



When Will Donald Trump Stop Even One Endless War?

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These days the U.S. is the world's most militaristic power, threatening, droning, bombing, invading, and occupying far more countries than any other nation. Operating on the well-established principle that might makes right, American presidents routinely intervene with neither domestic nor international legal warrant, as in Syria today. Washington also routinely sanctions allies as well as adversaries, insisting that every person in every nation follow US dictates.

Today America is lawlessly engaged in low-level aggression against Syria. US troops have occupied much of the north, protecting the Kurdish zone known as Rojava, seized Syrian oilfields in the east, for both politics and profit, and cut Syrian roads, including the main route to Baghdad, Iraq – based solely on the president's illegal orders. Imagine the Syrian army invading Montana, guarding a secessionist ministate, occupying the state's shale oil fields, and blocking highways heading east toward Washington, D.C.

The US also is engaged in a dangerous minuet with Turkey, which occupies part of Rojava. Ankara views Syrian Kurds as a threat and twice invaded northern Syria, including last fall after pushing America aside. Turkey established the "Syrian Interim Government," dominated by radical Islamist insurgents who have murdered and ethnically cleansed Kurdish inhabitants. The Pentagon admitted that Turkey "actively supports several hardline Islamist militias and groups 'engaged in violent criminal activities'."

Finally, Washington is supporting jihadist rule in the Turkish-protected Idlib enclave, the only part of Syria still under insurgent control. Although Washington has deployed no troops there, it provides political support for a leadership dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, long linked to al-Qaeda. HTS, reported the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, "detained, tortured and executed civilians expressing dissenting opinions, including journalists" as well as "indiscriminately shelled densely populated civilian areas, spreading terror among civilians living in government-held areas." Just a couple weeks ago the al-Qaeda affiliate abducted an American journalist and his driver, after he reported on the group's use of torture.

Thus, Washington, despite its humanitarian claims, is backing enemies of America who are as brutal as the Assad government. Despite repeated accusations of genocide against Damascus, the Syrian conflict was a vicious, multi-sided civil war with few good guys. The half million killed included many allies of the regime, such as Alawites, Assad's co-religionists. Max Blumenthal

of Grayzone recently reported on an investigation of the atrocity photos used to justify sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act: "investigators have determined that at least half of the photographs in the 'Caesar' trove depict the bodies of government soldiers killed by the armed opposition."

Ironically, American behavior in Syria mimics that of Russia in Ukraine's Donbass: illicitly occupying a sovereign state and promoting repressive autonomous regions within. In doing so, President Donald Trump is risking conflict with Syria and its allies, Russia, Iran, and conceivably even Lebanon's Hezbollah, despite his frequent complaints about "endless wars."

The possibility of combat is real. A couple weeks ago Syrians manning a checkpoint and a U.S.-Kurdish patrol engaged in a brief firefight. Around the same time tribal forces allied with Damascus shelled an American base. Bigger news was last week's clash between American and Russian troops – allied with Damascus – which resulted in four US injuries. In July a Russian patrol blocked transit of American military vehicles.

A far more dangerous incident occurred two years ago, when a large contingent of Russian mercenaries unsuccessfully attacked a position held by Americans and Kurds. (Moscow disclaimed responsibility for the incident.) Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly threatened to attack American units stationed alongside Kurdish forces in Rojava. Last fall US personnel twice came under artillery fire by Turkish units.

Nevertheless, at the moment the bipartisan War Party in Washington, which supports American military intervention everywhere for every reason, is in full cry, demanding retaliation against Moscow for challenging the Pentagon's illegal presence. These same legislators refused to authorize administration war-making in Syria. Probably because they know they cannot explain let alone justify America's involvement.

The current US deployment is little short of mad. The Obama administration originally proposed intervening to destroy ISIS, but the last territory held by the Islamic State was recaptured in March 2019. Existing forces from Syria and surrounding nations are capable of preventing an ISIS renaissance. Indeed, that may be the only issue that everyone in Syria agrees on. Anyway, if Washington had not been more interested in ousting Assad than halting jihadist violence, the Islamic State would have had far less opportunity to wreak havoc from the start.

Today some 600 American military personnel are tasked with simultaneously forcing Assad from office, ousting Iranian and Russian forces allied with Damascus, protecting Kurds from Turks, and apparently everyone else, and ensuring that the Islamic State does not stage a repeat performance. Damascus is likely to increasingly challenge US forces. The more uncomfortable America's presence, the harder for Washington to achieve its mission and greater the pressure on Washington to withdraw. Yet so long as US policymakers are determined to play imperial power and lawlessly occupy a country riven by conflict, the potential for violent confrontation will be great. And next time someone could escalate, creating a genuine crisis.

Yet geographic and resource piracy might not be the worst aspects of current US policy. Syrians who have been harmed by their own government now are being punished by Washington, which is using sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to destroy the already ravaged Syrian economy and immiserate the already-impoverished Syrian people. Regime elites can

protect themselves to some degree. Most Syrians – more than 80 percent of whom fall below the poverty line – are helpless.

U.S. policymakers care nothing about the impact on Syrians. They are focused on preventing reconstruction of a nation that has suffered through nine years of war, which cannot help but punish the victims. The US special representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, glories in the resulting human hardship, explaining that the administration hoped to turn Syria into "a quagmire for the Russians."

Unfortunately, Washington's harsh strategy is working. Observed Syrian writer Ishtar al-Shami: "Sanctions apply to vital institutions that provide important support (like clothing) for millions of Syrians. Among these institutions are the Central Bank of Syria as well as other banks, the oil and gas sector, Syrian airlines, and companies exporting and importing goods and services." He also cited people's complaints that the penalties "do not punish the government as much as they punish the Syrians living in their country," pushing "them further into poverty and suffering." Similarly, wrote Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, both at the Quincy Institute, the new law "further immiserates the Syrian people, blocks reconstruction efforts, and strangles the economy that sustains a desperate population during Syria's growing humanitarian and public health crisis."

The impact on the streets was predictable. After the law's implementation Chole Cornish of the *Financial Times* observed that "the immediate impact of the act has been felt in the form of higher goods prices as the threat of sanctions roiled the currency market." *The Independent's* Patrick Cockburn concluded: "Millions of ordinary Syrians are having to choose between buying food to eat and taking precautionary measures against coronavirus." In the last six months the number of Syrians who are food insecure increased by 1.4 million to 9.3 million, more than half of the population, according to the World Food Program.

America's friends are not exempt from harm. The Voice of America's Namo Abdulla reported: "Recent US sanctions against the Syrian government are already hurting US allies in the country's northeast." So, too, aid organizations. Last month, explained the *New York Times*, "medicine is already becoming harder to bring into the country. Insurance companies are telling aid organizations they will not cover certain procedures. A.T.M.'s have shut down, causing relief workers to waste precious time standing in line to withdraw salaries."

However, well-fed, -paid, and-housed politicians, journalists, and policy wonks in the West do not care, since *their objective is to create mass misery*. Two months ago Jonathan Spyer at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies proclaimed triumph: "The United States has ensured that [Syria's] underlying issue remain unresolved. The resulting stalemate – marked by frozen conflict, continued poverty, and a messy de facto division of the country – has prevented a triumph for Assad and his allies. This will remain the country's only practical future until Assad and his allies are finally prepared to negotiate on terms that their opponents are willing to accept."

Spyer's attitude recalls Madeleine Albright's infamous justification when asked about the death of a half million Iraqi babies due to US sanctions: "We think the price is worth it." No hardship of Syrian civilians is considered too great by Washington policymakers. And if the project fails – so far Assad has refused to play his assigned role and surrender – the humanitarian destroyers will move on to their next victim, consciences clear.

Alas, Washington's barbarity is exceeded only by its stupidity. The US has repeatedly tried the same strategy elsewhere, with no success. Every other case of "maximum pressure," most importantly Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, has failed completely. As have the slightly less harsh sanctions applied to Cuba and Russia. Each fiasco merely convinced the administration and Congress to redefine success as hurting vulnerable foreign civilians. This is now America's approach to the entire world, while pretending to be the shining city on the hill acting as a global example.

In practice, Syrian sanctions are more about attempting to appear to be doing something than actually doing something to force Assad from power. Who imagines that the regime, triumphing after nearly a decade of war, is going to yield to Washington now? Assad isn't concerned with his people's welfare and his government has faced far worse.

Serious analysts recognized that the strategy was likely to fail from the start. For instance, Mona Yacoubian of the US Institute of Peace concluded that the law was not "enough to bring the regime down. It just means, unfortunately, more suffering for ordinary citizens." Cockburn's judgment was similar: "In practice the Caesar Act does little to weaken President Bashar al-Assad and his regime, but it does impose a devastating economic siege on a country where civilians are already ground down by nine years of war and economic embargo." Admitted al-Shami: "Despite the serious effects of the sanctions, a positive reaction from the regime is unlikely." Instead of adopting political reforms the Damascus government "recently launched military campaigns against opposition forces in southern Syria."

Jeffrey's desire to create a "quagmire" by ruining Syrian lives is no more realistic. Russia saved Assad in war but has no obvious means to force him from power. Moreover, Moscow invested much to ensure military victory against forces generously funded by the U.S. and Gulf States. Keeping the Syrian regime, as opposed to population, afloat will cost far less. Compare that to the expense of American involvement in Vietnam, the archetype of an international "quagmire" in American parlance: far more money was spent, and the even bigger burden was returning body bags.

Weakening Assad also makes him more dependent on Washington's adversaries. As Simon pointed out, administration "policy will increase [Assad's] reliance on Russia and Iran, whose influence in Syria the US seeks to roll back." For instance, in mid-August Damascus agreed to Moscow's request to expand its airbase at Hmeimim.

Even worse would be a state collapse. The result could be constant, low level conflict or another full-fledged civil war. Alas, Jeffersonian democracy would be unlikely to arise from a Mad Max world in which a plethora of countries, movements, groups, tribes, and perhaps even local warlords ruled and fought. The results of American intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen certainly offer no reason for optimism.

When the Arab Spring hit Syria in 2011 the only logical US policy was to stay out. Although a humanitarian tragedy, Damascus did not matter to America security. Attempting to fix a brutal, multi-sided civil war where another great power had historical dominance was a fool's mission at best. Officials were not justified in risking American lives, wealth, and influence on issues of minimal importance and policies with great likelihood of failure.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union overweening hubris joined abundant hypocrisy and sanctimony to dominate US foreign policy. The reigning American attitude became "what we say goes." So, unsurprisingly, in Syria the Obama administration exacerbated an already difficult situation.

By insisting on Assad's ouster, the US discouraged both the government and insurgents from negotiating. By targeting a secular dictator, Washington ensured that religious minorities, who were robbed, slaughtered, and displaced in Iraq, would back Assad to avoid an Iraq replay. By threatening an American takeover in a country long allied with Moscow, the administration encouraged Russian involvement.

By attacking the Islamic State while backing supposedly "moderate" forces, the administration ensured that Damascus would ignore the first and battle the second. By offering weapons, money, and training to largely nonexistent democratic-minded insurgents, usually subservient to more powerful Islamist radicals, the US indirectly subsidized hostile jihadist factions, including the local al-Qaeda affiliate.

After more than nine years the Obama/Trump campaign in Syria had failed as completely as US interventions in Iraq and Libya. Yet Washington refuses to consider an alternative strategy. American officials sanctimoniously applaud their own efforts while risking the lives of US military personnel and imposing hardship on foreigners, who suffered most from endless war. America's only meaningful result was to demonstrate its power to impose great harm on the least among us. It is a strategy for policy fools and political cowards.

Indeed, after American and Russian personnel clashed, the Pentagon denounced Moscow's "deliberately provocative and aggressive behavior." Members of the House Armed Services Committee, who have refused to vote on the administration's illegal Syrian operations, issued a statement denouncing "Russian military aggression toward US troops" and "aggressive behaviors" by "Russian forces." Yet these descriptions more accurately describe Washington's counterproductive, illegal behavior.

The problem goes well beyond Syria. US foreign policy has become an illegal, almost criminal, enterprise. Members of Congress refuse to fulfill their constitutional responsibility to vote on deployment of US forces to numerous foreign battlegrounds. Washington is actively immiserating desperate populations around the world, without influencing their governments' policies. Yet legislators refuse to be honest with their constituents. Consider: after the administration discussed withdrawing forces from Syria, the Democratic House voted to criticize the administration for plans to withdraw from Syria forces whose deployment legislators had never voted to authorize.

The latest U.S.-Russia clash should act as Thomas Jefferson's famous "fire bell in the night." The potential for a bigger conflict is very real. Sami Nadir of the Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs observed: "There is a new Cold War prevailing in Syria and any escalation could pave the way for a regional or international war given the fact that the big powers are directly present on the ground and not through proxies, as used to be the case in the past." America's political leaders are recklessly making the country less secure. No where is the need for a genuinely "America first" foreign policy more desperately required.

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