

Washington's Influence in Syria is Nowhere to be Found

Doug Bandow

September 13, 2018

Syria's capital looks a bit like Washington, D.C.: imposing government buildings, heavy traffic, busy streets, and imperious officials. Public edifices are surrounded by concrete walls. The main difference may be the ubiquitous regime propaganda: you can't miss images of President Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez, whereas President Trump's visage is missing from Washington.

Also unusual are the ubiquitous checkpoints. They're there to prevent terrorism via 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. It may be the peace of the grave, but at least it is peace.

On a recent trip to Syria, I found similar situations in Homs and Aleppo. The damage was greater and more extensive—entire neighborhoods in the latter are just rubble—but other areas of the cities were recovering. The government rules without an overwhelming public security presence. The war is over and they have won.

The last area under insurgent control, surrounding Idlib, faces an imminent offensive by the Syrian military backed by Russian airstrikes. Washington has warned the Assad regime against using chemical weapons but otherwise won't intervene. The humanitarian consequences could be severe, but 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 to keep America 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.

According to Washington, there are two primary objectives. One is to force Assad from power, presumably through some political settlement negotiated with Moscow. The other is to force Iran to withdraw its forces, also apparently with the assistance of Russia. These are quixotic, bizarre plans. The Syrian Civil War is over. The government won. The U.S. can't force Syria, Russia, or Iran to do anything. America's intervention in Syria is entirely misguided.

Syria is a humanitarian tragedy, of course. But that is no reason for the U.S. to risk sacrificing its own peoples' lives and wealth in another lengthy, brutal conflict. Washington has been entangled

in Afghanistan for 17 years and Iraq for 15 with no ends in sight. There is little that it can do in Syria, absent becoming just another active participant in a complicated, multi-sided battle with multiple bad actors. President Assad was one of them and deserved to fall, but ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda affiliate), and a gaggle of other radical groups were even worse, murderous totalitarians that brutalized those they rule and threatened those who believe differently, including Americans.

In contrast, Syrian rebel “moderates” were largely irrelevant and ineffective. They never appeared to be real contenders for power and routinely cooperated with the radicals, often surrendering personnel and (U.S.-supplied) materiel.

Nor was ousting Assad likely to end the humanitarian crisis. Overthrowing him would have merely led to the next conflict over who would succeed him. In countries from Iran to Nicaragua, diverse coalitions defenestrated long-ruling dictators only to see the most vicious authoritarians among them take control. There is no reason to believe Syria would have been any different. Alawites, Christians, and other minorities saw Washington’s previous production in Iraq and didn’t like the ending. For understandable reasons these groups saw Assad as their best protection.

In any case, today Washington’s ability to influence events in Syria is only a little above nil. U.S. forces occupy part of that sovereign nation without the slightest legal authority. And the Assad government is more secure today than at any point during the last seven years. Why would it give way now? American policy actually gives the regime a plausible excuse to its own people for a slow recovery.

In fact, the administration said it will not support reconstruction in government-controlled areas. The theory, apparently, is that people will rise up and throw off their Assad-imposed chains in disgust. That is unlikely, given the fact that Damascus triumphed against a plethora of well-armed and funded opponents. Anyway, disgruntled Syrians are more likely to target Washington with their disgust, having felt punished by the U.S. for not making political choices that aren’t actually empowered to make.

Nor could Moscow displace Assad even if it wished to do so. His government controls the ground. At most, Russia could withhold air support in a conflict that has largely ended. And having invested so much, the Putin government is unlikely to risk its ties with Damascus. Relations are close: pictures of Assad and Putin together are common, the two countries share an airfield near the coast, and I saw truckloads of armed Russian soldiers driving about. The belief that Moscow would, or even could, force Iran from Syria is even more fanciful: Tehran has long been allied with Syria and has far more at stake there than does Washington.

Indeed, America’s position is beyond arrogant. Washington is in Syria illegally. In contrast, Iran, like Russia, has been invited in by the legally legitimate (however brutal) Syrian government. 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 the access of Iranian forces to Syria, as if Tehran was unaware of airplanes. Worse, Kurdish forces know that Washington will not protect them, from Turkey or likely anyone else. So they have little reason to take great risks for America. Indeed, Damascus is engaged in negotiations with

Kurdish officials. A Syrian takeover along the Turkish border might satisfy Ankara and finally end Turkey's invasion, which is designed to prevent the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state.

Given the inevitable failure of the administration's plans, how long will Washington continue its illegal military occupation of another country? The problem is not just wasted time, effort, and money. America's role creates a serious risk of wider conflict.

U.S. forces are taking aggressive, confrontational positions within a war zone, forcibly occupying another nation's territory. Washington is daring Damascus and its allies to take a shot at the foreign invaders. Simple error or misjudgment could land Washington in a violent conflict with Syrian, Iranian, and/or Russian forces.

Perhaps worse, the U.S. remains at odds with its NATO ally Turkey. Washington has positioned American military personnel between the Turkish military and Kurdish militias, having promised what it has no authority to do: force the Kurds away from their home territory along the border. Earlier this year, the threat of violent collision appeared real when the Pentagon promised to defend its positions and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to deliver an "Ottoman slap" to the U.S.

The Syrian civil war was and remains a tragedy. Unfortunately, the Trump administration appears to share the belief of the Obama and Bush administrations that it can transform the Middle East in America's image. But Washington's record when it attempts that is not just bad: it is catastrophically awful.

It's time to say no more. Social engineering doesn't work at home. It has worse results when attempted overseas. President Donald Trump has a unique opportunity to change the course of U.S. foreign policy for the better. It is time to bring home America's troops and leave at least one foreign problem, Syria, to others.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.