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Why Are We Still In Syria?

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The sun never sets on an American battlefield, it would seem. At least not in Syria, where U.S. forces again came under fire from militias allied with Iran, killing one American and injuring several others. The Biden administration launched a retaliatory strike on Iranian bases in Syria, triggering another round of attacks.

The Syrian civil war has ebbed, with President Bashar al-Assad emerging victorious. At least, he is almost the last combatant still standing, relying on assistance from both Russian and Iranian forces. He controls roughly two thirds of his country, its cities wrecked and people impoverished. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians are dead.

Jihadists backed by Turkey control territory around the city of Idlib in the country's northwest. Syrian Kurds alongside U.S. troops, obviously present without Damascus's authorization, fill much of the remaining territory. President Joe Biden is "absolutely" committed to keeping U.S. troops there. Yet Ankara has overrun some Kurdish territory and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened another invasion, which would again put Americans at risk.

Washington's extended intervention in yet another civil war not its own—after Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Libya, and Vietnam a generation and more before them—was foolish. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first declared Assad to be a reformer, before making a startling political pirouette and announcing that he must be forced from office. That discouraged both Assad and his opponents from negotiating, since he had no intention of quitting and his opponents expected Washington to finish the job.

The Obama administration presented the conflict as a morality play, while choosing sides amid an abundance of bad guys. Backing rebel forces opened the way for the rise of the

Islamic State. The U.S. even allied with the local affiliate of Al-Qaeda which, lest anyone forget, was responsible for killing thousands of American civilians on 9/11. Washington's one success was aiding Syria's Kurds in defeating the malign forces it helped unleash.

The U.S. had no serious interest in the conflict. Syria was a long-time ally of Moscow and posed no threat to America, or even Israel, which enjoyed overwhelming military superiority. Russia and Iran had far more at stake in Assad's survival than America had in his ouster.

Assad is a cruel thug, but so are most of America's Mideast allies. Freeing Arab peoples never was a priority in Washington, which has backed brutal autocracies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, among other states. The U.S. even aided Iraq's Saddam Hussein after he invaded Iran. And Washington was allied with Iran's Shah before that.

Although the Syrian conflict highlighted the role of ISIS, the latter sought to carve out a "caliphate," or state, in the Middle East, not attack America. As such, the group was opposed by every nation in the region. Moreover, as noted earlier, Washington's effort to oust Assad empowered the Islamic State.

The war was destabilizing, but U.S. intervention prolonged the fighting without overthrowing Assad, let alone creating a stable, democratic government. Elsewhere Washington's behavior was far more disruptive than that of ISIS. The Bush II administration blew up Iraq, loosing Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into the Islamic State. The Obama administration helped oust Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, triggering a decade of on-and-off fighting.

America's involvement in Syria makes no sense today. Observed *New York Times* correspondent Edward Wong: "Few people like to talk about it, but the U.S. has been in a proxy war with Iran in Iraq and Syria for years. ... Every now and then, the violence comes into public view." And Americans die. The only good news is that casualties have been few considering the more than 70 attacks by Iranian-backed militias over the years.

President Donald Trump wanted to pull out, but was thwarted by the likes of Ambassador James Jeffrey, a "never-Trumper" who inexplicably repaid the Trump administration's trust by misleading the president about America's troop presence. With Jeffrey's dishonest policy a dismal failure, he then backed immiserating economic sanctions on the already impoverished Syrian people, treating them as a means to create a "quagmire" for Russia. Although Moscow hasn't seemed to notice, the Syrian people continue to suffer greatly.

Another former diplomat tasked with handling Syria, Joel Rayburn, also seems to exult in the economic wreckage caused by Washington, tweeting: “Assad's economy & state are collapsing: - No fuel. - No electricity. - No commerce. - Streets empty. - Assad just prints money to pay salaries/bills. Result: inflation making basic needs unaffordable. - Pound crashed to 5,900 per \$, making imports impossible.” One is reminded of Madeleine Albright’s callous response when questioned about the human cost of sanctions on Iraq: “We think the price is worth it.”

Jeffrey’s claim that punishing the population will force the departure of Assad, who survived a decade of civil war, is beyond risible. Sanctions on Syria have proven to be no more effective than those on Iran in changing the target government’s behavior. Even less credibly, the administration continues to imagine that political negotiations can force Assad to leave.

Worst of all, for Americans, at least, some 900 U.S. military personnel and hundreds more contractors, who first arrived in 2015, remain on duty in Syria’s northeast. They are there without congressional authorization, looting Syrian oil. And they face attacks from Syrian, Turkish, Iranian, and Russian forces.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained that Americans remain committed to “an enduring defeat of ISIS and continuing to support our friends and allies in the region.” A Biden administration official set objectives of “mitigating human suffering, expanding humanitarian access, sustaining the campaign against ISIS, and making clear our intolerance toward human rights abuses by the regime and other actors in the Syrian conflict.”

However, concluded Defense Priorities, what remains of the Islamic State, which lost its desultory “caliphate” four years ago, “lacks the capability and resources to take and hold significant additional territory.” As a result, the current situation “is as close to victory as one can reasonably expect.” The president has no authority to invade another nation, permanently occupy it, and forever wage war because a hostile force once existed. Nor are supporting allies, friends, humanitarian aid, and human rights constitutional grounds for executive war making.

Damascus has chosen not to confront the U.S. military, despite its legal right to do so. After a disastrous military assault by Russia’s semi-official Wagner Group five years ago, Moscow also has avoided direct contact, though its aircraft regularly buzz American forces—the airspace is Syria’s, not America’s, after all. In contrast, Iranian-backed forces periodically hit U.S. facilities and personnel with missiles and drones, like last week.

The administration made much of its military response. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin grandly announced: “No group will strike our troops with impunity.” The president claimed that the administration was prepared “to act forcefully to protect our

people.” Of course, the best way to do that would be to remove them from Syria. So far administration reprisals haven’t deterred strikes against U.S. bases, which triggered demands from inveterate hawks for even tougher action, a “withering and deadly response.”

Yet the president has no legal authority to unilaterally wage war against assorted foreign forces, even if suspected of firing on Americans. The Constitution allows the executive to defend against attacks, but presidents have routinely moved far beyond that limitation. What is more accurately termed retaliation, like Biden’s strike, requires congressional authorization. Wrote Thomas Jefferson: “if the case were important enough to require reprisal, and ripe for that step, Congress must be called on to take it; the right of reprisal being expressly lodged with them by the Constitution, and not with the Executive.” However, legislators hate to take any responsibility for any military intervention. House members recently rejected a bipartisan effort to end the U.S. occupation, but still refuse to provide a legal authorization for staying.

Americans are rightly tired of endless wars for foolish, even frivolous objectives, like illegally occupying a distant Middle Eastern nation wracked by more than a decade of conflict. The only argument for staying is the sunk cost fallacy. Having invested so much, successive administrations were determined to stay until someone can claim success, which could take forever, or even longer.

However, no one else wants to wait. Russia has encouraged negotiations between Ankara and Damascus, which could result in a Turkish withdrawal and Syria regaining control over its border. A modus vivendi between the Syrian Kurds and Assad government could reunite the country, preserve a degree of Kurdish autonomy, and enable Damascus to rely less on Tehran.

Finally, the Gulf monarchies are moving toward reestablishing diplomatic relations with the Assad government. Indeed, Assad recently returned from his second visit to United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia might be next, which would neatly fit alongside the recently announced restoration of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh, a welcome if as yet fragile step toward regional peace.

Naturally, Washington is apoplectic about its allies flouting its dictates. Two score former officials—leading architects of today’s failed policy—put out a statement demanding that the Biden administration do something to stop Syria’s neighbors from cleaning up America’s mess. In an act of self-parody, they declared: “Opposing regime normalization in word only is not enough, as tacitly allowing it is short-sighted and damaging to any hope for regional security and stability.”

Over the last two decades the U.S. has done more than anyone else to undermine Mideast security and stability. Washington should step back militarily and leave Syria to its

neighbors. Allow them to reestablish relations, offer assistance, and push political reforms. The administration also should drop economic sanctions on the Syrian people—and press Congress to do likewise. The U.S. could continue to penalize regime leaders and security organizations, while allowing the rest of the population to begin the long process of recovery and reconstruction.

America is at war in Syria. But why? President Biden says that “the United States does not, does not, I emphasize, seek conflict with Iran.” Then he should withdraw all U.S. forces from Syria. There is no justification for a continued American presence. It is time to end yet another unnecessary, undeclared forever war.

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