

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Sources of Mission Creep in Syria

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The other day we learned that there are four times more U.S. troops in Syria than any earlier official figure had acknowledged. The discrepancy did not get much public attention, perhaps because the numbers are small compared to some other U.S. military deployments: about 2,000 troops in Syria, with the earlier official figure being 500. The incomplete count evidently had omitted personnel on short-term assignments and some others performing sensitive missions. A Pentagon spokesman said that release of the newer, more complete figure is part of an effort by Secretary of Defense James Mattis to be more transparent.

Less transparent than the new data about numbers of U.S. troops is the reason any of those troops are staying in Syria. The one uncontested rationale for the deployment in Syria has been to combat the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which is an unconventional nonstate actor but presented conventional sorts of military targets when it established a state-like entity occupying significant territory in Syria and Iraq. The ISIS mini-state is now all but eliminated. Nonetheless, the U.S. military presence in Syria, although down from its peak strength, shows no sign of ending. Mattis has said that the United States “won’t just walk away” from its efforts in Syria.

The United States is exhibiting mission creep in Syria, with new rationales being spun to replace the mission of armed combat against the ISIS caliphate. Underlying the mission creep are some familiar patterns of thinking that have been behind other U.S. military expeditions as well. Donald Trump did not originate these patterns but his administration has slid into them.

Mattis’s comment about not walking away from where the United States already has been involved points to one of those American habits of thought, which is to believe that the United States is best equipped, and should be most responsible, for setting right any troubled country in which the United States has had more than a passing interest. To believe this about Syria goes well beyond the mission of combating ISIS and gets into pacification and even some elements of nation-building.

Other patterns of thinking about the Syrian case entail amnesia about recent relevant experiences and the lessons that should have been drawn from them but evidently weren’t. American attitudes toward ISIS, the Syrian regime, and Syria’s Russian and Iranian allies are all involved.

The dominant American perspective toward counterterrorism, and thus toward ISIS, has been a heavily militarized one inherent in the notion of a “war on terror”. Use of the military instrument has been appropriate insofar as ISIS, as a mini-state, presented military targets. But ISIS, which lives on as more of a clandestine movement and ideology, no longer presents many such targets. Non-military counterterrorist instruments are now relatively more important.

Too often forgotten is how much war itself, and specifically the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, was a boon to ISIS. Also too often forgotten is how much the collateral casualties and damage that are almost unavoidable byproducts of U.S. military action in complicated conflicts tend to boost rather than reduce anti-U.S. extremism, including extremism that takes the form of international terrorism.

One habitual thought about ISIS has been that Assad must be toppled if there is to be any hope of killing off ISIS. Max Abrahms and John Glaser catalog the many iterations, voiced over the past two years, of the theme that defeating ISIS would require defeating Assad. Today’s situation, with the ISIS caliphate extinguished while Assad remains ensconced in Damascus, demonstrates how erroneous that argument was. Many who propounded the argument are among those now pushing for continuation and expansion of the U.S. military expedition in Syria, with no acknowledgment of how wrong was their earlier assessment. This demonstrates anew how little accountability there is for faulty policy analysis among the Washington chattering classes.

The dream of felling Assad does not die, even though with the help of his friends he does not appear to be going anywhere in the foreseeable future. Persistence of the dream involves more amnesia, in at least two respects. One is to forget the consequences of earlier U.S. or U.S.-backed efforts at regime change in the region. These include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which gave birth to the group that we later came to know as ISIS, and the chaos-fomenting ouster of Qadhafi in Libya.

There also seems to be forgetfulness of how long the Assads—including the father Hafez, who put down internal opposition at least as brutally as his son Bashar—have been in power. Forty-seven years, to be exact. Anyone arguing that continuation of Bashar Assad in power is intolerable needs to answer the question “why now?” and to explain how the world and U.S. interests somehow have survived nearly a half century of the Assads.

As for Bashar Assad’s Russian and Iranian friends, the dominant American perspective is the zero-sum assumption that any presence or influence of either Iran or Russia is *ipso facto* bad and contrary to U.S. interests. This perspective makes no effort to sort out the respects in which Russian or Iranian actions conflict with U.S. interests, parallel U.S. interests, or are irrelevant to those interests. This absence of effort persists despite the glaring example (not just in Syria, but also in Iraq and beyond), of the fight against ISIS as a parallel interest. Joined to this habitual perspective is the also habitual use of the misleading vacuum metaphor, according to which not just U.S. involvement but physical and preferably military involvement to fill a space is needed to counter bad-by-definition Iranian or Russian influence in that same space.



These habits of thinking, taken together, close off an escape route from Syria. They imply no end to the U.S. military expedition there. They preclude declaring victory (that is, a military victory against ISIS) and going home. Vladimir Putin, more conscious than most American pundits are of the hazards of indefinitely being stuck in Syria, is doing that now.

Thus Syria is becoming one more place, like Afghanistan, in which the United States endlessly wages a war. Meanwhile the Russians will keep reminding everyone that they were there at the invitation of the incumbent government and the United States is not. The Turks will keep getting angry about U.S. tactical cooperation with Kurds. Sunni extremists will keep exploiting for propaganda and recruitment any damage done by the United States or its local clients. And the Pentagon may or may not tell us how many U.S. troops are actually there.