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Bring US forces home from Syria

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Syria's capital looks a bit like Washington, D.C.: Imposing government buildings, heavy traffic, busy streets, and imperious officials. Different, however, are ubiquitous checkpoints to thwart car bombs.

Although the threat of terrorism scares most Americans, it actually offers a form of relief to Damascus residents. Until recently insurgents controlled some suburbs, from which they fired artillery and mortars into the city. Today those neighborhoods, just a few minutes away, are wrecked and empty. But the fighting is over.

On a recent trip to Syria I found similar situations in Homs and Aleppo. Entire neighborhoods in the latter are just rubble. But other areas of the cities are recovering.

Moreover, the war there is over. The government has won.

The last area under insurgent control, surrounding Idlib, faces an imminent offensive by the Syrian military. Damascus is widely expected to prevail.

If so, only lands in the north, where U.S. forces are cooperating with Kurdish militias, and in the southeast, near the Iraqi border, the site of another American base, remain outside of Syrian government control. President Donald Trump said he wanted U.S. forces stay out of the Syrian conflict and remain only long enough to defeat the Islamic State. But the administration recently announced what sounds like a plan for an essentially permanent, though lawless—without any congressional authorization—presence in Syria.

Washington wants to force Assad from power, presumably through some political settlement negotiated with Moscow. The U.S. also hopes to force Iran to withdraw its forces, also apparently with the assistance of Russia.

These are quixotic, bizarre plans. Indeed, America's intervention in Syria is entirely misguided.

Syria is of essentially no security interest to the U.S., which dominates the Middle East.

Damascus was a Soviet ally throughout the Cold War. In recent years Syria has been close to Tehran. The Assad regime is hostile to Israel, but the latter is well able to protect its own interests.

Syria also is a humanitarian tragedy, of course. But that is no reason for the U.S. to risk its own peoples' lives and wealth in another lengthy, brutal conflict. Anyway, there is little that

Washington could do in Syria, absent becoming just another active participant in a complicated, multi-sided battle with multiple bad actors.

President al-Assad was one of them, but ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, and a gaggle of other radical groups were worse. They are murderous totalitarians that brutalize those they rule and threaten those who believe differently, including Americans. In contrast, Syrian “moderates” were largely irrelevant and ineffective.

Nor would ousting Assad likely have ended the humanitarian crisis. Overthrowing Assad would have merely led to the next conflict, over who would succeed him. Most Alawites, Christians, and other minorities saw Assad as their best protection.

In any case, Washington’s ability to influence events in Syria is only a little above nil. The U.S. occupation inconveniences Damascus, but the Assad government is more secure today than at any point during the last seven years. Why would it give way now?

Nor could Moscow displace Assad. At most, Russia could withhold air support in a conflict which has largely ended. And having invested so much, the Putin government is unlikely to risk its ties with Damascus.

The belief that Moscow would, or even could, force Iran from Syria is even more fanciful. To start, Tehran long has been allied with Syria and has far more at stake there than does Washington.

Anyway, whatever the tensions between Moscow and Tehran, the former has no way of pushing out the latter. And given U.S. policy toward Russia, why would the latter do Washington any favors?

Moreover, the administration apparently imagines that the U.S. can use the Kurds to limit Iranian forces in Syria, as if Tehran was unaware of airplanes. Worse, the Kurdish authorities know that Washington will not protect them, so they have little reason to take great risks for America. Indeed, Damascus is engaged in negotiations with Kurdish officials, seeking to find a modus vivendi.

America’s role also creates a serious risk of wider conflict. Washington is daring Damascus and its allies to take a shot at what are foreign invaders. Simple error or misjudgment could land Washington in a violent conflict with Syrian, Iranian, Russian, and/or Turkish forces.

The Trump administration appears to share the belief of prior administrations that it can transform the Middle East in America’s image. But Washington’s record in the Middle East is catastrophic. It is time to bring home America’s troops.

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