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U.S. Should Stay Out Of Syria: 'Safe Zones' Aren't Safe for Americans

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During the Republican primaries Donald Trump was almost alone in resisting the call for U.S. military intervention in Syria. While some of his competitors advocated shooting down Russian planes, Trump pledged to focus on ISIS. Yet he recently promised to “absolutely do safe zones in Syria,” which would put American forces in the middle of Syria’s civil war—apparently fighting on behalf of people he won’t allow to enter the U.S.

The Obama administration’s Syria policy was a failure, but of intervention, not isolation. For instance, Washington unintentionally fueled the conflict by calling for Assad’s ouster and offering the hope of Western support after protests erupted in 2011. Both sides saw less reason to negotiate.

Restless hawks on both right and left called for U.S. military action. They presumed that a few bombs on the right targets would wipe away the Assad regime, enabling pro-Western forces to establish a tolerant democracy, strengthening American influence, safeguarding Israeli security, and undercutting Iran’s Islamist regime.

It was a beautiful vision, but there was no reason to believe their claim that *this time* they would finally get foreign social engineering right. In Iraq America went in heavy, defenestrated the secular dictator, occupied the country, and created a new democratic government. In Libya Washington went in light, degraded the dictator’s armed forces, and left governance to the victorious rebels. In Yemen the U.S. partnered with an ally, Saudi Arabia, strengthening its campaign against the coalition of forces which ousted Riyadh’s pliant president.

In none of these cases was the result as promised. Yet war advocates simply dismiss their awful record. UN Ambassador Samantha Power insisted that “There is too much of, ‘Oh, look, this is what intervention wrought’.” She demanded to plunge ahead and start bombing in Syria, never mind the consequences. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof admitted that “We can’t be sure that more robust strategies” would actually succeed, but argued that something had to be done nonetheless.

A frustrated Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* complained: “The Russians managed to do what they wanted to do. Why not the United States?” Perhaps because Moscow had one simple objective, buttress the Damascus government. In contrast, Washington wanted to oust President

Bashar al-Assad, promote democratic governance, defeat ISIS, work with the Kurds and Turks as they fought each other, use “moderate” rebels against radical groups even though all were formed to fight the Syrian government, “vet” insurgents in the midst of a confusing conflict, and push the Gulf States to fight Daesh, even though they were providing money and weapons to radical groups working to overthrow Assad, their primary objective.

Most dubious was the assumption that a little military intervention would eliminate Assad, which in turn would empower liberal, tolerant, Western-oriented leaders. But even a U.S. bombing campaign would not have guaranteed his early or easy departure. Moreover, so-called moderates were not necessarily secular democrats in waiting, and many proved comfortable cooperating with jihadists and other extremists. As President Donald Trump observed shortly after his election, “Now we are backing rebels against Syria, and we have no idea who these people are.”

A victory by well-intentioned but poorly organized and largely unarmed moderates also would merely be the first combat round. Argued Emile Simpson, a former British infantry officer now at the Kennedy School, “After the initial euphoria, the country would have become fragmented, as various militias sprang up and took control of their local areas.” In fact, in most revolutions the better organized and more ruthless radicals triumph over everyone else, as in France, Russia, Iran, and Nicaragua.

Thus, Washington probably would have had to intervene even more heavily post-Assad to put one faction in power and keep it there. An insurgency—or even insurgencies—would almost certainly have followed. And how long an occupation would be necessary? The U.S. and its allies have been in Afghanistan since 2001 without establishing a competent, stable government in Kabul. Attempting to put Syria back together would make repairing Humpty-Dumpty look easy in comparison.

Why should Washington take on another extended bout of bloody nation-building in the Middle East? James Jeffrey of the Washington Interest for Near East Policy contended that intervention is necessary to contain “a challenge to global order” like the Berlin blockade, Korean War, and Cuban missile crisis. But Syria doesn’t matter to America, certainly not like those explosive events—unless Washington joined the conflict and confronted *Russia*.

U.S. security is not at risk in Syria. The Assad dynasty spent the Cold War allied with the Soviet Union, but in no way threatened the U.S. Israel proved more than able to take care of itself, causing Damascus to back away from conflict after the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Even if the Assad regime survives, it will be a shadow of its former self.

Many feared the conflict would spread, but after nearly six years the fighting remains contained. Moreover, the overthrow of Assad actually would make the fight for control more vigorous and unpredictable, fueling battles among insurgents and involvement by surrounding states. Better for the U.S. to stay out of a conflict which does not threaten America.

Jeffrey also argued that Moscow and Tehran are seeking to “to upend the regional order.” Actually, they are fighting to protect the status quo. American policy in both Iraq and Libya was revolutionary, to wreck existing regimes. Washington is doing the same in Syria. “Success” for

Russia and Iran merely means preserving an ally even before of limited value and now on life support.

Columnist Charles Krauthammer contended that “Russia will use its naval and air bases to bully the Sunni Arab states, and to shut out American influence.” The U.S. dominates the region: Washington is allied with Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf States. American bases and forces leapfrog the region. NATO rules the Mediterranean. Moscow gets the dregs, and is desperately attempting to maintain its one foothold in the Middle East.

Alberto Fernandez of the group MEMRI argued that Syria was “one place where Iranian ambition ... can be challenged,” but that is not worth U.S. involvement in a war. Anyway, Syria matters disproportionately to neighbor Iran. Tehran’s new revolutionary regime endured years of ruinous war after Saddam Hussein’s invasion, during which Syria was its only friend. Iran also confronts a hostile, well-armed Sunni coalition led by Saudi Arabia and U.S. encirclement through military bases and force deployments. No wonder Tehran is seeking to prevent a further tightening of the cordon around it.

Some analysts talk as if Syria is the bedrock of a new Iranian empire. Iran’s reach is limited to shrunken, war-torn Syria, impoverished and perpetually conflict-ridden Yemen, ineffective and embattled Iraq, and sectarian polyglot Lebanon. Tehran’s role has grown in Iraq, but almost entirely due to George W. Bush’s foolhardy invasion of the latter.

Although the Assad regime poses no threat to America, turning Syria over to a mix of radicals, jihadists, and terrorists would endanger U.S. security. Which is what the Obama administration risked doing with its willingness to make common cause with extremist and al-Qaeda linked groups against Assad. The Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, provided money and arms to the radical opposition while Turkey accommodated even Islamic State forces.

A new Rand Corporation study concluded that “The emphasis on both regime change and the defeat of terrorist groups seeking to overthrow the Syrian government has only served to prolong the war. They are, in the end, probably irreconcilable objectives, absent a level of intervention or escalation that has not been proposed.” That is, absent large-scale U.S. military action, Washington can’t simultaneously overthrow Assad and wipe out ISIS, et al.

The Syrian regime’s attempt to tar all of its opponents as “terrorists” was self-serving but contained a germ of truth. Government forces were the strongest barrier to the ISIS flag flying over Damascus. In contrast, early on, at least, Washington was more interested in ousting Assad than controlling radical forces.

Advocates of U.S. involvement point out that the Syrian military targeted more “moderate” forces. Of course, such groups commonly cooperated with the radicals, minimizing the difference. Moreover, it was imperative for Damascus to quickly degrade the effectiveness of groups backed by America lest Washington intervene on their behalf.

Syria has been a humanitarian horror, with the Syrian government bearing particular responsibility, along with its allies Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. But the conflict is not genocide. Low-tech civil wars typically are brutal, especially this one, a multi-sided conflict in which multiple armed factions are battling fiercely and cruelly. Even in Aleppo, the insurgents engaged

in their own indiscriminate shelling and starvation blockades of government areas. Most of the dead still are combatants, despite the heavy civilian casualties. And early tallies, at least, reckoned that regime supporters had lost most heavily.

Nevertheless, intervention advocates ignore such fine distinctions in claiming Washington has an obligation to act. Sen. John McCain, who supported the invasion of Iraq, which triggered sectarian conflict that killed 200,000 or more Iraqi civilians, announced that “the name Aleppo will echo through history, like Srebrenica and Rwanda, as a testament to our moral failure and everlasting shame.” Said Max Boot of the Council of Foreign Relations: “the outside world also bears moral responsibility for standing by and doing nothing.” New York University professor Alon Ben-Meir asked “What happened to our moral responsibility?” and demanded that U.S. President Barack Obama take military action. Richard Cohen said the president appeared “heartless.”

Yet today Washington aids Saudi Arabia’s callous killing of civilians in Yemen and ignores Turkey’s renewed assault on its Kurdish citizens. The “world” stood by when millions died in the multi-sided intervention in Congo’s civil war in the early 2000s. South Sudan, the world’s newest and probably poorest country, suffered a fratricidal breakdown more than three years ago and “the international community” has done nothing. While no foreign policy is likely to be fully consistent, it needs to be at least defensible in the standards it sets. There are none regarding Syria.

However, Washington long has been full of intellectuals determined to send others off on grand moral crusades. The fulsome demands that “we” do something actually means U.S. military personnel should fight. “We scorned the obligation” to act in Aleppo, thundered the Brookings Institution’s Leon Wieseltier. “We did not even try.” Actually, if “we” had acted, Wieseltier still wouldn’t have done anything, or even tried. Instead, the military would have done the deed for him.

Worse are foreign advocates of intervention who seemingly want to borrow America’s military. For instance, Canada’s Michael Ignatieff wrote: “The risks [of America intervening] are justified because the stakes are nothing less than the credibility of the NATO alliance, the survival of Europe as a union and the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.” Britain’s *Economist* magazine complained of the West, which in this case mostly means America: “By failing to stand up for what it is supposed to believe in, it has shown that its values are just words—and that they can be ignored with impunity.” Why don’t such advocates demand that Ottawa and London organize an expeditionary force to the Middle East?

Finally, there is the credibility canard. Wrote retired Gen. John Allen and Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute: “The credibility of the United States as the leader and defender of the free world must be salvaged from the horrific devastation of Syria.” Why is America’s reputation at stake in Syria but not in South Sudan, which Washington helped birth? Why was it not at stake in the Congo, previously known as Zaire, long a U.S. client under the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko? Why is it not at stake in Yemen, a devastating war that America is actively participating in? Leadership does not mean joining every conflict, irrespective of interests and circumstances.

In any case, what is there to do? America has no easy military options. Expanding aid to the sort of supposedly liberalish forces Washington has supplied and trained isn't likely to have a great impact. They have the poorest combat record. In fact, they "got stomped," wrote journalist Kevin Knodell. Giving such insurgents portable anti-aircraft missiles would improve their effectiveness, but still wouldn't enable them to defeat both the Syrian government and jihadists, as hoped by the Obama administration. At best, such assistance would merely lengthen an already indeterminate conflict.

Worse, this policy would risk leakage to terrorist who might use them against U.S. airliners. Independent groups backed by America often have surrendered or defected to radical forces, taking along their U.S.-supplied weapons. In the latest such setback Free Syrian Army units in the northwest were defeated by Japhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra Front. The group said it attacked FSA to undercut the latter's role in ongoing peace talks.

A no fly zone would be an act of war that also would rebalance the conflict, not end the fighting. The U.S. would have to suppress Syrian air defense systems, likely costing the lives of U.S. airmen and Syrian civilians. Only a fool would threaten to shoot down Russian planes, yet a "no fly" zone in which Moscow bombed at will would not be a "no fly" zone.

No one quite knows what President Trump means by "safe zones" for civilians, but anything which promised protection from military attack by Syrian, Iranian, or Russian forces would be no mean feat. It would require housing, clothing, and feeding the thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands who might show up. They would have to be defended, presumably both on the ground and from the air.

The Pentagon estimated that it would need 30,000 troops and a billion dollars a month to implement previous "safe zone" proposals. U.S. personnel would be a magnet for terrorist attacks—radical jihadists would be actively fighting nearby and could easily infiltrate as refugees fleeing conflict elsewhere. Having drawn people to the area with the promise of protection, Washington could not easily leave, even if the conflict continued for years.

Moreover, such an region would end up protecting insurgents who could move in with refugees. This would turn "safe zones" into armed sanctuaries, inviting, even necessitating, attack by the Assad regime and its allies. Protecting such areas, and any radical forces operating within, would drag America into the war. Russia would be unlikely to back down, at least unless Washington policed the zones and excluded opposition combatants, which would require introduction of American forces.

So too with the proposal by MEMRI's Fernandez to use "the motley assortment of rebel groups fighting against both ISIS and Damascus to fashion a zone of influence that serves our own strategic interests." Alas, experience suggests Washington could not rely on such a "motley assortment." And there would be little strategic value to a small zone in a sea of fire. Rather, the U.S. would just be presenting its forces as targets, akin to President Ronald Reagan's introduction of American forces in Lebanon's civil war.

Indeed, it would seem particularly foolish for Washington to go militarily half in. Instead, the U.S. could intervene directly, as in Iraq and Libya, attacking Syrian military units and facilities.

A report last fall from a task force chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley advocated use of “air power, stand-off weapons, covert measures and enhanced support for opposition forces” against the Damascus regime. That surely would weaken the regime, but would not guarantee a victory by U.S.-backed forces. Moreover, if Assad fell, U.S.-backed groups would seek continuing military support in the ensuing battle against radical forces. Washington would have to guarantee the survival of any friendly government which took power. And the U.S. would find it hard to avoid a confrontation with Russia, which has worked to save the Assad regime.

No American interest warrants such a risky and potentially bloody course.

Hopes of peace have been raised by the talks in Astana, Kazakhstan involving the Syrian government, “moderate” insurgents, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. An agreement will be tough to come by and especially to enforce.

Both sides have fractured badly. The Assad government retains its expressed goal to reassert its authority over the entire country, though it depends on the backing of its allies for its survival. Assad’s role even in a transition is problematic. Ankara barred participation of Syrian Kurds, Washington’s close ally in the anti-ISIS fight. Some other groups backed by the West also have been excluded. Radical groups will continue fighting irrespective of what emerges from Astana. Nevertheless, even a bad deal looks better for the people of Syria than continued bitter warfare.

Americans should be appalled by the widespread carnage in the midst of Syria’s civil war. However, that doesn’t mean they have the means to stop it, at least at reasonable cost and with a reasonable chance of creating a stable, peaceful future. Sen. McCain argued that if the U.S. refuses to intervene militarily “the instability, terror and destruction at the heart of [Syria’s] chaos will eventually make their way to our shores.” But past terrorism has come as a result of precisely this sort of intervention, joining other nations’ struggles and making new enemies, not staying out of fratricidal sectarian conflicts.

Having promised to limit Washington’s objectives in Syria, President Trump should reject half-hearted proposals for more war, including “safe zones.” If not, he will find his administration and America stuck in another conflict from which escape would prove difficult if not impossible.

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