



No progress on building safe zones for Syrian refugees amidst troop withdrawal announcements

Mica Soellner

April 5, 2018

President Donald Trump said during his campaign that he wants to create a "safe zone" for Syrian people wanting to escape ongoing war in their country, rather than having refugees enter the United States.

Trump's recent announcement that American troops should get out of Syria as soon as possible is at odds with this idea.

Trump commended the success of combating ISIS and announced plans for the United States to come out of Syria to "let the other people take care of it now" during an infrastructure speech in Ohio on March 29.

The next day, Trump ordered the State Department to suspend over \$200 million in funds for recovery efforts in Syria while the administration re-evaluates its position in the conflict.

Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson promised additional funds in February during a meeting in Kuwait with the coalition fighting ISIS. Trump fired Tillerson as Secretary of State in March.

Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a press conference on April 4 that the goal of being in Syria has always been to defeat ISIS. Sanders said the next step for the United States would be to bring troops home and transition the battle to local law enforcement.

Sanders also said that Trump is not going to declare a timeline, and the Pentagon will determine when conditions have improved enough to permit a drawdown.

No comments have been made so far on the progress to implement safe zones into Syria following the declaration to remove troops.

Mark Hetfield, who is the president and CEO of HIAS, a Jewish nonprofit organization that supports refugees, believes that while Trump has kept his promise to limit the entrance of Syrian refugees into the United States, his proposal to create safe zones has been stalled indefinitely.

"The U.S. under Trump is showing zero leadership in terms of refugee resettlement," Hetfield told PolitiFact. "To my knowledge, the U.S. has not stepped up its efforts to protect Syrians who have been forced to flee their homes inside of Syria."

John Glaser, the director of foreign policy studies at the CATO Institute, said that creating safe zones in Syria was a policy option that was much discussed during the Obama administration, but the government has since made the campaign against ISIS a higher priority.

"I don't think (Trump's) comments in support of a safe zone during the campaign were well thought out, and at present he clearly doesn't support them," Glaser told PolitiFact.

"Washington has long understood the risk of that kind of escalation in Syria, and Trump wants to avoid that by abandoning any hope of establishing safe zones by suggesting it's time for the 2,000 or so U.S. troops to withdraw," he said.

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at Brookings Institution who specializes in foreign policy, said that pulling troops out will hinder the progress of safe zones: "(Trump)'s Syria strategy to date has helped honor and fulfill such a promise at least partially and indirectly, but a complete U.S. pullout would largely invalidate and threaten it."

Trump's promise to pull troops out of Syria undermines his campaign pledge to create safe zones there. We'll continue monitoring this promise update, but for now it remains rated Stalled.