

## America Doesn't Belong in Syria

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When Syria tragically collapsed into brutal civil war in 2011, Americans had two contending reactions. One was to stay the hell out since there was little they could do other than offer aid to relieve suffering. The other was to intervene big time in order to transform the Middle East.

Naturally, the president, leading congressional Republicans and Democrats, and virtually the entire foreign policy community chose the second option. Never mind American interests, public opinion, fiscal responsibility, practical capabilities, and common sense. It was Washington's job to reorder the world. What could possibly go wrong?

Without seeking congressional approval, the Obama administration embarked on a multi-faceted campaign: oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who had not attacked or threatened America; find, train, and empower moderate insurgents to create a liberal democracy in Syria; use radical extremists, such as al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra, against *really* radical extremists, such as the Islamic State; expel Iranian forces, even though they represented a government with far more at stake in the conflict than America and had been welcomed by Damascus; convince Moscow, a Cold War ally of Syria, to advance Washington's agenda; employ Syrian Kurds to act as America's shock troops against ISIS; persuade Turkey, which profited greatly from the illicit ISIS oil trade, to combat the Islamic State; pacify Turkey while arming Syrian Kurds, which Ankara viewed as an existential threat; and occupy sovereign Syrian territory until the foregoing objectives had been achieved.

It was the plan of a madman—or an arrogant, officious, ignorant social engineer with no understanding of human nature, the Middle East, or America. Predictably, the result was almost complete failure. The Islamic State was at least defeated, but it was also opposed by Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Israel, Russia, European governments, the Gulf States, and America. Just some of those countries could have done the job, yet they had little need to contribute much once Washington had taken responsibility.

In spite of all that, today, Assad is still in power, and aided by the Iranians and Russians. There were never many moderates and democrats, and they never had much chance of winning. Most of the insurgents, radical and more radical, are gone, courtesy the Syrian military, other than

around the city of Idlib. Ankara has occupied and ethnically cleansed Kurdish territory in northern Syria and is preparing to seize more borderlands containing Kurds.

Until recently, around 1,000 American military personnel had been left in Syria, stationed among Kurdish forces that occupy around a third of Syrian territory. The occupying Americans' job, explained Washington policymakers, was unchanged: oust Assad, bring democracy to Syria, get rid of the Iranians, bring sense to the Russians, and, until Sunday anyway, stop the Turks from harming the Kurds. Washington's ambitions remained ever fantastic even as after its means shrank to near nothingness.

Moreover, the mission remains entirely illegal, without congressional or international warrant. On his own authority, the president entered a foreign war, occupied a foreign country, dismembered a foreign nation, established a foreign security commitment, and threatened war against a foreign government along with its long-time foreign allies. This is the sort of behavior that the British king engaged in, which the nation's founders sought to curb by placing the power to declare war in congressional hands.

Of course, there remains much to criticize about the president's decision to move U.S. forces away from the border and presumably exit entirely. Even when he does the right thing, he usually does so for the wrong reason and in the wrong way. Still, his previous efforts to end U.S. participation in Afghanistan and Syria generated frenzied opposition from the war hawks who dominate Congress and even his own staff. Again and again he gave in to those prophesying doom if the smallest deployment anywhere was curtailed to the slightest degree. Perhaps the only way he can set policy is by acting without warning, essentially by *fait accompli*.

None of the arguments for remaining in Syria are serious, let alone persuasive. Wishing for a different result does not a viable alternative make. By means more foul than fair, Assad has won: no minuscule American military presence is going to oust him, force him to hold fair elections, or make him send home the Iranians and Russians who sustained him. Even a vastly expanded American commitment wouldn't achieve what eight years of civil war failed to do. And there is no popular or political will for such an effort.

The U.S. military is not the only force standing between Americans and a globe-spanning ISIS empire. Every Middle Eastern country is threatened by the Islamic State, and each of them has a greater interest than the U.S. in ensuring that the group does not again metastasize. Indeed, an expanded Syrian military presence in areas occupied but not populated by Kurds—currently opposed by Washington—would create an important barrier to an Islamic State revival.

The greatest outrage against the president's decision is over his leaving the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava vulnerable to Turkish attack. Yet the Kurds had good reason for battling the Islamic State, which threatened them as well. Washington did not force them to act and provided them with aid, arms, and protection. Nothing entitled the Kurds to a permanent American security guarantee, especially protection from neighboring Turkey, an American ally.

Moreover, the Kurds had little reason to believe in America's sponsorship. In the 1970s, Washington worked with Iran's Shah to use them against Iraq, before abandoning them. In 2017, Kurdistan held an ill-advised independence referendum, and the Trump administration unhesitatingly backed Baghdad—which closed the airspace over Erbil and forcibly reclaimed non-Kurdish areas, including Kirkuk and nearby oil fields.

Nor should anyone confuse a potential Kurdish homeland with liberal, democratic, and moderate values. The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in Turkey, is no friend of the West. Kurdistan is a family-run state. The Syrian Kurdish movement is neo-Marxist and linked to the PKK. The U.S. can, and should, have sympathy for the Kurdish people and work with their authorities when appropriate. But Washington should act without starry-eyed illusions. Ankara's concerns are overblown and its treatment of the Kurds at home and abroad has been outrageously brutish, but neither do Kurdish politicians win medals for humanitarianism.

As for issues of credibility, it is far worse to needlessly risk lives and resources to fight an unnecessary and foolish war than to walk away from a bad promise or deal. No one will judge America's willingness to defend against existential threats by its willingness to sustain a marginal wartime commitment that generates few benefits. Virtually all great powers put their own peoples and interests first, as assorted American allies and friends have learned to their detriment over the years.

More important, but lost in the analysis, is the fact that Turkey, a member of America's premier military alliance and treaty ally of almost 68 years, has a higher claim to credibility than the Kurds. Discomfort with Ankara notwithstanding—a good case can be made for expelling the Islamist, repressive Erdogan regime from NATO—as of today, Turkey remains an alliance member in good standing and Washington remains committed to that government's defense. If the U.S. won't prioritize Ankara's security claims, what nation can rely on Washington? If credibility is the issue, then Turkey wins any dispute with the Kurds.

Perhaps the most dangerous attitude in Washington is the certainty that today's policymakers can succeed where yesterday's policymakers failed. Consider Uncle Sam's disastrous record in foreign civil wars. Ronald Reagan's greatest mistake was taking the U.S. into the Lebanese Civil War, with its more than a score of contending factions. Americans are still fighting in Afghanistan, 18 years after joining an internecine conflict that had begun years before.

The U.S. and Europe intervened in Libya's civil war, and after eight years of combat and chaos, featuring the rise of ISIS and the murders of Egyptian Copts, fighting continues. More than four years of American backing for Saudi and Emirati depredations in Yemen have yielded tens of thousands of civilian casualties, horrendous famines and epidemics, and increasing attacks on the Saudi homeland, with no end in sight.

Then there is Syria. As that conflict raged, Samantha Power, one of the chief advocates of promiscuous military intervention, complained that war supporters were being held accountable for their previous blunders, especially in Iraq: "I think there is too much of, 'Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought'...one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons." How unfair: destroy a nation, in the process empowering Islamist radicals and terrorists, wrecking minority

religious communities, and triggering conflict that kills hundreds of thousands, and people are less inclined to listen to you. Is there no justice?

Imagine what American foreign policy might look like if officials were judged on the results of their actions. Who in power today could withstand scrutiny? Whatever would they do in Washington?

These are the people who are most upset over President Trump's apparent decision to bring home U.S. forces from Syria. He should ignore the carping. He promised to stop the endless wars. Syria would be a good place to start putting America and Americans first.

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