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Our Military is Clashing With Russians While Defending Syrian Oil. Why?

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Last month, American military forces physically blocked Russian troops from proceeding down a road near the town of Rmelan, Syria. U.S. troops were acting on orders of President Trump, who said back in October that Washington would be “protecting” oil fields currently under control of the anti-Assad, Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces.

Meanwhile, the Russians are acting on behalf of Syrian president Bashar Assad, who says the state is ultimately in control of those fields. While no shots were fired in this case, the next time Moscow’s forces might not go so quietly.

U.S. officials offered few details about the January stand-off, but General Alexis Grynkewich, deputy commander of the anti-ISIS campaign, said: “We’ve had a number of different engagements with the Russians on the ground.” Late last month the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported: “Tensions have continued to increase significantly in recent days between U.S. and Russian forces in the northeastern regions of Syria.”

Stationed in Syria illegally, with neither domestic nor international legal authority, American personnel risked life and limb to occupy another nation’s territory and steal its resources. What is the Trump administration doing?

American policy in Syria has long been stunningly foolish, dishonest, and counterproductive. When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, Washington first defended Assad. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even called him a “reformer.” Then she decided that he should be ousted and demanded that the rest of the world follow Washington’s new policy.

For years the Obama administration implemented a confused mix of contradictory policies. The U.S. sought to oust Assad and destroy the Islamic State, which the Damascus government opposed. The administration sought to find and aid an ever-diminishing pool of “moderate” insurgents while cooperating with an al-Qaeda affiliate and watching substantial U.S. materiel end up in the hands of other radical groups. American officials maintained the fiction that Turkey shared Washington’s objectives, even as it aided ISIS and focused its ill attention on Syrian Kurds, which Washington, in turn, relied on as its primary ground force against the Islamic State.

Both Moscow and Tehran aided Syria against ISIS, yet the administration sought to expel Russia from a country with which it had been allied throughout the entire Cold War and turn Syria into another front in the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, also long allied with Damascus.

President Obama’s only serious objective was reversing the Islamic State’s geographic advance. However, the group was an outgrowth of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and would not have existed otherwise. ISIS was opposed by most every regional power backed by Russia, Europe, and America. The “caliphate” would have been defeated even without Washington, though not as quickly. Obama’s policy, which kept U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq, left the latter particularly dependent on America, which is proving dangerous for both Baghdad and Washington.

Candidate Trump criticized “endless wars” in the Middle East, and as president he has repeatedly indicated his determination to bring home U.S. forces from Syria. Despite his cheerful announcement that ISIS had been defeated—it no longer rules any territory as a “caliphate”—Washington continues to occupy Syrian territory without legal warrant, U.S. or international. Nevertheless, the president has continuously faced determined resistance to his withdrawal demands from his own appointees as well as the Pentagon and the Washington foreign-policy establishment.

Last year his staff convinced him to swap deployments in the name of withdrawal, removing troops from Kurdish-held territory in the north and deploying units to guard Syrian oilfields seized by the Kurds. This new presence could be essentially permanent. General Frank McKenzie, America’s Mideast commander, stated: “This is an area where we made a commitment. I think we’re going to be here for a while.”

The president has long had a fixation on oil. As a candidate he complained that Washington should have kept Iraq’s petroleum reserves, and he continued to talk about the possibility of seizing the oil after becoming president, to Baghdad’s extreme discomfort. As for Syria, after he approved the Department of Defense plan he said America would be “keeping the oil.” It seemed natural to him: “I’ve always said that—keep the oil. We want to keep the oil, \$45 million a month.”

The president apparently believed that the U.S. would make back the money spent on the occupation: he said he hoped to “make a deal with an ExxonMobil or one of our great companies to go in there and do it properly.” That isn’t going to happen—no legitimate company is likely to develop *stolen resources* in a *war zone*. Even if the petroleum were developed, the resulting revenue collected from Syria’s wells, limited even before the conflict exploded, would hardly justify the occupation expense, let alone the military risk.

And the latter is real. President Trump seemed ready for war: “Either we’ll negotiate a deal with whoever is claiming it, if we think it’s fair, or we will militarily stop them very quickly.” A bit less clear was Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who minimized the role of oil while announcing that Washington would “respond with overwhelming military force against any group who threatens the safety of our forces there.” Since some 500 Americans are currently occupying the oil fields, that effectively means they will defend them with deadly force.

Unfortunately, potential conflict is not limited to Syria, the recognized government of the territory occupied by America and the legal owner of the oil the president threatens to sell. As noted earlier, Washington is prepared to confront nuclear-armed Russia, a Damascus ally, over Syrian oil.

What conceivable stakes could be worth taking such risks?

The president appears to realize that the standard reasons for entanglement do not just justify America's ongoing military presence, but his officials see the oil mission as a stalking horse, an excuse to keep the U.S. entangled in the region. Admiral William D. Byrne, Jr., vice director of the Joint Staff, opined that protecting the stolen Syrian oil was merely a "subordinate task." The president may reign, but he does not govern.

What and why do Washington's war partisans want America to do in Syria?

Syria does not matter and never has much mattered to America. The Assad regime obviously poses no military threat to the U.S. Although Washington labeled Damascus a state sponsor of terrorism, the latter does not engage in terrorism as commonly understood. That designation is political, reflecting Syria's support for quasi-states, such as Hamas, which are antagonistic to Israel. But the latter is well able to protect itself, having destroyed a Syrian nuclear reactor and more recently launched routine strikes against Iranian forces located in Syria, without any response from Damascus.

Throughout the Cold War, Syria was allied with the Soviet Union, so Russia's current involvement changes nothing. Washington, meanwhile, retains overwhelming influence in the Middle East, being allied with virtually every other state and possessing multiple bases, military relationships, and deployments. What happens in Syria simply isn't important for the U.S., other than as a humanitarian tragedy, which cannot justify military intervention.

Why else occupy roughly a third of Syrian territory with American troops? To continue the fight against ISIS? As a quasi-state, the group is dead. But its remnant forces will remain a problem, promoting a malignant theology and perhaps undertaking insurgent attacks. However, that is likely to be the case for years if not decades: the U.S. still worries about al-Qaeda nearly two decades after 9/11. A permanent U.S. occupation of Syria is not necessary. The Islamic State's other enemies, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf States, and Russia, are capable of countering whatever remains of the group.

The Syrian Kurds cooperated with America out of their own interest—defeating ISIS forces that threatened their population and territory—not for humanitarian reasons. Washington has no cause to offer a permanent defense commitment, especially one that Congress has never voted on. The Kurds' best option is to make a deal with Syria, within which their territory is located.

Desiring to defenestrate Russia is a fantasy objective, given Moscow's long ties with Damascus. Attempting to exclude Iran, invited in by the Assad government, is an even less realistic objective. Pushing these two governments out would be convenient for Washington, but in practice would offer little meaningful benefit. America will retain its long-standing military

dominance throughout the Middle East in either case. Indeed, the wreckage known as Syria may prove more liability than asset for both Moscow and Tehran in the foreseeable future.

Finally, some Washington policymakers still dream of ousting Assad. Indeed, that objective likely underlies Esper's October announcement that Washington would "maintain a reduced presence in Syria and deny ISIS access to oil revenue." Since the Islamic State has been largely destroyed, in reality, Washington is denying Syria's oil to the Syrian government and its allies, such as Russia, as we recently saw. Weakening the Assad government is supposed to allow its ouster, or force it to follow other U.S. dictates, such as the expulsion of Russia and Iran.

Assad deserves to be overthrown, but that does not make him unique. Nor does the Trump administration have the ability to oust him. On the contrary, he has survived years of bitter warfare and is on the cusp of victory over the remaining rebels in Idlib. He has no reason to quit or abandon allies that sustained him against myriad insurgents backed by America, Europe, and the Gulf States.

Moreover, removing Assad would not answer the vital question: who comes next? Washington has dramatically bungled regime change in both Iraq and Libya, leaving behind greater carnage and instability. Nor can the promotion of democracy justify the human and financial cost of promiscuous war-making, even for allegedly humanitarian reasons. American military personnel are not pawns for Washington's ivory tower crusades; 9/11 demonstrated that misguided foreign intervention puts even America's homeland at risk.

The president wants to seize Syrian oil but his appointees have very different agendas. Such contradictory objectives could lead to confusion and worse. At the same time, the president's well-publicized focus on resources feeds the traditional Mideast meme that all the U.S. government cares about is oil. Today that is not just a conspiracy theory; it is the president's own official pronouncement.

A policy of America First should be Americans First. Two months ago the president declared that "we left troops behind, only for the oil." Last month a 22-year-old North Carolina soldier, Antonio Moore, was the latest death in the illegal, counterproductive Syria mission. Washington policy should focus not on collecting cash for the federal government but protecting the lives and liberties of the American people. That means not risking them for interests that are fundamentally frivolous—like grabbing Syria's oil for fun and profit. President Trump should fulfill his promise and bring home the U.S. military from Syria.

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