liberation of some 2,000 km² of territory.¹¹

Likewise, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch on January 20, 2018, to liberate the Afrin region from the terrorist organization PKK/PYD. Some 90 rocket, missile, and mortar

This humanitarian disaster in Syria clearly accounts for the fact that the country remains the main source of migrants around the world

attacks against Turkey's border towns, Kilis and Hatay, resulted in seven deaths and left 107 others injured. The operation lasted two months, resulting in the liberation of that area on March 18.¹² Finally, the Turkish Armed Forces launched Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019, in cooperation with the Syrian National Army, and announced that its mission was accomplished by October 23. As a result of these operations, Turkey has liberated approximately 8,234 km² of territory in northern Syria with a maximum depth of 30 kilometers from the border, which was previously controlled by terrorist groups. Whereas Operation Euphrates Shield brought security to Jarablus, al-Rai, Soran, Azaz, Marea, Akhtarin, and al-Bab, Operation Olive Branch resulted in the liberation of Afrin. Finally, Operation Peace Spring restored stability in Ras al-Ayn, Tal Abyad, and surrounding areas.¹³ More recently, on February 27, 2020, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield within the de-escalation zone in Idlib. Consequently, the Turkish Armed Forces and the regime's opponents gained control over 3,394 km² of territory.

The stated purpose of Turkey's operations into Syria has been to combat

Keeping in mind the difficulty that defending its territory unilaterally and in the absence of authority across the border, Ankara felt compelled to take cross-border measures on Syrian soil due to the ongoing civil war

terrorism and to ensure the safety of its borders. Another consideration, however, was to take precautions against future waves of migration, which could have certainly undermined the country's domestic stability.¹⁴ After all, the UNHCR states that Turkey continues to host more refugees than any other country in the world, having admitted nearly four million Syrians to its sovereign territory in addition to asylum seekers from other countries.¹⁵ Provided that the current situation already puts a strain on Turkey's capacity, the Turkish authorities assessed that an additional wave of migration from Syria could give rise to a much greater challenge.¹⁶

This study analyzes Ankara's 'safe zones' in Northern Syria and its policy toward those areas. At the same time, it will attempt to answer the question of whether establishing safe zones in response to the Syrian civil war and the resulting humanitarian crisis was a choice or a necessity for Ankara within the context of irreg-

ular migration and border security. Last but not least, the final part is devoted to an assessment of the 'safe zone' policy's prospects.

The Role of Safe Zones in Preventing the Refugee Influx

Even though Ankara began to admit Syrian war victims in line with its 'open door' policy in the Syrian civil war early stages, it felt the need to take additional physical precautions at the border. As part of that effort, Turkey sealed 98 percent of its land border with Syria by building a 3-meter-high concrete wall and placing one-meter-high barbed wire on top of that wall –altogether, a four-meter-high obstacle. It also tightened the security of its southern border with the help of guard towers, patrol roads, reinforced wire nets, lighting systems, active border patrol units, observation balloons, drones, and mobile armored vehicles, in addition to aerial and land surveillance systems, acoustic sensors, remote-controlled weapon systems, anti-laser guns, and auto-recognition software.¹⁷

Thanks to these precautions, Turkey has made considerable progress in securing its southern border and preventing irregular migration.¹⁸ Keeping in mind the difficulty that defending its territory unilaterally and in the absence of authority across the border, Ankara felt compelled to take cross-border measures on Syrian soil due to the ongoing civil war. Although the main purpose of these steps was to protect its borders and citizens, in

Idlib' de İnsani Durum Humanitarian Situation in Idlib



line with the principle of self-defense, managing migratory flows was the main source of motivation behind operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield in Idlib.¹⁹

Overall, the safe zones have three distinct functions. Primarily, they provide shelter to civilians fleeing regime attacks during periods of escalation, whilst mitigating the pressure on Ankara by discouraging migratory flows toward the Turkish border. The safe zones, which represent a safe haven for the civilian population, reduce the need to approach the Turkish border and serve as a crucial shield against fresh waves of migration. For example, nearly one million people were forced to flee their homes in the Eastern Aleppo countryside and Idlib's southern parts due to Russia's heavy aerial bombardment and simultane-

ous regime attacks in 2020.²⁰ Whereas some 550,000 people sought refuge in Idlib, near the Turkish border, the rest relocated to the 'safe zones' that Turkey had established as a result of the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations.²¹ There is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of migrants would have directly headed to Turkey, had Ankara not adopted its 'safe zone' policy and liberated the relevant areas from terrorist organizations. As such, the safe zones not only made a vital contribution to Turkey's border security but also created a safe space for people fleeing regime or terror attacks –thus serving as a buffer that hinders the flow of refugees toward the Turkish territory.

Secondly, the safe zones, where Ankara works with the local authorities to bring life back to normal, serve as an advanced outpost to combat ter-

The UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Kevin Kennedy (L2), previous head of Turkey's AFAD, Mehmet Güllüoğlu (R2) and Director of the White Helmets, Raed al-Saleh (R) attend the International Idlib Conference on March 5, 2020, in Istanbul, Turkey.

SERHAT ÇAĞDAŞ / AA

rorism and cope with irregular migration. In other words, Turkey not only ensured the safety of those liberated areas in a military sense but also adopted policies geared toward stopping terrorists taking root in those places anew and eliminating the ‘push’ factors that lead Syrians to violate the Turkish border in the first place.

Thirdly, having brought life back to normal in the safe zones, Turkey aims to facilitate the return of Syrian nationals, to whom it offered sanctuary, to their native land. In this regard, the safe zones’ third purpose is to enable Syrian nationals, who want to return to Syria voluntarily, to go back. Moreover, Turkey adopts policies to encourage Syrian asylum seekers to return home to alleviate the pressure on itself.

What follows is an analysis of the policy choices that Ankara made to bring life back to normal in the safe zones and to mitigate migratory pressures on Turkey.

Restoring Normalcy in the Safe Zones

The Turkish government work with the local authorities within the safe zones to repair critical infrastructure, which was damaged by the civil war and acts of terrorism, and assist in key areas, including public safety, the judiciary, education, healthcare, religious services, and humanitarian assistance. Moreover, it takes necessary steps to help the region’s economic infrastructure recover and

strengthen, to encourage commercial and industrial activities, and to repair and improve the infrastructure and the superstructure alike. These forms of assistance represent part of a broader policy that aims to bring people’s lives back to normal and to improve the local population’s living standards.

Public Safety and Justice

Turkey supports local law enforcement agencies and the justice system, which operate under the control of the local authorities, as part of a ‘train and equip’ program to help the safe zones’ residents to lead safer lives. As such, the country hopes to combat terrorist groups across its southern border and to address security concerns –a major source of irregular migration. In this context, over the 10,000-strong police force, which was trained by Turkey’s security advisors and reports to the local councils, continues to operate in the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring zones. Furthermore, the judicial system, which was covered by the ‘train and equip’ program, remains operational in all aforementioned safe zones. The local authorities thus provide judicial services to the population through primary and secondary courts.

In addition to dealing with everyday incidents, the local police force and the justice system play a critical role in the fight against terrorist organizations. Thanks to their operations in the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring zones, a resurgence of terrorist entities in those areas is

prevented. In this sense, they not only defend their lands against terrorists but also make an indirect contribution to Turkey's border security. In other words, the law enforcement agencies and the court system in the safe zones combat terrorist organizations to ensure the safety of their population, whilst preventing those groups from carrying out terror attacks on Turkish soil.²² Indeed, the fact that Turkey's border towns suffered no attacks since the country's adoption of the 'safe zone' policy and the end of terror attacks, which the authorities believed to have been perpetrated by ISIS and PYD on Turkish soil, were undoubtedly linked to efforts to start defending the homeland across the border.²³

At the same time, the Turkish-backed local civilian and military security forces have been cracking down on human trafficking networks and drug smugglers inside their respective safe zones as well as their outskirts. In this regard, the local military forces and law enforcement agents conduct raids to target human and drug traffickers. Those individuals are processed before appearing before local courts.²⁴ Let us recall that those operations take place on the main migration route between the Middle East and Western Europe for the purpose of depriving terrorist organizations and other illegal groups of a major source of revenue. As such, the Turkish-backed Syrian forces' crackdown on irregular migration and drug trafficking networks is obviously relevant to the safety of third countries, starting with Europe.

Turkey supports local law enforcement agencies and the justice system, which operate under the control of the local authorities, as part of a 'train and equip' program to help the safe zones' residents to lead safer lives

Assistance in the Area of Education

Education is undoubtedly the most effective way to combat terrorism and extremism. At the same time, the need for education encourages migrants to leave their countries. In this context, as part of efforts to bring life back to normal, two-thirds of some 1,500 schools in the safe zones have been repaired with the help of the Turkish Maarif Foundation and the Ministry of National Education. Furthermore, Turkey oversaw the construction of additional schools, in line with the safe zones' growing population, through non-governmental organizations. At this time, close to 15,000 educators operate inside the safe zones, attempting to address one of the region's most serious problems –the lack of education. They seek to address the educational needs of over 350,000 students in order to deny terrorist organizations an opportunity to find new recruits in the area.²⁵

Moreover, a large number of Public Education Centers operate inside the

Within the framework of ongoing efforts to bring life back to normal inside the safe zones, Ankara has also attached importance to projects intended to strengthen infrastructure and superstructure

safe zones, providing professional courses (e.g. hair styling, computer maintenance, surgical mask production, car maintenance, iron joinery, etc.) and aiming to train the desperately needed workforce to boost production in the area. Non-governmental organizations aim to provide funding to a limited number of individuals, upon completing those courses, to help them start their own businesses and stop depending on financial assistance.²⁶

The Yunus Emre Cultural Center, which was launched in Azaz in 2020, in turn, seeks to meet the local population's demand for Turkish language courses and to promote Turkish culture in the region, to strengthen the cultural ties between the local population and the Turkish people.²⁷ Moreover, science and technology high schools, which the Maarif Foundation established in Azaz and al-Rai in 2021, are expected to start a new chapter in secondary education by improving the overall quality of education.

The Turkish government attaches a lot of importance to higher education as well. In this regard, Gaziantep University's School of Islamic Sciences, School of Education Sciences, Professional School of Health, and School of Economic and Administrative Sciences operate, respectively in Azaz, Afrin, Jarablus, and al-Bab. Moreover, the University of Medical Sciences has opened a medical school in al-Rai, which admitted its first group of students in 2021. At the same time, the Free University of Aleppo –which is based in Azaz and under the authority of the Syrian Interim Government– continues to train students at 16 schools and seven institutes.²⁸ Finally, two private universities (International Damascus University²⁹ and Nahda University³⁰) remain operational in Azaz. Provided that over 10,000 students attend universities in the Azaz area alone, the many institutions of higher education inside the Safe Zones present young people with career opportunities, thereby aiming to stop drug smugglers, human traffickers, or terrorist organizations from targeting them.

To sum up, ongoing activities in the area of education both improve the general level of education in the region and serve to combat terrorism. At the same time, education facilitates the restoration of normalcy and is expected to eliminate the 'push' factors that cause irregular migration toward other areas.

Healthcare and Religious Services

Since Turkey completed Operation Euphrates Shield, whereby the first

safe zone was established, in 2017, providing medical services has been a top priority for Ankara. In this regard, the Turkish government oversaw the repair of medical facilities, which were damaged by war, and built new, prefabricated hospitals in relevant areas with growing populations. For example, the National Hospital in Azaz (which the Russian forces had destroyed)³¹ was rebuilt and made operational anew. Moreover, Turkey facilitated the construction of new hospitals in al-Rai, al-Bab, and Marea to serve the civilian population of the safe zone.³² Thanks to a series of projects implemented under the supervision of Turkish advisors, the safe zones' residents have gained access to healthcare, a fundamental human right, and a basic need, where they live. As such, the authorities have strived to minimize the population's need to relocate to receive medical treatment.

Meanwhile, it is an indisputable fact that certain terrorist organizations, including ISIS, have gained power by abusing religion. To address that problem, Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) and the *Diyanet* Foundation (TDV) have been engaged in an intellectual battle against extremist views inside the safe zones. In this regard, TDV (along with other non-governmental organizations) has repaired over 500 places of worship, which suffered damage during the war, and ensured that they resumed their operations.³³ Moreover, Turkish advisors have trained some 2,500 *Imams*, who staff the newly-opened mosques, in order

to be better equipped for the fight against extremist movements in the region.³⁴ These activities, which span many years, are intended to combat terrorism in an intellectual sense and to deny those terrorist entities, which abuse religion, opportunities to find recruits and generate power.

Strengthening Economic Infrastructure, Supporting Commercial, and Industrial Activities

It is a widely-recognized fact that economic underdevelopment and instability are among the driving forces behind migratory movements. Hence the Turkish government's ongoing attempts to improve the economic standards inside the safe zones. In this regard, Turkey removed obstacles allowing the sale of some agricultural products from the area (such as wheat, barley, lentil, chickpeas, and black sesame) in the Turkish market.³⁵ Moreover, Turkey took necessary steps to enable producers operating in the safe zones to transit through Turkish territory to sell their products to third countries. By taking that step, the authorities hope to contribute to the region's economic development by ensuring that all agricultural and manufactured products can be sold at a fair price.

Furthermore, to boost commercial activity in the region, Turkey, in cooperation with the local councils, established chambers of commerce. Merchants, who became members of those chambers, were allowed to enter Turkey freely to strengthen the commercial ties between Turkey and



Turkey has started to build briquette houses in Idlib, enabling Syrians to live in a warmer environment. Many Turkish associations and foundations are supporting the AFAD campaign "We Are Together, We Are With Idlib" launched on January 13, 2020.

METİN AKTAŞ / AA

the safe zones and to allow those sellers to reach third countries. Thanks to that opportunity, local businesses were able to meet their demand for raw products, and the various obstacles, which they faced in the past, were removed to help them gain access to foreign markets.

Meanwhile, to support the manufacturing industry and to create jobs in the safe zones, Ankara continues to assist efforts to established Organized Industrial Zones. In this regard, with financial contributions from local investors, the business community in Azaz, al-Bab, al-Rai, Marea, Jarablus, and Soran have taken initial steps to establish industrial zones. Over 80 percent of the construction of the industrial zone in al-Rai, which will host 1,338 workshops, has been completed already.³⁶ This organized industrial zone, where shoe-making, textile, agricultural produce packaging, iron-making, and logistics companies will operate, is expected to create up to 17,000 jobs at full ca-

capacity.³⁷ The preliminary work on the construction of industrial zones in the remaining safe zones, in turn, has already started and factories are being built there at this time.³⁸ Upon completion, those projects will create jobs for tens of thousands of Syrians and generate wealth in the area through the sale of local products in nearby and international markets. This development could not only eliminate the push factors behind migration but also encourage Syrians, currently residing in Turkey, to return to their country in the future.

Strengthening Infrastructure and Superstructure

Within the framework of ongoing efforts to bring life back to normal inside the safe zones, Ankara has also attached importance to projects intended to strengthen infrastructure and superstructure. After all, the infrastructure and road networks inside the safe zones were severely damaged during the civil war, hindering the delivery of hu-

manitarian assistance to the area and the boosting of intra-regional economic activity. Furthermore, the population density has exceeded its pre-civil war levels, putting a strain on infrastructure and the road network. In response to these developments, Turkey launched a program to repair and improve the region's infrastructure in cooperation with the local authorities. The initiative covered the repairing or rebuilding of roads linking residential areas or leading to refugee camps, where Syrians have settled inside the safe zones upon fleeing attacks by the regime or terrorist organizations.³⁹ As such, intra-regional transportation has become less challenging to facilitate the revival of the local economy. At the same time, the related projects have made it easier for national and foreign non-governmental organizations to deliver humanitarian aid to the victims of war.

Meanwhile, private enterprises have been providing electricity and Internet service –desperately needed amenities for modern living and the manufacturing industry– to the region. Accordingly, two private companies have repaired the area's power infrastructure, which was destroyed and incapacitated by the civil war, and offered electricity, which they purchased from Turkey at market prices, to local residents and industrial plants on a 24/7 basis under a pre-paid electric meter system.⁴⁰ Moreover, the municipal offices, which report to the local councils, have been fulfilling crucial tasks, such as delivering clean water, cleaning the streets, and col-

Together with Turkish and international non-governmental organizations, AFAD also assists in the Idlib region, where the concentration of internally displaced Syrians remains higher than in other places

lecting garbage, with the help of the Turkish government and non-governmental organizations.

Humanitarian Assistance

Whereas the vast majority of several hundred thousand people, who fled attacks by the regime and terrorist organizations, have relocated to nearby cities, hundreds of thousands of people continue to live in camps, located inside the safe zones, near the Turkish border. Today, an estimated 350,000 internally displaced Syrians live at 31 regular and some 250 irregular facilities (e.g. makeshift camps without proper infrastructure) supported by Turkey and non-governmental organizations.⁴¹

Inside the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch safe zones, whose total population nears two million, the Azaz area remains home to the largest portion of camp residents. At those camps, which are mostly located near the border, there are an estimated 200,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs). According to Muhammad

To ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid by the UN and other organizations to Idlib, where one million people are believed to live in makeshift camps near the Turkish border, the Cilvegözü border gate remains operational

Hamdan Yusuf, chairman of the Azaz local council, the city, whose pre-war population was approximately 80,000, currently hosts nearly 400,000 people due to the influx of Syrians from other parts of the country.⁴² The remaining camp population resides in Afrin and al-Bab. Meanwhile, the soaring number of IDPs in the Afrin region was largely due to the relocation of Syrians to that area in the wake of Russian- and Iranian-backed regime attacks in 2020. Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) coordinates efforts by Turkish and international non-governmental organizations to provide food, housing materials, hygiene products, and clean water to camp residents.⁴³ Furthermore, AFAD oversaw the replacement of some 10,000 tents inside the Euphrates Shield safe zone with containers. Finally, non-governmental organizations, which have built approximately 2,500 brick houses, are currently constructing 2,500 additional units in the area.

Together with Turkish and international non-governmental organizations, AFAD also assists in the Idlib region, where the concentration of internally displaced Syrians remains higher than in other places. To be clear, the situation in Idlib remains significantly different from the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring safe zones, since that area has become the final and most important stronghold of the opposition, which was forced to retreat due to the advance of the Russian- and Iranian-backed regime. The region's total population, which was recorded as 1,5 million⁴⁴ ahead of the civil war in 2011, climbed to 4 million during the fighting.⁴⁵ The likelihood of that population heading toward Turkey due to attacks by the regime and its allies, which would cause a fresh wave of irregular migration, has led Ankara, which exceeded its actual capacity to host Syrian refugees, to view that situation as a question of national security.

In line with that thinking, Turkey established 12 observation posts inside the Idlib de-escalation zone (which it established together with Russia and Iran under the agreement reached in Astana, Kazakhstan in May 2017) to enforce, monitor, and perpetuate the ceasefire, to deliver humanitarian aid to people in need, and to create favorable conditions for the return of displaced persons.⁴⁶ Ankara, which relocated its observation posts in 2020, due to fresh attacks by the regime and its allies, reached an agreement with Russia after that operation to establish the relevant areas as a red line be-

fore strongly reinforcing those places in a military sense.⁴⁷

To ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid by the UN and other organizations to Idlib, where one million people⁴⁸ are believed to live in makeshift camps near the Turkish border, the Cilvegözü border gate remains operational. Furthermore, to meet the local population's most basic needs, private companies have been permitted to provide electricity and Internet service to the region. That project, which Syrian and Turkish companies undertook jointly, restored the region's uninterrupted access to power after many years.⁴⁹ Moreover, most recently, Ankara led efforts to build 'brick houses,' which are better equipped and better suited for living than tents, inside the safe zones and at camps in the Idlib region. Following Operation Spring Shield in 2020, AFAD began to coordinate efforts by Turkish non-governmental organizations to build 50,000 brick houses⁵⁰ in Idlib to meet the housing demand of displaced persons near the Turkish border –in line with the target set by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.⁵¹ Those brick houses are intended to improve the living standards of displaced Syrians as well as prevent migratory movements toward Turkey.

Concluding Remarks

Turkey has established several safe zones within Syria's borders, exercising its right to self-defense under international law, to combat terrorist organizations that took advantage

of the emerging power vacuum on Syrian soil and placed at risk Turkish borders and citizens. These safe zones play a vital role in Turkey's counter-terror campaign as well as efforts to stem migratory movements triggered by the Syrian civil war.

Within the framework of curbing migratory waves stemming from Syria, the safe zones serve three distinct purposes. First, they create a safe space for the civilian population, where they can seek shelter amid regime attacks. As such, they eliminate the individuals' need to head to the Turkish border directly. Secondly, the safe zones, together with policies designed to bring life back to normal there, represent an advanced position vis-à-vis the counter-terror campaign and efforts to stem irregular migration. Finally, the safe zones enable Syrians to return to their country and, with the help of financial incentives designed to promote development, serve to encourage Syrians to go home. Indeed, the Turkish Interior Ministry has announced that some 462,000 Syrians have returned to their native land following the 'safe zone' operations.⁵²

Keeping in mind the many purposes that the safe zones currently serve for national security and the fight against irregular migration, the majority opinion is that Turkey's 'safe zone' policy represents a necessity, as opposed to a choice. After all, the 'safe zone' policy significantly reduced the number of terror attacks within and near the country's borders. Furthermore, these areas serve as a buffer

It appears that Syria will continue to generate migrants due to the political and humanitarian crisis underway –which leaves Ankara few options to address the question of Syrian migrants

against fresh waves of migration toward Turkey, as a variety of policies aim to discourage Syrians from relocating to Turkey.

To assess the future of the ‘safe zone’ policy, however, one ought to predict that the policy shall remain intact until the various factors, which contributed to its adoption, cease to exist. Today, terrorist organizations, including ISIS and PKK/PYD, continue to operate on Syrian soil, whereas the latter group attempts to attain statehood with Western support. It seems highly unlikely for Ankara to abandon its ‘safe zone’ policy, therefore, as long as these terrorist entities continue threatening Turkish borders and citizens. Moreover, it appears that Syria will continue to generate migrants due to the political and humanitarian crisis underway –which leaves Ankara few options to address the question of Syrian migrants.

Last but not least, it goes without saying that handing over those safe zones to the Baath regime, which strives to survive with Russian and Iranian support, before a political

solution is found would mean leaving millions of displaced persons to the Syrian regime’s mercy or having to admit millions of additional refugees to Turkey.⁵³ Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely for Ankara to abandon its ‘safe zone’ policy (which required large sums and many casualties to enforce) as long as Syria remains unstable and a political solution cannot be found –which is universally considered impossible in the short run– for border security, stemming irregular migration, and combating terrorism. ■

Endnotes

1. “Syria: 10 Years of War Has Left at Least 350,000 Dead,” *United Nations*, (September 24, 2021), retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162>.
2. “Syria Emergency,” *UNHCR*, retrieved on January 2, 2022, from <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.
3. Fahrettin Altun, “Turkey Is Helping, not Deporting, Syrian Refugees,” *Foreign Policy*, (August 23, 2019), retrieved on January 10, 2022, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/23/turkey-is-helping-not-deporting-syrian-refugees-erdogan-turkish-government-policy/>.
4. “Turkey Seeks Buffer Zone on the Border with Syria,” *The New York Times*, (October 9, 2014), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/world/middleeast/turkish-support-of-coalition-fighting-isis-centers-on-border-buffer-zone-.html>.
5. “A History of the Syria Chemical Weapons ‘Red Line,’” *France24*, (April 14, 2018), retrieved from <https://www.france24.com/en/20180414-syria-chemical-weapons-red-line-obama-macron-assad-russia-usa-france-idlib>.
6. Aaron Stein, “The Origins of Turkey’s Buffer Zone in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, (December 11, 2014), retrieved on January 10, 2022, from <https://warontherocks.com/2014/12/the-origins-of-turkeys-buffer-zone-in-syria/>.
7. “Türkiye’de Yaşayan Suriyeli Sayısı Açıklandı,” *Sözcü*, (December 18, 2021), retrieved from

<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/turkiyede-yasayan-suriyeli-sayisi-aciklandi-6835742/>.

8. "DEAŞ'ın Hedef Aldığı Türkiye'den Örgüte Büyük Darbe," *Anadolu Agency*, (October 11, 2019), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/deasin-hedef-aldigi-turkiyeden-orgute-buyuk-darbe/1609884>.

9. Murat Yeşiltaş, Merve Seren, and Necdet Özçelik, *Fırat Kalkanı Harekatı*, (İstanbul: SETA Publishing, 2017), retrieved from https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2017/10/R91_FKA.pdf, pp. 13-16.

10. "Operation Euphrates Shield Is Aimed at Contributing to Regional Peace and Security," *Turkish Presidency*, (September 2, 2016), retrieved from <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/51205/operation-euphrates-shield-is-aimed-at-contributing-to-regional-peace-and-security>; "Erdoğan: Operasyonlar DAİŞ, PKK, YPG Tehdit Olmaktan Çıkana Dek Sürecektir," *BBC*, (August 29, 2016), retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37216166>.

11. "Fırat Kalkanı Harekatının 216 Günlük Bilançosu," *Milliyet*, (March 30, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/firat-kalkan-harekatinin-216-gunluk-bilancosu-2423279>.

12. "PKK Terrorists Continue to Target Civilians In Turkey," *Anadolu Agency*, (June 28, 2018), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/pkk-terrorists-continue-to-target-civilians-in-turkey/1189942>.

13. *Land Forces Command*, retrieved January 13, 2022, from <https://www.kkk.tsk.tr/>.

14. *Land Forces Command*, retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.kkk.tsk.tr/bahar-kalkani.aspx>.

15. "Dünyada En Fazla Mülteciye Ev Sahipliği Yapan Ülke Türkiye, İlk 10'da Avrupa'dan Sadece Almanya Var," *Euronews*, (February 28, 2020), retrieved from <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/02/28/dunyada-en-fazla-multeciye-ev-sahipligi-yapan-ulke-turkiye-ilk-10-da-avrupa-sadece-almanya>.

16. "MSB: 'Bu Aşamada Harekat İcra Edilmesine Gerek Kalmadı,'" *VOA*, (October 23, 2019), retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20191023141734/https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/msb-bu-asamada-hareket-icra-edilmesine-gerek-kalmadi/5135711.html>.

17. "İşte Erdoğan'ın Bahsettiği Duvar: Tam 1040 Kilometre Göç Seddi," *Hürriyet*, (August 14, 2021) retrieved from <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/iste-erdoganin-bahsettigi-duvar-tam-1040-kilometre-goc-seddi-41872859>.

18. "Düzensiz Göçe Karşı Mücadele: Sınır Hatlarımız Güçlendirildi," *Sabah*, (August 15, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2021/08/15/duzensiz-goce-karsi-mucadele-sinir-hattilarimiz-guclendirildi>.

19. "U.N. Fears for 2.5 Million in Syria's Rebel-Held Idlib as Fighting Escalates," *Reuters*, (November 6, 2018), retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un-idUSKBN1J70V7>.

20. "Kuzeybatı Suriye Durum Raporu 1," *UNICEF*, (January 2020), retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/northwest-syria-situation-report-January>.

21. "The Refugee Drama in Syria, Turkey, and Greece," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, (April 3, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C16>.

22. "Canlı Bomba Saldırısı Önlendi! 4 Terörist 13 Kilo Patlayıcıyla Yakalandı," *İnternet Haber*, (February 9, 2022), <https://www.internethaber.com/canli-bomba-saldirisi-onlendi-4-terorist-13-kilo-patlayiciyla-yakalandi-2235551h.htm>.

23. Yeşiltaş et al., *Fırat Kalkanı Harekatı*.

24. For operations carried out by the local police force in Azaz, see, Social media account of the Azaz Police Force, retrieved January 13, 2022, from <https://www.facebook.com/azazpoliceforces>; "قبح ينوي لمر فلتت "مرزق" ئىاضق رارقب "روصا بلح فير في" نوغاتبك" *Syria TV*, (August 25, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.syria.tv/ارقب-بلح-في-ري-في-نوغاتبك-قبح-ينوي-لمر-فلتت-مرزق-ئىاضق-روصا?amp>.

25. "Barış Pınarı Harekatı'nın Üzerinden 2 Yıl Geçti," *Anadolu Agency*, (October 8, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/baris-pinari-harekatinin-uzerinden-2-yil-gec-ti/2386326#:~:text=Harekatla%2C%204%20bin%20kilometrekareden%20fazla,600%20yerle%20C5%9Fim%20yeri%20ter%20C3%B6rden%20ar%20C4%B1nd%20C4%B1r%20C4%B1d%20C4%B1>; "Official Website of the Land Forces Command."

26. For examples of income-generating projects see, "Agricultural Livelihoods Initiative," *Orange Organization*, retrieved from <https://orange.org/Projects/agricultural-livelihoods-initiative>; "Überleben Sichern in Syrien," *Welt Hunger Hilfe*, retrieved from <https://www.welthungerhilfe.de/informieren/laender/syrien-tuerkei/katastrophae-zustaende-halten-an/>; "Projects," *Shafak Organization*, retrieved from <https://shafak.org/projects/?lang=en>; "Income Generation, Let the Hope Continues!," *Qatar Charity*, retrieved from

ington Post, (July 19, 2021), retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/idlib-syria-war-refugees/2021/07/19/db8d514e-e0e2-11eb-a27f-8b294930e95b_story.html.

49. "Electricity Supplied from Turkey Illuminates Idlib in Syria," *Anadolu Agency*, (May 25, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/electricity-supplied-from-turkey-illuminates-idlib-in-syria/2253970>.

50. "Türkiye Sıfırdan Yepyeni Bir Şehir Kurdu... İdlib'de 50 Bin Konutluk Yeni Kent," (November 5, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/idlibde-50-bin-konutluk-yeni-kent-41704267>.

51. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan İdlib'de Yaptıracağı 50 Konut İçin AFAD'a Bağış," *Anadolu Agency*, (July 2, 2020), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan->

[idlibde-yaptiracagi-50-konut-icin-afada-bagis/1897542](https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-idlibde-yaptiracagi-50-konut-icin-afada-bagis/1897542).

52. "Bakan Süleyman Soylu Duyurdu: İşte Ülkelerine Geri Dönen Suriyeli Sayısı," *Yeni Akit*, (September 15, 2021), retrieved from <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/bakan-suleyman-soylu-duyurdu-iste-ulkelerine-geri-donen-suriyeli-sayisi-1575445.html>.

53. Indeed, although 672,804 Syrian refugees lived in Jordan according to the United Nations, Dominic UNHCR's representative in Jordan said that only 5500 Syrian refugees voluntarily returned to Syria in 2021 –despite some level of improvement in relations between Jordan and the Syrian regime and the resumption of direct flights between Damascus and Amman. "5500 ئه‌ج‌الو ئه‌ج‌ال 5500 ئه‌ج‌الو ئه‌ج‌ال اوڤداغ نئىروس ئه‌ج‌الو ئه‌ج‌ال مره‌دل بى لى لى ندرال اوڤداغ نئىروس," *Al Mamlakat TV*, (January 2, 2022), retrieved from <https://www.almamlakatv.com/news/84682-5500>.

TURKEY'S POLICY ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CRISIS

FILIZ TUTKU AYDIN

SETA | ANALYSIS FEBRUARY 2022 NO.77



Turkey's Policy on the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis

Filiz Tutku Aydın

This analysis provides a review of Turkey's relations with Ukraine and discusses foreign policy options available to Turkey in case of invasion of Ukrainian territory by Russia.



Read
Online

Donbas Crisis | Geopolitical Importance, The Diplomatic Process, and Recent Developments

Mehmet Çağatay Güler

This analysis attempts to explain developments in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, where a low-intensity armed conflict has been taking place since early 2014. The Kyiv authorities, on the one hand, and the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on the other, are the two major parties to the conflict.

DONBAS CRISIS: GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE, THE DIPLOMATIC PROCESS, AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

MEHMET ÇAĞATAY GÜLER

SETA | ANALYSIS MAY 2021 NO.73



Read
Online