



# The Futility of Buffer Zones in International Politics

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*Abstract: Buffer zones as a concept have a long history. Despite their frequent occurrence in international relations past and present, however, they have been treated in passing by scholars and policymakers alike, and then usually from a purely historical perspective. Their importance in conflict management, third-party intervention and power politics are not adequately mirrored in scholarly research. This article seeks to remedy this lapse by re-introducing the buffer zone as a tool of international conflict management in a new and systematic fashion. In this article, we survey buffer zones, their conceptual roots and characteristics, and illustrate our theoretical findings with an array of different examples—predominantly from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In so doing, we make three fundamental arguments about buffer zones.*

If, as realists suggest, states are like a cluster of “billiard balls,” colliding against one another with little room to maneuver and few shock absorbers, then in theory, a buffer zone serves to provide countries with more cushioning, ostensibly mitigating potential security dilemmas that might arise.<sup>1</sup> From this angle, buffer zones may make sense for countries like Turkey or Jordan that are trying to contain the Syrian civil war violence from spreading across borders. Indeed, there are at least a dozen such formalized zones across the globe, from Cyprus to the Sinai to Moldova's Transnistria region,<sup>2</sup> with repeated calls for installing similar zones in other ongoing conflict zones. Past negotiations between Russia and Ukraine featured

<sup>1</sup> This analogy was first articulated by Kenneth M. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Waveland Press, 2010). Airspace legal scholars have justified the need for 45 miles as a legitimate aerial buffer zone to allow aircraft the right of “innocent passage,” see Gbenga Oduntan, *Sovereignty and Jurisdiction in the Airspace and Outer Space: Legal Criteria for Spatial Delimitation* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Taylor, “Frozen in Time: The Cyprus Buffer Zone,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 4, 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/.../frozen-in-time-the-cyprus-bufferzone./1007140714/](http://www.theatlantic.com/.../frozen-in-time-the-cyprus-bufferzone./1007140714/).

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calls for a 30-kilometer buffer zone along Ukraine's eastern border from which both sides had agreed to withdraw heavy armaments; the agreement was promptly violated.<sup>3</sup>

This article makes an argument about buffer zones in three parts. *First*, we contend that buffer zones exhibit characteristics previously overlooked; most particularly, a strategic flexibility that allows their use as both a passive tool of conflict management, as well as an active, offensive tool of intervention. *Second*, as a tool of crisis management, buffer zones are poorly defined, which gives them legal ambiguity. Again, this allows states to buffer themselves from the negative externalities of conflict within neighboring states, yet also provides greater wiggle-room legally to carry out cross-border strikes against non-state actors in such zones. *Third*, buffer zones are an attractive tool of foreign policy precisely because of this strategic and legal flexibility. Indeed, this dual-use character as both a defensive mechanism to buffer against conflict, as well as an offensive instrument to stage cross-border operations, makes buffer zones attractive when policymakers appeal to domestic constituencies, or react to domestic pressures. Buffer zones appear as a low-cost alternative to direct military interventions for casualty-averse publics.

Finally, we examine the use of a buffer zone in greater detail in a short case study on Turkey's suggested buffer zone in the Syrian civil war, with a particular focus on Turkey's motivation to employ the zone offensively and opportunistically rather than in a more "conventional" defensive manner.

### The Logic of Buffer Zones

The conceptualization of buffer zones derives primarily from the natural sciences, as a way for conservationists to preserve biodiversity and/or prevent the spread of infections. Such "green zones" are aimed at protecting endangered habitats and wildlife from civilization,<sup>4</sup> or vice versa.<sup>5</sup> In this way, there is overlap between the political and the biological or medical sense of the phrase. Both refer loosely to a protected zone aimed at preventing some public bad or "tragedy of the commons," whether by war or by environmental plunder.

A buffer zone appears to indicate that the state, or some other institution, is failing to provide some public good. This could be peacetime order and border protection, or biodiversity conservation. Consequently, some kind of *cordon sanitaire* (historically referring to an area zoned off to prevent infections from spreading) is required to restore equilibrium. Yet, there are invariably collective action problems

3 Alexander Kolyandr, "Ukraine Signs Deal with Rebels to Create Buffer Zone," *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 20, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-signs-deal-with-rebels-to-create-buffer-zone-1411207014>.

4 On "green zones," see Warren R. DeBoer, "Buffer Zones in the Cultural Ecology of Aboriginal Amazonia: An Ethnohistorical Approach," *American Antiquity*, April 1, 1981, pp. 364–77.

5 As an example, see M. J. Jeger and J. M. Thresh, "Modelling Reinfection of Replanted Cocoa by Swollen Shoot Virus in Pandemically Diseased Areas," *Journal of Applied Ecology*, Jan. 1, 1993, pp. 187–96.

over enforcement and sovereignty, not to mention the threat posed by non-state actors—from poachers and loggers to rebels or terrorists.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. military defines a buffer zone as “a defined area controlled by a peace operations force [...] formed to create an area of separation between disputing or belligerent forces and reduce the risk of renewed conflict.”<sup>7</sup> UN officials sometimes refer to such zones as an “area of separation.”<sup>8</sup>

A buffer zone, by this definition, can take many forms. It can be installed unilaterally or multilaterally, as well as by a UN Security Council resolution. It might be patrolled by a single state or a coalition, by two states together (even prior to potential adversaries), or by UN peacekeepers. It could also be demilitarized, so as to keep the area neutral and prevent hostilities. Moreover, a buffer zone can be enforced through other related tools, such as no-fly zones or naval blockades, often making the exact operational distinction between the various terms difficult.

The major means of implementation (i.e., sea, land or air) may serve as a differentiator. However, modern integrated military operations almost invariably make the interconnection of different loci likely. For example, buffer zones usually have air-based surveillance elements, and no-fly zones rely on ground-based laser targeting. Similarly, they cannot easily be distinguished by their range of targets. Buffer zones, just as no-fly zones and naval blockades, target all kinds of adversary units based on rules of engagement,<sup>9</sup> even though by trend the latter two concentrate their efforts on specific components (air and sea respectively).<sup>10</sup>

Contrasting the buffer zone with another potential remedy for conflict or cross-border aggression, namely a wall (i.e., a highly fortified construction to wall off two contiguous states), serves to illuminate further a buffer zone’s characteristics. Modern walls along state borders are not an above ground moat aimed to repel invading foreign armies,<sup>11</sup> but instead are usually meant to deter violent non-state actors—rebels, terrorists, illegal immigrants, drug smugglers. Also, a wall is fixed in one location, and cannot usually be used proactively.

<sup>6</sup> As an example, see Bhim Prasad Adhikari et al., “Economic Incentives and Poaching of the One-Horned Indian Rhinoceros in Nepal Stakeholder Perspectives in Biodiversity Conservation: Analysis of Local, National and Global Stakes in Rhino Conservation in Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, Aug. 15, 2005), <http://www.papers.ssrn.com/abstract=860244>.

<sup>7</sup> United States/Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military Terms and Acronyms* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Alan James, “The United Nations on Golan: Peacekeeping Paradox?” *International Relations* 9, no. 1 (1987), pp. 64–84.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy McIlmail, “No-Fly Zones: The Imposition and Enforcement of Air Exclusion Regimes over Bosnia and Iraq,” *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, Nov. 1, 1994, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Benard, “Lessons from Iraq and Bosnia on the Theory and Practice of No-Fly Zones,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, no. 3 (2004), pp. 454–78.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Boston: MIT Press, 2010).

A buffer zone, by contrast, has flexible-use capacity: it can guard passively and defensively against threats of both other states and (transnational) non-state actors. However, it can also be used proactively, even opportunistically, when states create a buffer zone to use force against non-state actors. In addition, while there are legal disputes surrounding a wall's location or function, they usually have a clear legal framework, namely the law of their respective location. Buffer zones function in a legal grey area whereby *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello* norms are temporarily suspended. Actually, their flexibility both in military-strategic and legal terms are precisely why they are attractive to many states.

### Buffer Zones' Functions

Buffer zones can have many functions. First, following the "billiard ball" model, they may guard against two states engaging in hostilities or going to war against each other. Surely, this is the most common association with the term buffer zone. In this case, the states may agree to neutralize the *cordon sanitaire* and not base any military hardware there to prevent hostilities. Such a buffer zone might be monitored by outside parties, such as a UN peacekeeping or observer mission.<sup>12</sup> The buffer zone separating the two Koreas provides a paradigmatic example.

Secondly, buffer zones may serve to contain a civil conflict within one state from spilling into another. In this case, the zone could be a jointly patrolled security cordon between two neighboring powers to prevent the spillover of violence, fighters, and other destabilizing elements. Notably, such a buffer zone could also be installed in a third country (e.g., to buttress neighboring states against the spillover effects of a conflict).

In both cases—the traditional buffer zone and the spillover buffer zone—the tool is primarily defensive in nature and likely based on a bilateral or multilateral agreement. It would arise out of mutual self-interest and serve a common public good, namely making (renewed) conflict less likely or avoided altogether. Ideally, then, buffer zones can act as confidence-building measures, serve as examples of cooperation between states, and mitigate against threats posed by the other state, or non-state actors. Such zones have been established all across the world, including: between the U.S. and Mexico in the late nineteenth century; between Thailand and Malaysia; and between Turkey and Iraq in the early 1980s.<sup>13</sup>

The third possible function of buffer zones is more offensive. Since states are legally forbidden from militarily entering another state's territory in the absence of an armed attack, a buffer zone might allow governments to pursue rebels or terrorists without technically violating their neighbor's sovereignty. In theory, such

<sup>12</sup> This model constituted the basis for what traditionally was considered UN peacekeeping: the interposition of observers between formerly or potentially warring parties in the context of a neutral area or buffer zone.

<sup>13</sup> On U.S.-Mexico buffer, see Nicholas M. Poulantzas, *The right of hot pursuit in international law*. (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2002); on Turkey and Iraq border agreement, see Brendan O'Leary, Khaled Salih, *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 8.

an agreement could be mutual, and the states involved would have similar rights of pursuit. However, in practice, this variant is most often one-sided. The outside state patrols a contested area (e.g., a border region) where the other state failed to ascertain its monopoly on violence, in quasi-preemptive self-defense.

This is a weak legal argument, to be sure, though the U.S. government applied similar logic to pursue Viet Cong forces into North Vietnam in the late 1960s.<sup>14</sup> The United States established a five-kilometer buffer zone along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel to divide North and South Vietnam, yet continually violated this zone to funnel arms and other war materials to its South Vietnamese allies. The May 19, 1967 incursion into North Vietnam was communicated as “designed as purely defensive intrusion and not an invasion of North Vietnam.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, apartheid-era South Africa’s buffer zone in Namibia, then a de-facto South African colony, was instituted as both a shield against the war in Angola spilling over, as well as a way to pursue separatist rebels and intervene in the Angola civil war.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the first two functions, this type of buffer zone is not necessarily based on mutual consent. Thus, in this regard, it could be considered a military intervention and even an act of aggression. Buffer zones are then a means of escalation rather than stability.

The three functions mentioned, thus far, are all primarily strategic in nature. However, calls for a buffer zone may be (at least on the surface) motivated by humanitarian concerns. Humanitarian buffer zones are usually called “safe zones,” “safe areas” or “safe havens,” where differences in terms denote a difference in geographic extent, togetherness and placement in the conflict area.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of such a zone would be to shield civilians and refugees from violence perpetrated by the conflict parties, which is why it is usually implemented by a third-party coalition.

The relatively successful multinational safe haven in 1991 northern Iraq, the less successful UN-authorized and French-run safe area installed in Rwanda in 1994, or the disastrous safe areas in the Bosnian civil war are illustrative.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, as most historical examples would suggest, strategic functions and humanitarian motivation of buffer zones are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they most often complement each other. For example, Operation Provide Comfort, which established a

<sup>14</sup> Poulantzas, *The right of hot pursuit in international law*.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Freeburg, “U.S. Defends DMZ Invasion as Legal,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1967, A1, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1967/05/20/page/4/article/u-s-defends-dmz-invasion-as-legal>.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Ross, “S. Africa Said To Be Seeking A Buffer Zone for Namibia,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 5, 1981, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/09/05/s-africa-said-to-be-seeking-a-buffer-zone-for-namibia/4f7e06e7-df73-40a3-a36e-d7e3e171183e/>.

<sup>17</sup> Barry R. Posen, “Military Responses to Refugee Disasters,” in Robert J. Art and Kenneth M. Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp. 427–447.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, “Preventive, Palliative, or Punitive? Safe Spaces in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, and Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16, no. 2 (2003), pp. 167–185, Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 105.

humanitarian buffer zone with an extensive safe haven as well as a no-fly zone in northern Iraq in 1991, ostensibly was motivated by the need to ease the refugee crisis along the Turkish border. Yet, Ankara also was interested in weakening the ability of Kurdish pro-independence rebels to carry out cross-border attacks from northern Iraq.<sup>19</sup> In this way, for Turkey the buffer zone was one of both humanitarian necessity and strategic opportunity.

### Using Buffer Zones Defensively and Offensively

Similar to other tools of foreign policy and military strategy, buffer zones possess a strategic ambiguity in terms of their offense-defense objectives.<sup>20</sup> Under what conditions can we expect buffer zones to be defensive ones of necessity or humanitarianism versus offensive ones of strategic opportunism? We can offer only preliminary answers here. Future empirical research should shed further light on this question. Also, a definitional caveat is in order: as true motivations for buffer zones or buffer zone proposals are difficult to ascertain. “Selling” a buffer zone to the UN Security Council also requires states to play up normative, humanitarian, as well as defensive concerns. Even the U.S.-installed buffer zone dividing North and South Vietnam was billed as a “defensive” measure, although it served primarily offensive purposes.

Several preliminary indicators exist for whether a buffer zone will likely be one of opportunism or one of necessity. Firstly, the greater the disparity in relative power between the neighboring states, the more likely there will be a kind of *non*-defensive buffer zone. Clearly there is *less* need for a defensive buffer zone if one state can overpower the other or defend itself with proper conventional forces. Presumably, a more powerful state should have more stable borders and, thus, less need to erect barriers, even if a civil war erupts on its borders. Conversely, a failing state will not need to erect a barrier because the risk of instability is lower. A corollary is found in Nicholas Taleb and Gregory Treverton’s thesis that argues that some volatility is good for stability. This explains why Lebanon has been quiet relatively, despite the war along its border, its close contacts with the Syrian regime, and the flood of refugees within its borders.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there is less international appetite to erect a buffer zone to defend a state already in chaos. Buffer zones tend to make

<sup>19</sup> George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, “Telephone conference notes from April 15, 1991 with Turgut Ozal, Turkey,” <http://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-04-15--Ozal.pdf>; “Telephone conference notes from April 16, 1991, with Turgut Ozal, Turkey,” <http://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-04-16--Ozal%5B1%5D.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> On offense-defense balance, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214; George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: John Wiley, 1977); Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen VanEvera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984), pp. 58–107.

<sup>21</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Gregory F. Treverton, “The Calm before the Storm,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/calm-storm>.

sense to prevent a strategically important state—Turkey, Cyprus and Israel—from becoming destabilized by cross-border conflict.

*Secondly*, states that view their neighbors more as “strategic depth” than as sovereign entities are more likely to use offensive buffer zones against them, or in their territory. States that view their neighbors as their own hinterland tend to prefer buffer zones as a space for their own armies to either retreat into, should a conventional war break out, or as a way to pursue their non-state enemies across borders. Russia has voiced a similar sentiment with respect to Ukraine as historically part of its “near abroad.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most famously, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan less as a sovereign country than as a bulwark against India, or a place for its forces to retreat into should war with India break out.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, herein lies a paradox. The conditions needed to maintain a buffer zone can be the very ones that fuel conflict. The Pakistani government—especially its intelligence services—engaged in a multitude of shady relationships with militia groups, like the Haqqani network, to undermine Kabul’s authority. This was a way to prevent Afghanistan from becoming too autonomous and, thus, no longer Pakistan’s source of strategic depth. Hence, the idea is *not* to keep such a buffer state politically neutral, as one might expect, but rather to keep it weak and dependent. Again similar dynamics are playing out between Russia and Ukraine.

*Thirdly*, the presence of past agreements and treaties with similar content, or with reference to strategic depth, suggest that a buffer zone will be intended for offensive purposes. The logic here is that these agreements can create norms, conditions and delineated frontier areas that become de facto buffer zones long after the agreement has expired. These circumstances can then give rise to cross-border violations and an “elasticity” of sovereignty. Even if the agreements are no longer valid, states often take the approach that their uses of force have become a normal or routinized part of their bilateral relationship, thus creating de facto buffer zones on the ground. Often these states are either former enemies that sign an agreement to boost cross-border ties or former allies that see their agreement come undone.

### Buffer Zone Effectiveness

Like any foreign policy tool—ranging from sanctions to full-blown military intervention—assessing effectiveness depends primarily on the costs and benefits assessed, as well as on the comparative benchmarks employed.<sup>24</sup> A full discussion of

<sup>22</sup> David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Barnett R. Rubin and Abubakar Siddique, “Resolving the Pakistan- Afghanistan Stalemate,” *USIP Special Report* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, Oct. 2006), <http://www.usip.org/publications/resolving-the-pakistan-afghanistan-stalemate>.

<sup>24</sup> David A. Baldwin, “The Sanctions Debate and the Logic of Choice,” *International Security* 24, no. 3 (1999), pp. 80–107.

how best to assess effectiveness of such a flexible tool is beyond the scope of this article. However, judging from historical examples and secondary literature, buffer zones have a mixed success rate at best, both from a strategic as well as a humanitarian perspective. Buffer zones near the Golan Heights have shielded effectively the violence in Syria from spilling into Israel.<sup>25</sup> When Israel withdrew its forces from Lebanon in 1985, it retained a six-mile security corridor along its northern periphery to prevent attacks from Hezbollah, which it did reasonably well for decades.<sup>26</sup> The buffer zone between the Koreas has held for more than half a century.

Others, however, have not only failed to achieve their aims (think of the demilitarized Rhineland after WWI, or Egypt's notoriously porous buffer zone to Gaza), but arguably made the situation worse.<sup>27</sup> The physical creation of a buffer zone can require drastic actions to implement. To install such a zone along the Angolan-Namibian border, South African forces killed livestock, poisoned wells, and blocked the distribution of food.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, over the past year, Egyptian authorities have razed thousands of homes to enlarge their buffer zone along the Gazan border in Sinai.<sup>29</sup>

The effectiveness of buffer zones can be hampered when there is a false sense of security during a war in which zones of control are actually often fluid. This, among other factors, led to disaster in Bosnia. Can buffer zones possibly be effective? Certainly. But they are rarely without unforeseen complications or costs for all parties involved. Are there differences in likely success between defensive buffer zones driven by necessity and opportunistic and offensive ones? While there might be preliminary evidence pointing in this direction, further research is clearly required to provide a definitive answer.

### **Buffer Zones as Tools of Opportunity: A Case Study on Turkey**

In the ongoing conflict in Syria, Turkey invoked NATO's Article IV<sup>30</sup> and proposed, on multiple occasions, different types of military intervention for

<sup>25</sup> Although there have been exceptions, see Jonathan Spyers, "Behind the Lines: Hezbollah, Iran, Syria Join Forces near Golan 'buffer zone' Arab-Israeli Conflict," *The Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 14, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Behind-the-Lines-Hezbollah-Tehran-Assad-join-forces-against-buffer-zone-near-the-Golan-Heights-390903>.

<sup>26</sup> The eventual pullout of forces from southern Lebanon was part of a "land for peace" deal heavily criticized by Israeli hawks; see "Ending Will Be Harder," *The Economist*, July 2006, <http://www.economist.com/node/7198967>.

<sup>27</sup> Jack Khoury, "Egypt to Raze 2,000 More Homes for Gaza Buffer Zone," *Haaretz*, Jan. 12, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.636538>.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, "S. Africa Said To Be Seeking A Buffer Zone for Namibia."

<sup>29</sup> Kareem Fahim and Merna Thomas, "Egypt Flattens Neighborhoods to Create a Buffer with Gaza," *The New York Times*, Oct. 29, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/30/world/middleeast/egypt-sinai-peninsula-gaza-buffer-zone.html>.

<sup>30</sup> "The North Atlantic Treaty," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).



“humanitarian” reasons, including a buffer zone. A buffer zone appeared attractive to its proponents in Ankara because of its strategic and legal flexibility. Our investigation reveals its likely use in an active-offensive manner: its implementation would certainly mean extensive strikes against Kurdish separatists, and, because of the inherent characteristics of a buffer zone, full-blown Turkish intervention into the Syrian civil war.

Turkey’s calls for a buffer zone in Syria had a tortuous history. Prior to the March 2011 outbreak of war, relations between Ankara and Damascus had been on the mend. The beginning of this thaw dates back to October 20, 1998, when Syria and Turkey signed the “Adana Agreement,” a secret treaty to end longstanding conflicts between the two neighbors following Damascus’s handover of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan. The agreement subsequently was likened to a “Turkish-Syrian Camp David Accord.”<sup>31</sup> The rapprochement was motivated, in part, by Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s view, which envisioned Turkey’s role in the region as having “zero problems” along its perimeter, as well as by Ankara’s need for “strategic depth.” (This term was also the title of former AKP foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s book).<sup>32</sup> Syria was to give up the province of Hatay and agree to allow the Turkish military to engage in “hot pursuit” missions against Kurdish separatist rebels up to five kilometers inside Syria without seeking prior permission from the Syrian authorities.<sup>33</sup> Turkish authorities made first calls for a buffer zone in northern Syria in reference to this secret agreement.<sup>34</sup>

In September 2011, Turkey broke off all ties with Bashar al Assad.<sup>35</sup> In the early days of the war, Turkey responded in a restrained fashion, with limited tit-for-tat artillery strikes against Syrian targets across the border. Ankara grounded a Russian commercial plane bound for Damascus on suspicions of spiriting radar equipment to the Assad regime, even as its parliament green-lighted a motion for military intervention.<sup>36</sup>

But throughout 2012, Turkey began to pressure the Assad regime through more indirect means—by hosting opposition groups like the Syrian National Council, and rebel groups like the Free Syrian Army. It also allowed the free flow of arms and

<sup>31</sup> Omar Lamrani, “The Global Intelligence Files—Re: Discussion Turkey/Syria—the Military Buffer Zone,” Nov. 15, 2011, <https://search.wikileaks.org/gifiles/?viewemailid=189699>.

<sup>32</sup> For more on Davutoglu’s concept of “strategic depth,” see Aaron Stein, “The Origins of Turkey’s Buffer Zone in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 11, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/the-origins-of-turkeys-buffer-zone-in-syria/>.

<sup>33</sup> According to leaked Stratfor memos from Wikileaks, this zone was revised later by Hafiz Assad to a zone of 15 kilometers; see Lamrani, “The Global Intelligence Files—Re: Discussion Turkey/Syria—the Military Buffer Zone.”

<sup>34</sup> Lamrani, “The Global Intelligence Files.”

<sup>35</sup> Aaron Stein, “Turkey’s Evolving Syria Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 9, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-02-09/turkeys-evolving-syria-strategy>.

<sup>36</sup> Ellen Barry and Rick Gladstone, “Russia Says Syrian Plane Impounded by Turkey Had Radar Gear, Not Arms,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

other aid across its porous 500-mile border, including foreign jihadists with extremist agendas such as the *salafist* Ahrar Al-Sham and Jabhat Al-Nusra.<sup>37</sup> This practice has continued to this day and, unfortunately, has aided in the rise of ISIL.

A series of lethal incidents ratcheted up cross-border tensions further. In June 2012, a Turkish F-4 fighter jet was shot down near Om al-Tuyour by Syrian forces, killing both pilots. The pilots were flying in “international airspace” according to Turkey’s foreign minister.<sup>38</sup> Turkey’s President Recep Erdogan vowed to retaliate with military force, calling Syria a “clear and present threat.”<sup>39</sup> Assad later publicly expressed “regret” for the incident, but did not apologize, nor relent in his use of cross-border force.<sup>40</sup> In January 2013, Syrian forces fired into Turkey and Assad’s El Muhaberat agents even tried to enter Turkey before being turned back.<sup>41</sup>

Turkey repeatedly urged its partners to support a security zone and/or a no-fly zone similar to the 2011 Libyan one. However, its allies, including the United States, hesitated to endorse the strategy in the face of severe opposition, especially from Russia. Bombings and border raids by the Syrian air force continued for the rest of 2013.<sup>42</sup> More recent cross-border violence has become conflated with the ongoing Turkish counterinsurgency against Kurdish militants. The 2014 siege of the strategically important Kurdish-held border town of Kobani by ISIL forces curiously did not draw in Turkish forces, though U.S. fighter jets attacked ISIL targets.<sup>43</sup>

Despite such clashes, there was little public support in Turkey for a military intervention in Syria, exposing a rift between the populace and Turkey’s business community on the one hand, and its political leadership on the other.<sup>44</sup> Turks have been overwhelmingly against the use of ground forces in Syria,<sup>45</sup> and the government has slowly backed away from earlier hints of deploying troops across the border.<sup>46</sup> In

<sup>37</sup> Erin Banco, “Why Turkey Is Essential for the Syrian Opposition,” *The Atlantic*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/05/why-turkey-is-essential-for-the-syrian-opposition/276389/>.

<sup>38</sup> Turkey later revised this and admitted the F-4s had briefly entered Syrian airspace; see Jonathan Marcus, “Syria-Turkey Tension: Assad ‘Regrets’ F-4 Jet’s Downing,” News Portal, BBC News, July 3, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18685250>.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus, “Syria-Turkey Tension.”

<sup>40</sup> Marcus, “Syria-Turkey Tension.”

<sup>41</sup> “Lack of Control along Syrian Border Creates Serious Security Gap,” Today’s Zaman, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national/lack-of-control-along-syrian-border-creates-serious-security-gap\\_325684.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national/lack-of-control-along-syrian-border-creates-serious-security-gap_325684.html).

<sup>42</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, “Turkey Reinforces Syria Border as Erdogan Backs U.S. Attack,” Bloomberg, Sept. 5, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-09-05/turkey-reinforces-syria-border-as-erdogan-backs-u-s-attack>.

<sup>43</sup> Tim Arango, “In Liberated Kobani, Kurds Take Pride despite the Devastation,” News Portal, *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/world/middleeast/in-liberated-kobani-pride-despite-the-devastation.html>.

<sup>44</sup> From background interviews with Turkish and Kurdish businessmen in Gaziantep and Istanbul, Oct. 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Doruk Ergun, “Turkish Views on the Syrian Civil War,” Mideast Flashpoints, Jan. 21, 2014, <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspensia-online/article/turkish-views-syrian-civil-war>.

<sup>46</sup> Later in 2015 he switched his position and said Turkey would be willing to use airpower.

mid-2015, spurred on by a wave of terrorist attacks by ISIL, as well as several incidents involving Kurdish separatists, Turkey began selected counterterrorism airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria.<sup>47</sup> It also reversed a position barring other NATO forces access to its airbase for carrying out cross-border sorties, and finally committed forces to the common international effort against ISIL.<sup>48</sup> Concomitantly, a formal “safe zone” (buffer zone) was finally announced for northern Syria.<sup>49</sup> Parallel to these developments, however, Turkey also began attacking Kurdish targets in southern Turkey, Syria, and northern Iraq, even though Kurdish forces have been allied to Turkey’s international and NATO partners in their fight against ISIL.<sup>50</sup>

### **Ankara’s Agenda for a Buffer Zone**

Since at least 2011, Ankara repeatedly has accused the Assad regime of providing shelter and indirect material support to the largest Kurdish opposition group in Syria, the People’s Protection Unit (YPG),<sup>51</sup> in hopes that the group will take its fight across the border into Turkey. Supposedly, Damascus’ “enemy of my enemy” logic sought to punish Turkey for assisting Syrian opposition groups and driving a wedge between its Kurdish communities and other rebel forces. In response, Turkey sought to extend its routine raids against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) strongholds in northern Iraq into greater Syria. These violations of sovereignty raise thorny issues for legal scholars, but not among Turkish leaders. Erdogan warned Syria that his government would “not stand idle” in the face of cross-border incursions, and “is capable of exercising its right to pursue Kurdish rebels inside Syria, if necessary.”<sup>52</sup>

That script echoes what a retired Turkish general told the BBC back in 2007, regarding incursions into northern Iraq: “I believe operations will continue on this scale—pin-point operations, hot-pursuit raids and carefully controlled air strikes.”<sup>53</sup> Turkey has long maintained its prerogative to use force against rebel groups across

<sup>47</sup> “Turkish PM: No Plans to Send Ground Troops into Syria,” BBC News, July 27, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33671436>.

<sup>48</sup> Gul Tuysuz and Zeynep Bilginsoy, “Turkey Joins Coalition Airstrikes against ISIS in Syria,” CNN, Aug. 29, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/29/europe/turkey-airstrikes/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Matishak, “Is Turkey More Interested in Fighting Kurds Than ISIS?” *The Fiscal Times*, Aug. 27, 2015, <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/08/27/Turkey-More-Interested-Fighting-Kurds-ISIS>.

<sup>50</sup> Matishak, “Is Turkey More Interested in Fighting Kurds Than ISIS?”

<sup>51</sup> The YPG is loosely an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is based in northern Iraq and which has waged a decades-long civil war against Ankara for greater autonomy.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Seale, “Al Assad Uses Kurds to Fan Regional Tensions,” *Gulfnews*, Aug. 2, 2012, <http://m.gulfnews.com/opinion/al-assad-uses-kurds-to-fan-regional-tensions-1.1056945>.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Mardell, “Talk of Invasion,” BBC Euroblog, July 19, 2007, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/reporters/markmardell/2007/07/talk\\_of\\_invasion\\_1.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/reporters/markmardell/2007/07/talk_of_invasion_1.html).

borders, but until recently limited its reach to Kurdish separatists, as these groups have traditionally been viewed by the Turkish electorate as the primary security threat.<sup>54</sup>

The Turkish officials we interviewed early on in the war believed, perhaps naively, that the Obama Administration, as well as NATO, would intervene militarily in Syria after the November 2012 elections.<sup>55</sup> When that proved incorrect, and as the refugee crisis worsened, Ankara slowly revised its expectations. Ironically, by the time of the northern Syrian Kurdish militants' success in the Syrian civil war and their increasing independence and authority in these regions made them an important security concern for broader parts of the Turkish leadership, these groups had also gained new momentum and won international sympathy because of their fight against ISIL.

Turkey's government increasingly wanted to quash the danger of a Kurdish proto-state close to its borders. Yet, it now had to be careful not to antagonize the only on-the-ground ally the Western coalition had in its fight against ISIL. In addition, openly fighting the northern Syrian (and Iraqi) Kurdish groups could void any hopes for continued peace talks with the Turkish Kurds, which Ankara remained hesitant to do. Turkey was in the awkward position of being called upon by the international community to both directly and indirectly (through fighting ISIL) aid precisely those rebels whose ranks include untold numbers of Syrian Kurds that could take up arms against Ankara or proclaim independence in northern Syria were the Assad regime to fall. Not least, this dilemma may explain part of Turkey's passivity regarding the Syrian civil war.

Instead, a tool would have to be found to provide wiggle room for strategic offense, best under a cloak of legal ambiguity and humanitarian rhetoric. A buffer zone may be perceived as allowing Turkey to regain some initiative. Consequentially, Turkey began pushing more forcefully for what it called a "safe zone," without providing details of what such a zone would entail, who would enforce it, or how Turkey would secure its international backing.<sup>56</sup> The claimed purpose of the zone was to contain the violence in Syria from spilling across the border, but also to provide a humanitarian corridor, or "ISIL-free zone," for the hundreds of thousands displaced from the fighting. As Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters, "Once ISIL has been cleared from the areas in northern Syria, 'safe zones' will be formed naturally, offering havens for displaced people."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Rebecca Collard, "Why Turkey Sees the Kurdish People as a Bigger Threat than ISIS," *Time*, July 28, 2015, <http://time.com/3974399/turkey-kurds-isis/>.

<sup>55</sup> Background interview with Turkish ex-military official in Istanbul, Oct. 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Erin Cunningham, "U.S., Turkey Aim to Create Buffer Zone on Syrian Border. Nobody Knows How" *The Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/us-said-it-will-create-a-safe-zone-on-syrian-border-but-nobody-knows-how/2015/08/12/4c7d0baa-37e4-11e5-ab7b-6416d97c73c2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/us-said-it-will-create-a-safe-zone-on-syrian-border-but-nobody-knows-how/2015/08/12/4c7d0baa-37e4-11e5-ab7b-6416d97c73c2_story.html).

<sup>57</sup> Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "U.S.-Turkey Deal Aims to Create de Facto 'safe zone' in Northwest Syria," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-us-turkey-plan-amounts-to-a-safe-zone-in-northwest-syria/2015/07/26/0a533345-ff2e-4b40-858a-c1b36541e156\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-us-turkey-plan-amounts-to-a-safe-zone-in-northwest-syria/2015/07/26/0a533345-ff2e-4b40-858a-c1b36541e156_story.html).

It remained unclear what the proposed buffer zone would require in terms of its scale and scope. Various proposals held that the “safe zone” was to serve as a kind of “no man’s land” that could be extended further into Syria if needed.<sup>58</sup> Initial plans called for roughly 100 kilometers of a narrow strip of land on the Turkish side of the heavily mined border.<sup>59</sup> Presumably, opposition-controlled parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces would be included.

This flexibility may have been precisely why a buffer zone was considered an attractive policy option. Its unclear scope and consequences made it a tool that could be “sold” to anti-Kurdish and Islamist hardliners, but also internationalists and humanitarians across Turkey. Domestically, the 2015 parliamentary election, in which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey lost its majority while a pro-Kurdish party gained more seats,<sup>60</sup> was likely a larger factor in Turkey’s final drive to implement a “safe zone” in northern Syria, as it would ostracize the Kurdish political wing and rally parts of the anti-Kurdish electorate behind the AKP. Establishing a buffer zone in northern Syria potentially to be used against Kurdish militants would also constitute a major political victory for the conservative and ultranationalist parts of the Turkish leadership.

Perhaps, ironically, a Turkish buffer zone could also calm those international partners and allies worried about the purpose and costs of stronger forms of military intervention, and rally international public opinion when combined with humanitarian rhetoric. Legally, there was precedent for such zones—a similar one existed between Baghdad and Ankara during the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>61</sup> Russia and China had rejected all proposals for military intervention, and pledged to veto them in the UN Security Council, primarily because of their stance on state sovereignty, and due to what they considered a deplorable precedent in the 2011 Libya intervention. In Russia’s case, geostrategic concerns over its Syrian ally supplemented this position.

Internationally, this situation called for a tool with enough legal flexibility so that it might arguably fall outside of the UN Security Council’s purview. Similarly, historical precedent makes a buffer zone more likely to be accepted by Turkey’s international partners. As various examples suggest, it is a passive and rather limited foreign policy tool. In this, the buffer zone exhibits many similarities to the position

<sup>58</sup> “Drawing in the Neighbours,” *The Economist*, July 4, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21656692-turkey-and-jordan-are-considering-setting-up-buffer-zones-war-scorched>.

<sup>59</sup> “Drawing in the Neighbours.”

<sup>60</sup> Ian Traynor and Letsch, “Turkey Election: Ruling Party Loses Majority as pro-Kurdish HDP Gains Seats,” *The Guardian*, June 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/07/turkey-election-preliminary-results-erdogan-akp-party>.

<sup>61</sup> O’Leary, et al. (2006).

the no-fly zone held in international negotiations prior to the 2011 Libyan intervention.<sup>62</sup>

On the side of the Turkish allies, the United States and the European states feared costs of intervention would, in the end, fall on them, and worried that additional involvement in Syria would only lay the groundwork for greater military intervention in the conflict, leading to another Afghanistan/Iraq-like quagmire. At least in diplomatic negotiations, this called for a lesser form of intervention, ideally more limited in nature, and with a history that credibly suggested its primary function was humanitarian. Again, a buffer zone offered itself. All the while, however, a buffer zone would allow the Ankara government to pursue its own distinct agenda: to create a kind of legal no man's land where its forces would be able to carry out airstrikes in pursuit not only of ISIL, but more importantly also of Kurdish rebels, all the while signaling genuine humanitarian concern and commitment to the outside world. The logic is that Turkish authorities are seeking to renew their cross-border counterinsurgency operations against Kurdish separatists both in Iraq and in Syria, and are using a buffer zone as a cloak of legitimacy and goodwill. Turkey carried out cross-border attacks against ISIL targets and arrested a number of Islamic militants to wage their war.<sup>63</sup>

### **The — Buffer Zone as a Tool of Opportunism**

Ankara sought to portray the zone as one of humanitarian necessity to prevent fleeing Syrian refugees from exposure to mines, evoking the precedence of 1991 northern Iraq, Bosnia, or Rwanda. Yet, evidence points to the Turkish government's different agenda: the renewal of hostilities against Kurdish separatists. Considering the three indicators of possible offensives in the contested areas of northern Syria and Iraq, or opportunist buffer zone usage—namely relative capability distribution, strategic depth and sovereignty issues, as well as historical precedent—the Turkish buffer zone proposal fits the bill. First, as an easy indicator of relative capability distribution as in existing military forces and equipment, the balance quickly tips in Turkey's favor. Syria under the Assad regime, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, possessed a 300,000-strong army and about 40 MIG fighters, but still relied on outdated Soviet-era weaponry, such as T54 and T72 tanks.<sup>64</sup> Its air-defense was considerably better than Libya's, for example, but still could be suppressed at relatively low-risk. Its troops were poorly trained.

On the other hand, Turkey boasts NATO's second largest military force (at one million troops), including a considerable and modern air force, as well as highly

<sup>62</sup> Gustav Meibauer, "‘Doing Something’: The No-Fly Zone in UN Security Council Decision-Making in the 2011 Libya Intervention," *St. Antony's International Review*, May 2015, pp. 44–74.

<sup>63</sup> Traynor and Letsch, "Turkey Election."

<sup>64</sup> "Syria's Steel Beasts: The T-72," *Bellingcat*, Dec. 14, 2014, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2014/12/14/1813/>; Soner Cagaptay and Coskun Unal, "The Turkey-Syria Military Balance," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-turkey-syria-military-balance>.

mechanized and armored rapid-response divisions that can mobilize 50,000 troops under 72 hours.<sup>65</sup> Still, it cannot simply enforce a buffer zone unilaterally. That is partly because of Turkey's divisive domestic politics, also due to limits set by international law and its NATO membership, but finally because Turkish forces are mostly defensive in nature.<sup>66</sup>

As an example, a buffer zone would require robust airpower to patrol, something Turkey is unable to provide without NATO or U.S.-led assistance and reconnaissance. Nevertheless, Turkey's significant military superiority over Syria makes its desire for a buffer zone more likely one of opportunism.

Secondly, we have argued that states that view their neighbors more as areas of "strategic depth" than as sovereign entities are more likely to overlook concerns around sovereignty and use buffer zones offensively. Indeed, there is a vast array of empirical evidence that at least some of Turkey's leadership see parts of northern Syria as de facto Turkish hinterland. In this context, Prime Minister Davutoğlu's comments about Turkey's neighborhood are remarkable.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, the concept of "strategic depth" across formal state borders runs both ways in southern Turkey—Kurdish militant groups in Turkey use northern Iraq as strategic depth to sustain their insurgencies. Their foothold in northern Syria could strengthen this de facto Kurdish-controlled rump state along the entire Turkish border, and create a broader security concern around strategic depth in Turkey's volatile southern neighborhood.

Finally, closely related to the views of many in the Turkish leadership vis-à-vis the sovereignty of its southern neighbors, the region indeed experienced multiple buffer zone-type arrangements that transcended borders. In 1984, Turkey had signed a similar joint agreement with Iraq, allowing both states to pursue Kurdish militants across each other's borders. The practice was continued after the 1991 no-fly zone in northern Iraq, which disabled Iraqi resistance to Turkish incursions against the autonomous northern Kurdish regions. In 1999, Turkey inked an agreement with Syria permitting it to carry out hot pursuit raids into northern Syria, as mentioned. This agreement was subsequently invoked in 2014, despite its referring to a different set of circumstances and a different era. Arguably, then, an opportunistic use of a buffer zone was likely. Additional empirical evidence points to the actual existence of such motives in the Turkish proposal of a buffer zone.

To begin with, there was considerable semantic confusion over the Turkish proposal, particularly over what the zone would be called. When President Erdogan visited the United States in 2014, he referred to it both as a "no-fly zone" and a

<sup>65</sup> Tom Clonan, "Turkey Well Equipped to Confront Assad Threat," *The Irish Times*, Oct. 6, 2012, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/turkey-well-equipped-to-confront-assad-threat-1.548459>.

<sup>66</sup> Cagaptay and Unal, "The Turkey-Syria Military Balance."

<sup>67</sup> Yonca Poyraz Dogan, "'Davutoğlu's Book 'Strategic Depth' far from Being Deep,'" *Today's Zaman*, Feb. 8, 2015, [http://www.todayszaman.com/monday-talk\\_davutoglus-book-strategic-depth-far-from-being-deep\\_372116.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/monday-talk_davutoglus-book-strategic-depth-far-from-being-deep_372116.html).

“buffer zone.”<sup>68</sup> But his own prime minister corrected him: speaking to Al-Jazeera, Ahmet Davutoğlu said, “We have never used the word ‘buffer zone.’ What we want is a ‘safe haven,’ a humanitarian term, guaranteed by military forces.”<sup>69</sup> This mirrors both the above-mentioned definitional distinction often made between strategic and humanitarian motivations, as well as the Turkish leadership’s confusion as to why such a zone might be attractive.

Given the buffer zone’s possible functions, and its ambiguity in definition and application, the Turkish leadership’s lack of clarity should not be surprising. Alternatively, the confusion might have been intentional to some degree—various people in the Turkish leadership had different ideas as to what end the buffer zone would be imposed, because the buffer zone was “sold” differently to Turkish leaders. All of this would suggest that the buffer zone idea originated with strategic or military advisors rather than the core leadership.

The results of this confused rhetoric offensive were mixed: the Russians, who had been arming the Syrian regime, chose to oppose any kind of buffer zone, apparently feeling that the suggestion came too close to the 2011 Libya “model.”<sup>70</sup> The United States remained lukewarm, preoccupied with defeating ISIL and upset about Turkey’s lack of cooperation on that front, especially its prior refusal of access to Incirlik airbase (located just 100 miles from the Syrian border). Washington worried that a buffer zone would escalate the conflict, provide a vacuum for extremist groups like ISIL to fill, and draw in more outside powers. Jordan, for example, was quick to entertain the notion of a similar buffer zone stretching from Suwayda to Deraa in the south.<sup>71</sup>

The French, meanwhile, backed a buffer zone for humanitarian reasons.<sup>72</sup> Also, both the United States and France, though not outright advocates of secession, traditionally have been supportive of the Kurds, and therefore remained suspicious of Turkey’s motives for a buffer zone until this past year.<sup>73</sup> All the while, human

<sup>68</sup> Muharrem Sarikaya, “Buffer Zone or Safe Haven?” Today’s Zaman, [http://www.todayzaman.com/turkish-press-review\\_buffer-zone-or-safe-haven\\_361883.html](http://www.todayzaman.com/turkish-press-review_buffer-zone-or-safe-haven_361883.html).

<sup>69</sup> Sarikaya, “Buffer Zone or Safe Haven?”

<sup>70</sup> Paraszczuk, “Why Syria and Russia Oppose Turkey’s Idea of a ‘Buffer Zone’ Despite IS Advances,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Oct. 15, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/syria-russia-oppose-turkey-buffer-zone/26639112.html>; Meibauer, “‘Doing Something’: The No-Fly Zone in UN Security Council Decision-Making in the 2011 Libya Intervention.”

<sup>71</sup> Michael Pizzi, “Report: Jordan Will Set up Buffer Zone inside Syria,” News Portal, Al-Jazeera America, June 29, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/29/report-jordan-will-set-up-buffer-zone-inside-syria.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Max Fisher, “Buffer Zones: The New International Plan for a Mini-Invasion of Syria, Explained,” News Portal, Vox, Oct. 9, 2014, <http://www.vox.com/2014/10/9/6951569/syria-buffer-zones-turkey-war-intervention>.

<sup>73</sup> Brian Murphy, Carol Morello, and Liz Sly, “U.S., Allies ‘examining’ Syrian Buffer Zone as Islamic State Fight Deepens,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islamic-state-fighters-give-up-positions-ringing->



rights activists fret that a buffer zone would allow Turkey to either deport or refuse entry to refugees since in theory, they would now have a safe zone in Syria.<sup>74</sup>

In interviews, a number of Turkish former military officials and other military experts admitted the buffer zone's purpose was *never* to prevent an escalation of hostilities but rather to provide legitimacy for Turkey to continue its pursuit of Kurdish militants into Iraq or Syria (as well as punish Syria for hosting such militants).<sup>75</sup> Leaked Stratfor memos also support the argument that Turkey's push for a buffer zone is borne out of fear not of the Syrian civil war spilling over the border but out of concern that Syrian Kurds, who comprise 30-40 percent of the population of northeastern Syria, might defeat the Islamist and government forces in the north and establish a safe haven themselves from which to carry out cross-border attacks against Turkey. This would be a mirror image of the Kurdish insurgency in Iraqi Kurdistan, and again with strong similarities to the 1991 safe haven and no-fly zone.

Establishing a buffer zone would allow Turkey to intervene in Syria as it could use the pretext both of self-defense and humanitarian concerns. There are claims within Turkey, including from scholars and military experts, that “[a]ccording to UN decisions [...] Turkey has the right to conduct cross-border ‘hot pursuit’ operations in Syria if terrorist activity near its borders is detected.”<sup>76</sup> PKK terrorists, who are withdrawing from Turkish lands as part of an ongoing settlement process the Turkish government launched in 2012 to end its Kurdish problem, were allegedly joining up with Syrian Kurdish forces in northern Syria.<sup>77</sup> The aim of these forces was to make Turkey's foreign policies in Syria ineffective and to strengthen the PKK's hand in the settlement process.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, a strong case can be made that while Turkey presented the buffer zone as one motivated by humanitarianism, it was motivated more by what domestic hardliners, Turkish nationalists and certain military elements regarded as the existential threat from Kurdish separatism. Through this lens, such a zone would provide Turkish forces greater leeway to carry out cross-border attacks and, in Ankara's view at least, prevent Kurdish separatists from carving out their own safe zone.

Turkey's leadership, in its apparent enthusiasm for a buffer zone, however, seemed to have forgotten lessons learned from previous buffer zones. While a buffer

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[syrian-town-amid-wave-of-us/2014/10/08/e76627fa-4edd-11e4-8c24-487e92bc997b\\_story.html](http://www.brookings.edu/research/interviews/2014/12/02-buffer-zone-turkey-syria-ferris).

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Ferris, “Amid the Debate over a Buffer Zone, Challenging Questions on How It Would Work,” The Brookings Institution, Dec. 2, 2014,

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/interviews/2014/12/02-buffer-zone-turkey-syria-ferris>.

<sup>75</sup> Background interviews with ex-military officials in Istanbul, Oct. 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Servet Yanatma, “Turkish Gov't Says Won't Tolerate PYD's Fait Accompli in Northern Syria,” Today's Zaman, July 18, 2013, [http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy\\_turkish-govt-says-wont-tolerate-pyds-fait-accompli-in-northern-syria\\_321226.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_turkish-govt-says-wont-tolerate-pyds-fait-accompli-in-northern-syria_321226.html).

<sup>77</sup> Yanatma, “Turkish Gov't Says Won't Tolerate PYD's Fait Accompli in Northern Syria.”

<sup>78</sup> Yanatma, “Turkish Gov't Says Won't Tolerate PYD's Fait Accompli in Northern Syria.”

zone could possibly prevent direct spillover of fighting into Turkish territory and allow additional strikes against the Syrian Kurds, it could also prove a slippery slope into the Syrian civil war. The only party that likely can be coerced to adhere to the zone would be the Assad regime, whereas both Kurdish militants and especially ISIL are unlikely to be deterred. Their de-facto foothold in the region that would be included in the buffer zone would make the provision of security within its demarcation extremely difficult, as it could be expected that both militant groups can blend in with civilian populations.

In addition, ISIL in particular undoubtedly would try to probe the effectiveness of the zone through raids or terrorist attacks. This would, in turn, necessitate retaliatory strikes, which would quickly escalate into intervention against every conflict party in the Syrian civil war. Overt offensive strikes against the Syrian or Iraqi Kurds, however, would mean that Turkey could quickly lose Western sympathies. Nevertheless, the recent open air strikes (under no “zone” regime, and not officially part of the international coalition against ISIL) suggest that the Turkish leadership may have decided not to care.

### **Buffer Zones: Unintended Consequences**

The efficacy of buffer zones is questionable, and their legality, in terms of the conditions under which their delineated borders can be violated, is suspect. That may explain why Turkey is pushing for such a zone along its borders. Ankara claims its aims are purely humanitarian—to provide a cordon sanitaire for Syrian refugees displaced by the war—and defensive: the buffer zone would serve as a security prophylactic to prevent the Syrian conflict from spilling further into Turkey. Yet, as we have argued, Turkey’s primary concern is preventing Kurds in the region from seeking greater autonomy.

Ironically, as an unintended consequence and not unlike the U.S.-led no-fly-zone imposed over Northern Iraq in 1991 to halt flows of Iraqi Kurdish refugees, Turkey’s proposed buffer zone in Syria might actually provide Kurdish militants with *greater* cover to carry out cross-border attacks in Turkey. The advent of ISIL and the international coalition fighting it has further decreased the attractiveness of a buffer zone for Turkey, as its consequences are by now virtually unpredictable because the Syrian conflict has quickly balkanized over the last months.

Clearly, Turkey’s fears of a Kurdish state on its doorstep are not unfounded. Syria’s Kurds reportedly had struck deals with both opposition forces and the Syrian government as a way to both hedge their bets and remain semi-autonomous. However, Turkey’s policy to date of turning a blind eye to Islamist fighters streaming across its border, while taking a hawkish stance against Kurdish rebels, is misguided and bound to backfire. The opposite strategy might actually yield better results: stronger anti-ISIL efforts combined with a slow “crowding-out” of Kurdish militant elements from the Turkish borderlands could prove much more effective, but also difficult to accomplish. As it stands, the buffer zone envisioned by some elements of the Turkish government would neither alleviate the suffering among displaced Syrians nor make Turkey any more secure from terrorist violence. It would only free up its military to pursue Kurdish rebels across



its border with greater force, and make an already violent and dangerous border region only more violent and dangerous.