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Trump's First Big Mistake

By Justin Raimondo
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The text of a draft executive order on “Protecting the Nation From Terrorist Attacks From Foreign Nationals,” expected to be signed by President Trump, which deals primarily with excluding citizens of selected countries from entering the United States, includes what may be the biggest mistake the newly elected President will ever make:

“Sec. 6. Establishment of Safe Zones to Protect Vulnerable Syrian Populations. Pursuant to the cessation of refugee processing for Syrian nationals, the Secretary of State, in conjunction with the Secretary of Defense, is directed within 90 days of the date of this order to produce a plan to provide safe areas in Syria and in the surrounding region in which Syrian nationals displaced from their homeland can await firm settlement, such as repatriation or potential third-country resettlement.”

As of this writing, such an order has not been signed by the President, but Trump told reporters “I’ll absolutely do safe zones in Syria for the people.”

This idea is a disaster waiting to happen, and could augur the unraveling of the President’s “America First” foreign policy, which supposedly abjures regime change operations in the Middle East and elsewhere. In 2013 testimony submitted to Congress by then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, the reality of what this would have to mean was outlined:

“Thousands of U.S. ground forces would be needed, even if positioned outside Syria, to support those physically defending the zones. A limited no-fly zone coupled with US ground forces would push the costs over one billion dollars per month.”

John Kerry, citing Department of Defense estimates, testified that “safe zones” would require up to 30,000 troops on the ground.

This wacky idea is something Trump floated during the campaign, when he averred that he would create a “big beautiful safe zone” in war-torn Syria. Vice President Pence also endorsed the idea in his debate with Democratic vice presidential nominee Tim Kaine. And the neoconservative faction of the GOP – which bitterly opposed Trump during the campaign, and continues to do so to this day – issued one of their frequent “open letters” demanding the establishment of a safe zone in conjunction with increased support for the “moderate” Islamist rebel campaign to overthrow the regime of Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad.

A viable space for such a zone is the area currently controlled by the Islamist rebels: the towns of Jarablus and Azaz and surrounding area, next to the Turkish border. Establishing a “safe zone” here would, in effect, carve out a mini-state under the control of Islamists, most of whom are indistinguishable from al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The Trump administration, which makes a fetish out of denouncing “radical Islamic terrorism,” would wind up protecting and aiding them under the guise of “humanitarianism.” With thousands of American troops guarding this Islamist enclave, the US would inevitably be drawn into Syria’s civil war.

And of course this plan would run into opposition from the Syrian government, which is presently fighting the rebels in conjunction with their Russian allies. It would only be a matter of time before US troops and Syrian forces collided. The Russians, for their part, are already signaling their displeasure, and it is bound to interfere with the Trump administration’s stated desire for a rapprochement with Moscow.

While Qatar, which backs the Islamist rebels, welcomed this new development, the rebels were cautious: “We’ve seen no result on the ground from (U.S.) statements that were made six years ago. So therefore we await action before anything else,” said rebel commander Fares al-Bayoush. Mr. Bayoush is affiliated with the “Free Idlib Army,” a merger of three rebel factions: Bayoush’s group has a working alliance – the “Army of Conquest” — with the al-Qaeda franchises in Syria, including Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front (renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). The rebels direct their main fire at Syrian government forces, while mostly ignoring ISIS unless directly attacked.

Another area where a “safe zone” might be established is in southwestern Syria, where the so-called “Southern Front” forces are in control. The Front is a vague alliance of dozens of rebel factions, including extremists: the latter are now involved in an effort to oust the more “moderate” elements – although, in Syria, “moderation” is a relative concept. The Front is backed by the US, Jordan, Israel, the Saudis, and the small Gulf states. The lobbying effort to suck the Trump administration into supporting the Southern Front rebels is already in full swing.

The creation of “safe zones” under US protection, no matter where they are located, would provide these terrorist outfits with a recruiting ground and a safe haven: it would be a situation very similar to the “refugee camps” in Lebanon that were turned into a playground for the various violent Palestinian factions that launched attacks far and wide. In short, these “safe zones” would become giant boils on the body politic of Syria, infecting the entire region with the poison of radical Islamism – the very ideology the Trump administration is supposedly pledged to “eradicate.”

This is utter madness.

In an interview during the presidential campaign with Fox’s Bill O’Reilly, Trump had the following exchange:

“O’Reilly: Once Putin gets in and fights ISIS on behalf of Assad, Putin runs Syria. He owns it. He’ll never get out, never.”

“Trump: “Alright, okay, fine. I mean, you know, we can be in Syria. Do you want to run Syria? Do you want to own Syria? I want to rebuild our country.”

Trump’s reluctance to get involved in yet another foreign quagmire was the basis for much of his support. So now it’s time for his supporters to ask President Trump: “Do you want to own Syria?”

It’s not too late for this nonsense to be stopped. The draft executive order cited above only states that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis will be directed to come up with a plan: it’s possible that the President could take one look at the plan, realize that it involves a major combat operation, and decide to nix it.

We can only hope.

But, wait, we can do more than that. We can call the White House and our local representatives and tell them that *we don’t want to own Syria*, that we oppose US intervention in Syria’s civil war, and that it’s time for Trump to keep his campaign promise to put America – not Syria – first.

If this crazy plan gets the green light, I can guarantee you that Trump will live to regret it. But by then it will be too late to backtrack. As recent history teaches us, it’s much easier to get involved in a quagmire than it is to get