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Should the U.S. Set Up a ‘No-Fly’ Zone Over Northern Syria?

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Officials often try to implement dubious or controversial initiatives over weekends or holidays, when journalists and the public are likely to be less vigilant than normal. Three-day holiday weekends are especially popular candidates for such maneuvers.

It is perhaps unsurprising that there were indications of a significant change regarding U.S. policy toward Syria on the Sunday before Memorial Day. Turkey’s foreign minister [announced](#) that his country and the United States had agreed in principle to provide air protection for some 15,000 Syrian rebels being trained by Ankara and Washington once those insurgents re-enter Syrian territory.

Granted, an agreement in principle could break down over the details of implementation, and the Obama administration has yet to confirm the Turkish account. Nevertheless, there are hints of an impending escalation of U.S. involvement in Syria’s murky civil war.

A lobbying effort by proponents of U.S. aid to factions trying to unseat dictator Bashar Assad is definitely taking place. The No. 2 Democrat in the Senate, Dick Durban of Illinois, has [openly endorsed](#) establishing and protecting “safe zones” for insurgents, and he is hardly alone.

In essence, the United States and its Turkish ally appear to be contemplating the imposition of a “no-fly” zone over northern Syria to prevent Assad’s forces from suppressing the rebel fighters. It is pertinent to recall that a fateful step in America’s disastrous entanglement in Iraq was the

creation of such zones against Saddam Hussein to protect Kurdish and Shiite insurgents in the 1990s. A similar measure should not be undertaken lightly in Syria.

Indeed, the Syrian conflict is a cauldron of ethno-religious feuds involving multiple factions. To a significant extent, it represents a bitter struggle for power between Assad's coalition of religious minorities (including his Alawite political base and its Christian allies) and the Sunni Islamic majority.

That, in turn, is at least partly a [broader regional power](#) struggle between Shiite Iran and the major Sunni powers, primarily Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, using Syrian factions as proxies. To make matters even more complex, Kurdish secessionists are exploiting the turmoil to try to establish an autonomous region in Syria's north and northeast akin to the successful de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

To be blunt, America does not have a dog in that fight. It is especially naive to believe that U.S. and Turkish-trained insurgents would be a strong "moderate" alternative to both Assad and ISIS.

The mythical moderate Syrian majority is just that: mythical. Too many of the supposedly moderate rebel factions that we supported earlier in the conflict turned out to be radical Islamic fellow travelers. Having been burned by that experience, U.S. policymakers should be doubly cautious about further entangling the United States in Syria's troubles.

Establishing a de facto no-fly zone would be a momentous, potentially very dangerous step. At a minimum, such a change should be implemented only after a far-reaching public discussion, an extended debate in Congress and a formal congressional vote authorizing that action.

It is disgraceful that officials might even consider trying to smuggle such an escalation of policy into practice through an announcement by an allied government in the middle of a holiday weekend.

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#) is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the [Cato Institute](#).