



Washington's Endless Policy Bankruptcy in Syria

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It took a particularly perverse and misguided mindset to watch the tragic collapse of Syria and insist that Washington intervene. One of the most important benefits of living in a nation that is stable politically (well, sort of these days!) and prosperous economically is to escape precisely that sort of devastating collapse. The U.S. government's job is to protect its own people, and that should mean avoiding unnecessary involvement in destructive wars, not embracing them.

Yet in the nation's capital foreign conflict attracts armchair field marshals like lights draw moths. There is an overwhelming desire throughout government bureaucracies, think tanks, and media newsrooms to get involved or, more accurately, to make others get involved. Opinion leaders rarely go themselves. But they are only too happy to send others to do the dirty work. Successive administrations have imposed sanctions, provided weapons, trained soldier, introduced troops, launched bombing raids, seized resources, occupied territory, and done more in assorted civil wars, including Syria.

The latter is a terrible tragedy, with an estimated half million deaths. It is not genocide, however, as oft-claimed. It is a civil war. And one with multiple factions, many if not most ugly, brutal, and murderous. Unfortunately, President Bashar al-Assad has no monopoly on evil. Yet the US cheerfully collaborated with most any killer of most any ideology if he opposed Assad, a perverse policy of dubious morality and dismal effectiveness.

Journalist Mehdi Hasan, no fan of Assad, wrote: "those responsible for arming and backing some of Syria's most thuggish rebel groups include – among many others – the government of the United States." And American officials were perfectly willing to play the propaganda card: Grayzone's Max Blumenthal investigated the atrocity photos used to justify sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, concluding that "at least half of the photographs in the 'Caesar' trove depict the bodies of government soldiers killed by the armed opposition."

Yet after nine years of fighting with Assad still in power, the conventional wisdom in Washington is that America cannot leave. Although deployed illegally without congressional authorization, the 600 to 900 men currently on station are supposed to overthrow the legitimate government, force out Syria's longtime allies Iran and Russia, guard Kurdish militias from NATO ally Turkey's armed forces, and prevent any revival of the Islamic State. Since that policy evidently hasn't been working well, Washington decided to starve the Syrian people in hopes of forcing out Assad. To call this policy moronic is unfair to morons.

President Donald Trump recognized the stupidity of yet another "endless war" which did not serve American interests. He sought to withdraw US forces from Syria, but the bipartisan war party, from which Trump foolishly hired his foreign policy staff, resolutely resisted his efforts. Some, such as Jim Jeffrey, admit misusing their position and misleading the president about the details of Washington's deployment. So Trump eventually settled on perhaps the most discreditable justification of all for keeping American personnel in danger in Syria: to steal the country's oil.

Has there been a worse, less effective, more wasteful policy carried out by the US government in recent years?

Well, there was the invasion of Iraq, which blew up the Middle East and killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. There was the regime change campaign in Libya disguised as humanitarian intervention, which fueled a conflict that continues today. There was US support for Emirati and Saudi intervention in Yemen's civil war, which has killed tens of thousands of civilians and created a humanitarian catastrophe. All of these were murderously immoral and stupid.

Alas, many of the American perpetrators of these policies will soon be back with the Biden administration making foreign policy. The president-elect voted for the Iraq war and criticized Trump for pulling back from Syrian Kurdish areas. He said to protect US interests "You need people on the ground," but gave no indication how many. Soon-to-be Secretary of State Antony Blinken helped forge President Barack Obama's disastrous policies in Libya and Yemen yet apparently believed that the Obama administration should have *done more* in Syria.

The Biden campaign blandly asserted that "Biden would recommit to standing with civil society and pro-democracy partners on the ground. He will ensure the US is leading the global coalition to defeat ISIS and use what leverage we have in the region to help shape a political settlement to give more Syrians a voice. Biden would press all actors to pursue political solutions, protect vulnerable Syrians, facilitate the work of non-governmental organization, and help mobilize other countries to support Syria's reconstruction." No doubt he also would kiss babies and pet puppies. Alas, this largely aspirational balderdash provides no indication of what practical steps he would take.

However, upon entering office Biden has a rare opportunity to start afresh, abandoning his predecessors' failed policies. Once he adopts their wars, however, he, too, will believe that he cannot leave, lest he be blamed for the aftermath. He should view Syria afresh. What lessons can be learned? What principles should America take for the future? Most important, should America go or stay?

What should we have learned from Syria?

- Don't get involved in other people's civil wars. Long before Syria was Ronald Reagan's bloody and foolish intervention in Lebanon, riven by more than a score of combat factions. Vietnam was the previous debacle, and even earlier was the Philippine-American War, a vicious imperialistic campaign against an indigenous insurgency to transform the Spanish colony into an American territory. These episodes typically involved costly interventions, murderous consequences, disastrous failures, endless wars, and bungled exits, all for minimal US interests.

- Do not intervene in strategically unimportant countries. Syria was irrelevant to American security. Damascus has been allied with Moscow for nearly seven decades. The US and NATO nevertheless dominate the Mediterranean. That won't change whatever happens in the conflict. Washington also effectively runs the Persian Gulf, being informally allied with Israel, the Gulf States, Jordan, and Egypt. After being defeated on multiple occasions by Israel, Syria no longer even defends itself from Israeli airstrikes whether on a nuclear reactor, military bases, or allied (Iranian) positions. American security is best served by staying out of conflicts of so little geopolitical significance.
- Do not intervene militarily to prevent "instability" in the Middle East. A new study from the Middle East Institute and Etana Syria complained: "The US's disengagement from Syria has fostered increased instability both for Syrians and their regional neighbors." This criticism follows the US and its allies intentionally *blowing up Iraq, Libya, and Yemen*. Now Washington should destroy Syria to prevent instability there? American policymakers dislike instability except when they don't, which seems to be most of the time. The Middle East will continue to suffer from instability even if America stops destroying countries. It should be obvious that endless intervention exacerbates instability.
- Do not intervene lawlessly, without congressional approval. Three successive administrations have gone to war promiscuously, claiming legal authority from the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force tied to al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks. That justified none of the Obama or Trump administrations' wars. The AUMF had nothing to do with any aspect of the war in Syria – promoting regime change against Bashar al-Assad, fighting ISIS, which was an enemy of al-Qaeda, protecting Syrian Kurds from Turkey, attempting to force out Russia and Iran, and stealing Syrian oil. Both Presidents Obama and Trump were bound by the Constitution to seek congressional authority to use the military for these dubious missions. So should Biden, if he foolishly decides to continue their policy.
- Do not allow employees to misuse their positions to promote their own foreign policy agendas. Jeffrey, a "never-Trumper" apparently determined to thwart the administration's agenda from the start, admitted that he dishonestly used his position to lie to the president and American people: "We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there." He gloried in his dereliction of duty: "What Syria withdrawal? There was never a Syria withdrawal." He helped ensure America's continued involvement in an unnecessary war.
- Do not launch counterproductive interventions that could lead to real war. Since the US is illegally occupying Syrian territory in a civil war the risk of involvement in hostilities remains serious. A U.S.-Kurdish patrol on Syrian land was fired on by Syrians manning a checkpoint. Illegal American bases have come under artillery attack from Syrian allies and Turkish forces. Indeed, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to target American units working with Syrian Kurds. Worse, American and Russian troops – the latter present at Damascus' invitation – have engaged in vehicular jousting. A couple years ago Russian mercenaries assaulted another illegal US position (the Putin government said the attack was not authorized). The potential for a great power clash is particularly dangerous, given the awful state of Moscow-Washington relations.

- Do not waste money on training programs with unrealistic requirements and means. Washington demanded vetting for ideological moderation, which ultimately is impossible to prove. Beneficiaries routinely surrendered, along with their U.S.-supplied weapons, to more radical groups. Even when programs reached the right trainees, the combat results were minimal. For instance, the half-billion-dollar program managed by Defense Secretary-designate Gen. Lloyd J. Austin, III, produced, according to his testimony, only "four or five" trainees (out of 54) who survived their first firefight. At the time another 100 to 120 were in the program.
- Do not engage in progressive social engineering in nations about which US officials have no understanding or capacity. In 2011 Washington was filled with wannabe humanitarian warriors who were largely ignorant about Syria – the combatants, issues, and prospects. Nor did they demonstrate the slightest competence in implementing their strategy. Although the architects of past disasters always promise to do better next time, consider the results in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, and before them in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. Washington should stop allowing fools to kill with alleged kindness.
- Do not intervene on behalf of groups that are America's enemies and more dangerous than the government Washington hopes to overthrow. Wars of choice do not warrant helping evil in order to hurt evil. No doubt, there were good guys in Syria in 2011 seeking a democratic revolution. But Syrians I met complained that even many initial protesters were sectarian, chanting: "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave." Evan Mullin, a former CIA operative, tweeted: "My role in the CIA was to go out & convince al-Qaeda operatives to instead work with us." Indeed, U.S.-trained personnel and -provided weapons often ended up in the hands of the al-Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda. Reported the Turkish think tank SETA, 28 of 41 factions were established before the Trump administration ended aid to Syrian rebels: "Out of the 28 factions, 21 were previously supported by the United States, three of the via the Pentagon's program to combat [the Islamic State]. Eighteen of these factions were supplied by the CIA." At one point near Aleppo, CIA-backed insurgents fought Pentagon-backed insurgents.
- Do not intervene in civil wars when that bad guys are likely to take control if they defeat the existing regime. Unfortunately, in revolutions in countries as diverse as Nicaragua and Iran, the worst factions seemed to corner the market in guns and ruthlessness and end up in charge. Hasan observed that there were "rebel groups that were dominated by violent Salafists and so-called jihadists from the start and who bragged about fighting alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS. The truth is that many of the rebel forces now committing war crimes against the Kurds were also committing war crimes in the early years of the Syrian civil war." The Idlib area, the last region under opposition control, is largely controlled by the radical Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham coalition, into which al-Nusra merged and which increasingly hostile Turkey backs. This group, warned the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, "indiscriminately shelled densely populated civilian areas, spreading terror among civilians living in government-held areas" and "detained, tortured and executed civilians expressing dissenting opinions, including journalists."
- Do not intervene in conflicts of choice when regional powers make the war their own. Virtually every country in the Mideast chose a side in the Syrian civil war, turning the fight into a proxy war. Today the opposition is mostly defeated, leaving the Syrian

government. The US never had good cause to jump into such an imbroglio. There certainly is no need to stick around today with his ravaged regime sitting atop a divided and wrecked land. Syria needs years of reconstruction before it can aspire to regaining lost influence and wealth.

- Do not intervene when other actors can address issues of concern. Virtually every government in the region was threatened by the Islamic State. However, most unsurprisingly lost interest in the fight once the US insisted on taking over. For instance, the Emiratis and Saudis dropped out to concentrate on killing Yemenis in order to reinstall the puppet Hadi regime. With the "caliphate" destroyed, ISIS is largely defeated. What remains of this threat faces a region united by little other than loathing of the Islamic State.
- Do not go to war to evict another government's allies absent compelling security justification, which is not present in Syria. Moscow has been allied with Damascus for almost seven decades, with little impact on the US. Iran and Syria are essentially each other's only allies in the region; both are weak and troubled regimes with no ability to harm America. Indeed, wrecked and divided Syria today is a dubious war prize. Ironically, the more successful the US is in weakening Damascus with sanctions, the more the Assad regime will be forced to rely on Iran (along with Hezbollah) and Russia. Yet having already punished Iran and Russia for other reasons, the US has little leverage absent full scale war to force them from Syria.
- Do not create perverse incentives that undermine your objectives. The US confused and undermined its respective missions to oust Assad and destroy the Islamic State. Since they were each other's greatest enemies, attacking each helped the other. Moreover, by aiding the supposedly moderate "Free Syrian Army" while focusing military efforts on ISIS, the Obama administration caused Damascus to make the rational calculation that it should concentrate on destroying the FSA, which carried with it American support, while leaving largely alone Islamic State forces, which Washington could be counted on to attack.
- Do not intervene when doing so creates an inevitable backlash making it more difficult to achieve one's objectives. For instance, demanding Assad's ouster discouraged him and his opponents from negotiating. Attacking another secular dictator after the debacle in Iraq encouraged religious minorities to back Assad to avoid the murder and mayhem likely to follow his ouster. Supporting largely nonexistent or ineffective democratic-minded insurgents often ended up underwriting jihadist forces, strengthening Assad's claim to be fighting "terrorists." Attempting to take control of a longtime Russian ally pushed Moscow to rescue Assad.
- Do not starve a population in order to punish the government. In a brutal act of international virtue signaling, the Trump administration used the Caesar Act to impose economic sanctions on Syria. Much of the Washington policy community now feels suitably righteous. Alas, explain the Quincy Institute's Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, the measure "further immiserates the Syrian people, blocks reconstruction efforts, and strangles the economy that sustains a desperate population during Syria's growing humanitarian and public health crisis." More than 80 percent of the population is currently below the poverty line. The World Food Program figures that 9.3 million

Syrians do not know where they will get their next meal. Still in power, though, is Assad. As is typical of sanctions, observed *The Independent's* Patrick Cockburn: "In practice the Caesar Act does little to weaken President Bashar al-Assad and his regime." So much for the bizarre assumption of Washington policymakers that Assad and his associates would voluntarily surrender power – after winning a bitter, horrid, and costly nine-year civil war – out of tender concern for the Syrian people.

- Do not support nominal allies that manipulate the conflict for their own benefit. Turkey spent years aiding the Islamic State, allowing personnel and materiel to cross the Turkish-Syrian border, and profiting from the group's commerce in looted oil, which reported enriched the Erdogan family. Ankara also invaded Syria, with US acquiescence, ethnically cleansing the border area, part of the autonomous Syrian-Kurdish zone known as Rojava. Although Turkey's security concerns were not without some validity, the Erdogan government created the "Syrian Interim Government" maintained by allied radical Islamist insurgents – many previously supported by the US – who committed numerous atrocities against the Kurdish inhabitants. Even the Trump administration acknowledged that Ankara "actively supports several hardline Islamist militias and groups 'engaged in violent criminal activities'."

The only serious justification for intervening in Syria, eliminating the ISIS "caliphate," has been completed. The other main objective, ousting Assad, has failed. Now a few hundred Americans are supposed to confront the Syrians, Iranians, Russians, and Turks and achieve ends of little security importance to the US. The best explanation is that the Trump administration decided to make Syrian policy but a footnote to its anti-Iran crusade, which also has failed spectacularly: Tehran has ramped up nuclear activities, interfered in Gulf oil traffic, encouraged rocket attacks on US facilities, including embassy, in Iraq, destroyed Saudi oil facilities, and remained active in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, all the while refusing to negotiate with Washington. Heckuva job!

Despite their sanctimonious rhetoric, US policymakers care nothing in practice about the Syrian people, who are just gambit pawns in Washington's policy. For instance, Jeffrey, who did his best to keep Americans at war, took evident pleasure in Syria's hardship, expressing his hope of turning it into "a quagmire for the Russians." That mimics Madeleine Albright's infamous justification for US sanctions which allegedly killed a half million Iraqi babies: "We think the price is worth it."

US intervention in Syria has been a nine-year train wreck. However, rather than admit responsibility for their failure, Washington policymakers believe they should have done more – intervened more vigorously, spent more money, imposed more sanctions, dropped more bombs, and killed more foreigners. Some even deceived their fellow Americans in order to double down on their failures. As the French statesman Talleyrand quipped about the Bourbon royals: "They had learned nothing and forgotten nothing." The American – and Syrian – people deserve better.

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