

# “Safe-Zone Judo” as Syrian Forces with Support of Russia and Iran Cross the Euphrates

By [Tony Cartalucci](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)  
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*Syrian forces with the support of their Russian and Iranian allies, crossed the Euphrates River near the city of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria.*

The move is not only a significant step forward in restoring security nationwide and ensuring the nation’s territorial integrity, it is also a significant step toward turning the tables on the very interests who provoked and have perpetuated this conflict since 2011.

US policymakers as early as 2012 openly declared their intent to partition Syria through the use of “safe zones” or “buffer zones.” From these zones – established with and protected by direct US military intervention – militant proxies would attempt to expand deeper into Syrian territory until the nation could either be toppled entirely, or sufficiently partitioned, effectively eliminating the Syrian Arab Republic as it was known before the conflict began.

Understanding “Safe Zones”



## Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change

*Daniel Byman, Michael Daniel, Kenneth Pollack, and Salwan Shakik*

SYRIA IS TRAPPED ON A CRUMBLING PRIZEPIECE, and however it might fall will result significant risks for the United States and for the Syrian people.

The brutal regime of Bashar al-Asad is employing its loyal military forces and sectarian thugs to crush the opposition and reassert its monopoly. Even if Bashar falls, Syria may not be out of the woods: an increasingly likely alternative to the current regime is a bloody civil war similar to what we saw in Lebanon, Bosnia, Congo, and most recently in Iraq. The horizon of such a war might even exceed the brutal reassertion of Asad’s control, and would cause spillover into Syria’s neighbors—Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel—that could be disastrous for them and for American interests in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

But the unrest in Syria, which is now entering its second year, also offers some important opportunities, ones that would come from the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Asad, whose family has ruled the country with an iron grip for over fifty years. Syria is Iran’s oldest and most important ally in the Arab world, and the Iranian regime has doubled down on Asad, providing him with financial aid and military support to shore up his regime. Asad’s departure would deal a significant blow to Tehran, further isolating it at a time when it has few friends in the region or the world. In addition, Damascus is useful in its hostility toward Israel, and Asad’s regime is also a longtime supporter of terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, and has at times aided al-Qaida terrorists and former regime

elements in Iraq. The regime’s collapse, therefore, could have significant benefits for the United States and its allies in the region.

Actually ousting Asad, however, will not be easy. Although the Obama administration has for months called for Asad to go, every policy option to remove him is flawed, and some could even make the situation worse—seemingly a recipe for inaction. Doing nothing, however, means standing by while Asad murders his own people, and Syria plunges into civil war and risks becoming a failed state. Already the violence is suggesting, as of March 2012, at least 8,000 Syrians have died and thousands more have been arrested and tortured in trying to topple the regime. At the same time, Syria is fragmenting. The Syrian opposition remains divided, and the Free Syrian Army is more a brand than a meaningful, unified force. Al-Qaida is urging fighters to join the fray in Syria, and sectarian killings and atrocities are growing. Should the violence continue to intensify, Syria’s neighbors may increase their meddling, and instability could spread, further weakening already-fragile neighbors like Iraq and Lebanon.

So to protect U.S. interests, Asad cannot triumph. But a failed Syria, one wracked by civil war, would be just as bad. Thus, U.S. policy must walk this tightrope, trying to remove Asad, but doing so in a way that keeps Syria an intact state capable of policing its borders and ensuring order at home. At the end of the day, however, removing Asad may not be viable

A March 2012 Brookings Institution paper titled, "[Middle East Memo #21: Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change](#)" (PDF), proposed the concept of "safe zones" or "safe-havens" not to fight the yet-to-be invented so-called Islamic State (ISIS), but specifically to assist US-backed regime change. It claims (emphasis added):

An alternative is for diplomatic efforts to focus first on how to end the violence and how to gain humanitarian access, as is being done under Annan's leadership. **This may lead to the creation of safe-havens** and humanitarian corridors, which would have to be backed by limited military power. This would, of course, fall short of U.S. goals for Syria and could preserve Asad in power. **From that starting point, however, it is possible that a broad coalition with the appropriate international mandate could add further coercive action to its efforts.**

A 2015 Brookings paper titled, "[Deconstructing Syria: Towards a regionalized strategy for a confederal country](#)" would elaborate on the nature of these zones, not as bases for fighting terrorism – but as a means of incrementally dividing and literally "deconstructing" Syria as a unified nation-state (emphasis added):

The end-game for these zones would not have to be determined in advance. The interim goal might be a confederal Syria, with several highly autonomous zones and a modest (eventual) national government. The confederation would likely require support from an international peacekeeping force, if this arrangement could ever be formalized by accord. **But in the short term, the ambitions would be lower—to make these zones defensible and governable, to help provide relief for populations within them, and to train and equip more recruits so that the zones could be stabilized and then gradually expanded.**

It would also elaborate regarding the role ISIS specifically plays in all of this – not as an enemy to be defeated – but as a pawn to be used against the Syrian government:

The idea would be to help moderate elements establish reliable safe zones within Syria once they were able. **American, as well as Saudi and Turkish and British and Jordanian and other Arab forces would act in support, not only from the air but eventually on the ground via the presence of special forces as well.** The approach would benefit from Syria's open desert terrain which could allow creation of buffer zones that could be monitored for possible signs of enemy attack through a combination of technologies, patrols, and other methods that outside special forces could help Syrian local fighters set up.

**Were Assad foolish enough to challenge these zones, even if he somehow forced the withdrawal of the outside special forces, he would be likely to lose his air power in ensuing retaliatory strikes by outside forces, depriving his military of one of its few advantages over ISIL. Thus, he would be unlikely to do this.**

It was clear in 2012 and being demonstrated on the ground by 2015 that US commitment to this policy of creating "safe zones" was complete.

The nearly full manifestation of this policy can be seen in northeast Syria, where the United States has military forces literally occupying Syrian territory while US forces accompany Kurdish and Arab militants as they push southwest deeper toward Syria's heartland, supposedly fighting ISIS. However, even within the deepest Kurdish-held regions of Syria, the Syrian government maintains a presence.

And now, with Syrian forces on the east bank of the Euphrates, the Syrian government maintains an even greater presence within and along the edges of this tenuous "safe zone."



Today - just as US policymakers had planned the US and its proxies would do in 2012 - Syrian forces can at any time during this current conflict or after it - expand incrementally into America's "safe-zone." The crossing of the Euphrates and the increasingly exhausted political legs the United States stands on regarding its military aggression in Syria, combined with Russia's direct military intervention upon Damascus' request - have severely complicated this "safe zone" policy.

It is no longer a matter of "Assad" being "foolish enough to challenge these zones," they are being challenged, regularly, and by Syrian forces backed by Russian airpower, which is in turn backed by a nuclear deterrence preventing the sort of escalation against Damascus US policymakers envisioned before the Russian intervention.

In essence, the crossing of the Euphrates represents geopolitical judo - an example of US policy describing an act of military aggression, invasion, occupation, and conquest being turned into a tactic of defense and the incremental uprooting of a foreign invader and the neutralization of its militant proxies.

### Syria's Kurds

Attempts have been made - and have mostly failed - to foster greater conflict between Syria's Kurdish minority and the government in Damascus. While seizing back every inch of Syrian territory may not be realistic in the near future, it is very possible in the intermediate future as America's "guarantees" to the Kurds become increasingly irrelevant and as Damascus works on a deal to bring various groups, including the Kurds, back under the protection and prosperity of a unified Syrian state.

Syria's Kurdish minority can only realistically hold small swaths of Syrian territory, confined mainly in the northeast. The Kurdish forces may have pushed toward Raqqa and even

further south toward Deir ez-Zor with the help of significant US military support, but they now find themselves trying to occupy territory with no demographically significant Kurdish population present. A mainly Kurdish administration, or an Arab administration dependent on Kurdish military protection, is unsustainable.

With such an unsustainable grasp on the territory US proxies are attempting to hold, cracks both between these proxies themselves and as the Syrian government begins reasserting control over its own territory further east, this grasp will weaken further.

Time and momentum are on Damascus' side. Syria's Kurds face an unsustainable future as America's proxies inside what is essentially an American "safe zone." Syria's Kurds have a much more sustainable future should they strike a deal with Damascus for greater autonomy. It is a crossroad quickly approaching, and one that will decide whether Syria faces years more of foreign-driven conflict, or the prospect of internal peace and prosperity.

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