

RELEASE IN  
FULL

# An Uncertain Spring

*Carving out the first*

*No Kill Zones*



Qalaat Al-Shgur, Idlib Governorate

An unusually cold winter gave way to an uncertain spring in the mountainous folded border region of northwest Syria as conditions remained tense, but for the moment free of killing and personal uncertainty. The first No Kill Zone had been secured in the rising hills of Idlib Governorate along the frontier with Turkey. This governorate abuts Turkey's Hatay Province, previously a Syrian governorate early in the last century. A number of minorities in the northwest reflect this recent history as their populations straddle the Turkish-Syrian frontier with relations in both countries.

Serious moves to establish safe zones began after the failure of the Kofi Annan ceasefire in April. By the middle of the month it had become clear that the Damascus regime was in a fight to prevail, to put the lid back on and re-establish a condign climate. Conditions deteriorated further and Syrians continued to flee shelled cities and towns as the White House began to look for an alternative to diplomatic initiatives.

The DoD continued to frame the Syrian Conflict in conventional military terms as critics began to point out flaws in DoD's assessments; staffers at the White House began soliciting opinions outside of the Administration. They started with the decisive insight that the safety of Syrians had to be the objective of any action undertaken, much less those of a kinetic nature.

The specter of the conflict exploding open sectarian fissures as the Assad regime deliberately exacerbated ethnic relations kept the international community on edge. That the conflict could erupt into civil war began to loom large in many observers' analysis. The fighting continued to spill over into Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan while Syrian Kurdish threats to splinter off and form a rump state in Al-Hasakah Governorate resurfaced to percolate in the northeast. Early reports of revenge executions finally prompted the White House to act.<sup>1</sup>

A contributing factor was the insistent voice of Senator John McCain to act and the previously cautious Romney campaign making bold foreign policy comments on the lack of leadership. Heeding McCain's pleas was viewed as politically acquiescent, so the Administration began to reconsider options such as the idea of "no kill zones."

This approach was more collaborative and less of a 'doing to' the Syrian regime and 'doing for' Syrians seeking both relief and regime change. It advocated working with civilian resistance inside Syria to establish No Kill Zones, or universal safety areas to protect the population from the Damascus regime. Local battalions would liaison with military attachés assigned to a US Consular mission to the LCC, or Local Coordinating Committee.

DoS analysts who saw the Arab Spring as a tectonic shift in dynamics that were underpinned by the youthful demographics of Arab countries saw the strategic

---

<sup>1</sup> The Responsibility To Protect, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty - December 2001

imperatives in shifting perceptions of the United States over the medium term as these youthful cohorts matured.<sup>2</sup>

Active US involvement at such a late stage was also propelled by a NIE that indicated revenge killings were already occurring and likely to escalate as the balance of control shifted on the ground in Syria. That same NIE indicated that 1.5 million Syrians were internally displaced.

By the beginning of May a reorientation of US policy regarding Syria was becoming visible. Jeffrey D. Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, newly appointed Director of National Intelligence, jointly led the ad hoc action team assembled by the White House. The first step taken was to ramp up the US Mission to Syria under Ambassador Robert S. Ford and assign FSOs from the region to fill out an expanded consular effort directed to the 14 LCCs related to the governorates in Syria. This outreach effort was essentially military satcom and web-based in the weeks before the first Foreign Service officer was safely on the ground in Syria.

The Mission effort also included FSOs being tasked to specific issues and concerns such as displaced women and children, as an institutional means of maintaining clarity in a fluid situation.<sup>3</sup> These FSOs reported directly to what was now called the United States Diplomatic Mission to the Levant.

Functional relations were established with the negotiation and agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding with two LCCs in Idlib Governorate, Saraqib LCC and Idlib LCC as well as representatives from Jisr ash-Shughur. Rebel unit commanders from the Osama bin Zaid, Suleiman, Harmoush, and Hamza Battalions were also consulted as observers to the MOU negotiations. Such ad hoc diplomatic negotiations with LCCs utilized the concept of MOU based granular recognition for towns and cities.

Although this approach was difficult compared to conventional approaches, this was seen as preferable to allowing for an 'intestate' vacuum as Damascus lost control over Syria, leading to a failed state condition extending over a shifting geography that would persist over an indeterminate time span.

Sectarian killings were becoming news items as consular officials reminded Syrian counterparts and media alike that the US position regarding Syria was about No Kill Zones and Universal Public Safety, and the re-establishing of rule of law. Upon reviewing the mounting evidence of revenge killing and summary execution of soldiers by rebels, the White House came to the realization that R2P in a fluid situation simply

---

<sup>2</sup> The Heritage Foundation: Opinion of the US on the rise. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/press/commentary/ed031005.cfm> accessed 4.15.09

<sup>3</sup> July 8, 2011 Secretary Hillary Clinton Interview With PBS's Gini Reticker for "Women, War and Peace" Series

shifts with vulnerability; thus NKZs to protect EVERYONE, including from each other, became the stated Allied common denominator.<sup>4</sup>

**In a practical sense, the US was linking legitimacy to the ability to ensure or secure public safety and rule of law, a position that has been endorsed by prominent international lawyers and Syrian opposition members.<sup>5</sup> The template crafted for negotiating MOUs with LCC civilian leadership within Syria set forth a set of criteria with regard to protecting all people within a zone, representing all groups in decision-making, and choosing peaceful protest over violence as conditions for recognition and support. The agreements went further in specifying benchmarks and agreed upon means of monitoring. They also laid a foundation for providing Syrians temporary travel documents similar to those issued in WW II to displaced persons.**

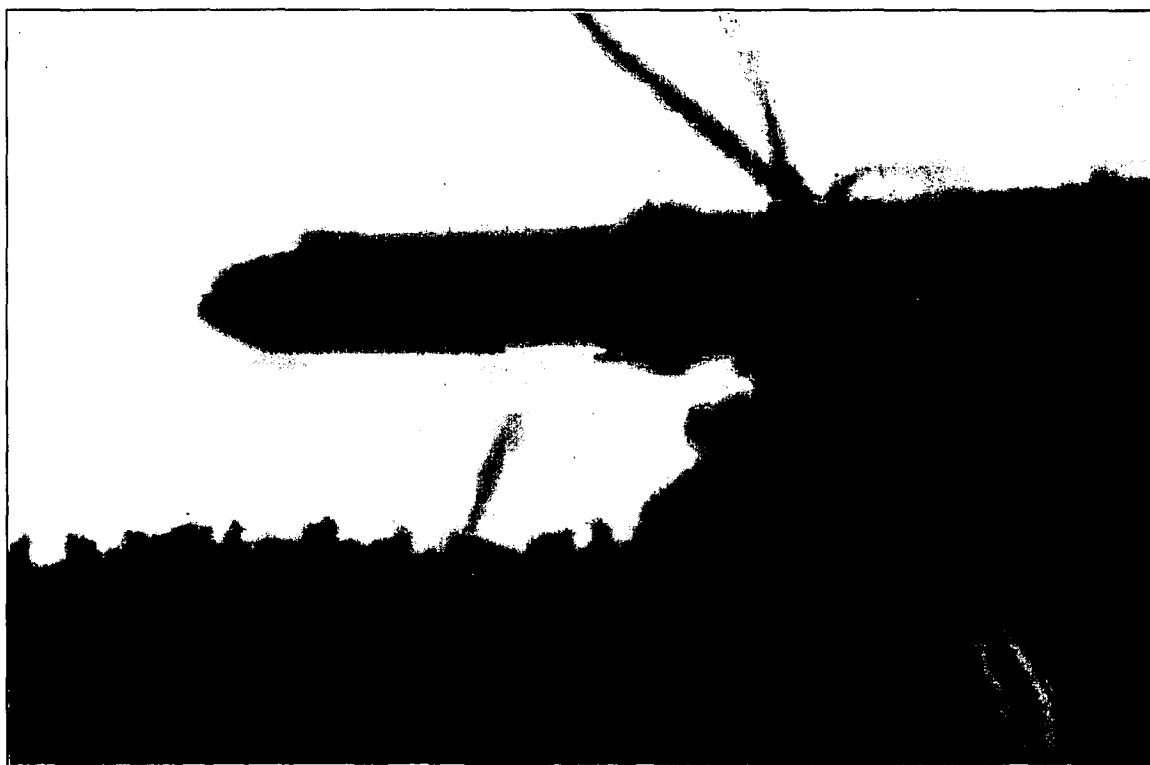
The consular effort began engaging the LCCs and local fighters in late May as newly assigned FSOs began emphasizing the support and recognition (limited) that would be forthcoming if the LCC and local resistance units agreed to creating a NKZ, or universal safe zone. This recognition of conditional sovereignty on the ground based on a demonstrated commitment to public safety for became the common glue of the different LCCs. As the number of No Kill Zones increased, governorates continued to slip away from Damascus' effective control.

This new diplomatic approach was tied to a shift in FSA military tactics toward regime forces access to population centers. Denial of access provided for public safety and denied the regime control over people. It is a direct alternative both to challenging the Damascus regime and to seeking control over territory.

---

<sup>4</sup> VOICES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY 2011 International Coalition for the R2P

<sup>5</sup> A Strategy for Syria Under International Law: How to End the Assad Dictatorship While Restoring Nonviolence to the Syrian Revolution  
Chibli Mallat, Jane Mansbridge, Sadek Jalal al-Azm, Trudi Hodges, Mansoor al-Jamri, Ishac Diwan, Sharhabeel al-Zaeem, John J. Donohue, S.J., Yang Jianli, Ph.D.\*, pp 147-48. Harvard International Law Journal Online March 2012 Volume 53

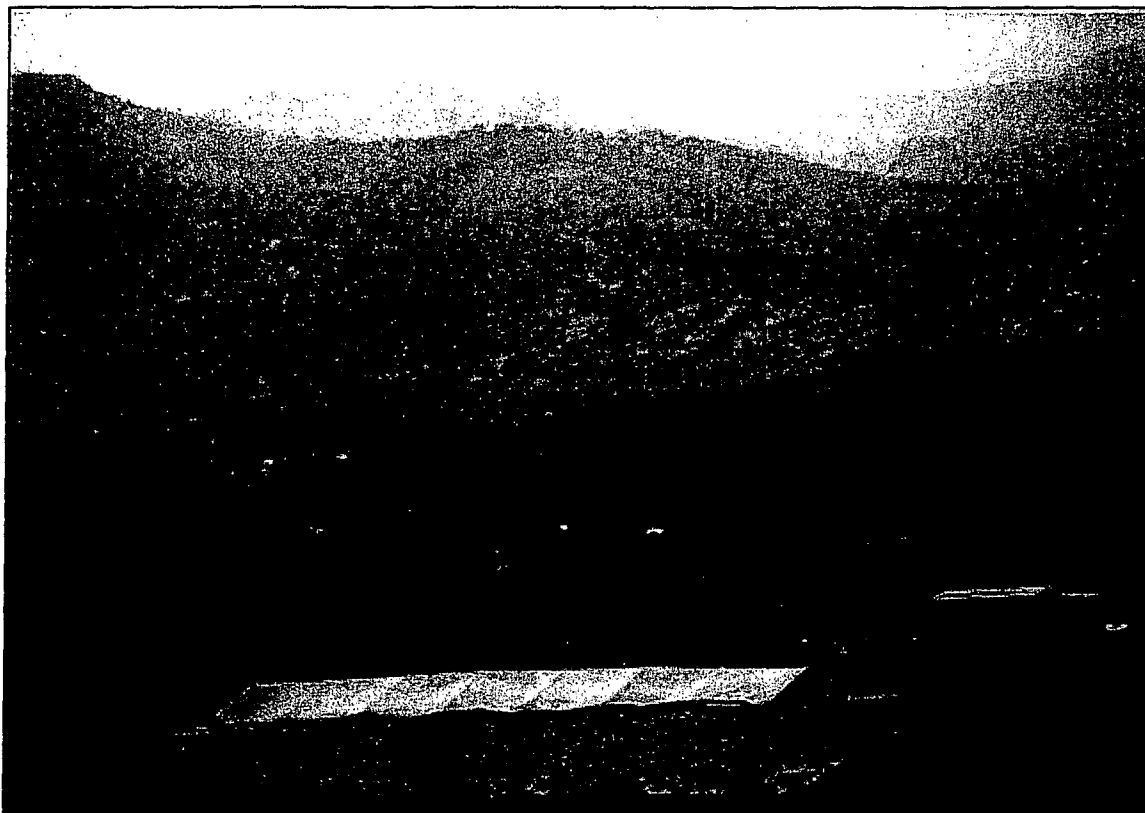


Qala'at al-Madiq - FSA firing stolen 9M133 Kornet AT missile at Syrian Army T-72 tank

Concurrently, Ambassador Ford began initiatives to establish communications directly with Alawi, Druze, Assyrian, Syriac, Kurd, Armenian, and other minorities. Ford began the influence battle for minority support, in part by assigning UN observers with direct communications to SF advisors, LCCs and local battalions to minority areas near or within cordoned areas. Interlocutors were engaged inside Syria as well as the expatriate communities. An aspect of this outreach was countering the fear based propaganda campaign being waged by Syrian media and the Damascus 'Syrian Electronic Army'. Technologically adept nonviolent Resistance and bloggers were given monetary & non-monetary support to enable them to counter Syria's digital disinformation war

Further east, the US Mission began working with Syrian Kurds, who were given an unambiguous statement of position from the US that Syria's borders would remain the same post-conflict. At Washington's behest, the Iraq KRG publicly supported the US position. At the same time the US Consul for Al-Hasakah Governorate made clear US intent to protect the rights of Kurds and other minorities and that full citizenship was part of that consideration. US diplomatic relations however must be with the Al-Hasakah Governorate LCCs.

Functional relations were established with the negotiation and agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding with Al Hasaka and Qamishli LCCs. Al-Hasakah Governorate is located in the far northeast corner of Syria and Al-Hasakah has the second highest population in the governorate with most being Assyrian and Syriac Christians. Muslims in the city are mainly Kurds and Bedouin. Qamishli is



Syrian refugees fleeing Idlib Governorate at Turkish Border on Hatay Province

also mixed, with Kurds being more prominent. A community of Armenians also made Qamishli their home. They are descendents of Armenians who remained after the expulsions and mass killings as the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

During quiet concurrent negotiations in Erbil, Iraq additional codicils were written into the MOU crafted for the Syrian KNC. An airbridge was set up with Erbil, KRG, Iraq as the terminus. From Erbil the aid was transported by ground into northeast Syria's Kurdish regions via the M-4 motorway.

As a confidence building measure, consular officials worked with Syrian Kurds on additional quid pro quo aid deals to send on more aid to Bedouin areas to the west such as Dier ez-Zor on the Euphrates and Al Raqqa, southeast of Aleppo.

SF advisors on the ground continued to discourage the local units from going on the offensive for the sake of militarily defeating Damascus via attrition as opposed to degrading LOCs and Syrian Army fuel logistics, population denial and establishing No Kill Zones for all Syrians. SF advisors pointed out the nonproductive casualties that resulted from these non-ambush actions and the logistics the newly wounded required. By instructing at the same time the advisors emphasized that an effective defense is usually more sustainable than going on the offensive and going head to head with Syrian Army units. The LCCs threw their influence behind protecting civilians first, and taking the fight out of the urban areas. Cordons became bastions. No Kill Zones were now real.



Syrian Army tanks firing into Baba Amr neighborhood, Homs

Feltman and Flynn agreed that integrating communications with the resistance within Syria was essential, and they reached out via the LCCs as the civilian authority. This approach established the Allied belief that rule of law and civilian authority over fighting units was critical to the post-conflict demobilization and reconstitution of the Syrian Armed Forces.

By early July the communications infrastructure with the LCCs had become more robust and the US State Department opened up bandwidth for other participating nations to establish ad hoc relations with the LCCs. The assigning of a military attaché to each LCC consular effort proved critical in getting local resistance units to accept civilian authority as primary, and the establishment of NO Kill Zones to protect as the tactical objective. US military attachés also coordinated with the Saudi and Qatari SF advisors who were augmented with civilian contractors in a few areas.

Military attachés also served to coordinate Allied assets with advisors. The advisors inside Syria coordinated the intel products flow and also served as monitors until the UN sent in public safety monitors in late June.

**Humanitarian Assistance** - In early May the State Department began planning and consultation with other countries and their ability to take stabilized patients from patient flow. Incirlik Airbase became the distribution hub for patients needing further care in hospitals in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Medical personnel began coordinating on how to collect patient data beginning inside Syria to begin managing patient flow fleeing Syria. This allowed medical and logistics managers to anticipate future needs and follow through care numbers to send on to receiving hospitals and to create and database patient flows starting inside Syria. By late summer a coordinated medical operation was functioning, and Syrian medical personnel who had fled the country were returning to secured NKZs and participating in the medical relief as well as attending to normal medical needs.

Within days of establishing the first No Kill Zone, emergency medical evacuations began. The Landing Helicopter Dock LHD-4 USS Boxer was standing by at Iskenderun, Turkey and deployed soon after off the southern Turkish coast. Within hours USS Boxer began receiving both patients and medical personnel being flown to the ship. Further offshore, south of Cyprus, an unseen US CVN delayed its transit through the Suez Canal to a pre-assigned station in the Arabian Sea. In the event, this contingency proved unnecessary and the carrier group exited the area in late July.

The USS Boxer is an amphibious warship and has medical and dental facilities capable of providing intensive medical assistance to 600 casualties, whether combat incurred or brought aboard ship during humanitarian missions. The ship's corpsmen also provide routine medical/dental care to the crew and embarked personnel. Major medical facilities include four main and two emergency operating rooms, four dental operating rooms, x-ray rooms, a blood bank, laboratories, and patient wards. In addition, three battle-dressing stations are located throughout the ship, as well as a casualty collecting area at the flight deck level. Medical elevators rapidly transfer casualties from the flight deck and hangar bay to the medical facilities.

In a rapid augmentation of medical personnel, the Department of State utilized social media to send out an appeal for doctors, nurses, and medical technicians. In response medical professionals began staging at Incirlik Airbase in southern Turkey.

The Defense Logistics Agency's Philadelphia medical unit organized initial load-outs for combat wounds treatment and medical supplies. One of the first tasks accomplished was sending out "Pharmacies in a Container" to replicate general population medical needs to prevent chronic illnesses from being life threatening.

A multi-national working Committee was set up to design a system to manage patients' medical records so that they followed the patient to the receiving facility. It also addressed the consumables that receiving facilities for stabilized patients would burn through. The Committee initiated joint planning with FSA, Turkish military, and the Turkish Red Crescent as host to Int'l org.

The focus was assisting the FSA in developing a medical relief "ratline" out of Syria and transportation of patients from secured areas in Syria. The FSA also began setting up more forward aid stations inside Syria. Returning ratline personnel transported medical supplies into Syria. The FSA needed reminding that the medical lines of communication they established and manage SHOULD NOT be the same as what they are using for military logistics heading in-country.

The reason should have been self-explanatory. The al-Assad regime had to be denied any pretext to attack the medical LOC. This effort also allowed the LCCs and FSA to incorporate civilians without military experience into a very critical mission for the Syrian citizenry.



As the above operations wound down a year after the conflict subsided, the international Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief communities began to assess the combined effort. There were many lessons to be learned, and they understood that Syria would not be an isolated example in the decades to come. Military and civilian organizations alike grasped the need for forward thinking as an imperative if competence in a new operational dynamic was to be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Health Care Logistics Response in a Disaster, Jerry D. Van Vactor, United States Army Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management Volume 7, Issue 1 2010