

Trump Isn't Ending Any Wars

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The New York Times reports on the growing dissatisfaction with endless wars among U.S. veterans that fought in them. Unfortunately, their initial framing for the article is wildly misleading:

The shifting attitudes of so many who served in the wars help explain why Mr. Trump has support among veterans **as he brings troops home and has resisted military action against other nations** [bold mine-DL].

The problem with this framing is that it isn't true. Trump isn't bringing troops home, and saying that he has "resisted military action" is a strange way to describe someone who has twice ordered the illegal bombing of Syria and has driven the U.S. to the brink of war with Iran. The headline refers to Trump's "opposition to endless wars," but the article eventually acknowledges that the president's "opposition" has proven to be entirely rhetorical. The record shows that Trump has sent more troops to other countries, and that has included escalating the U.S. role in ongoing wars. Trump can be said to have "resisted" military action only in the sense that he was moments away from launching an unnecessary attack on Iran that he then just as suddenly canceled. The president has repeatedly threatened to start new wars, he has greatly intensified U.S. drone strikes around the world, and to date he has not brought home any troops deployed abroad. Relaxed rules of engagement in the wars he has escalated have also meant a spike in civilian casualties.

The *NYT* article cites polling data that shows that most veterans see past and current U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as mistakes, and most of them think we should get out of Syria:

Among veterans, 64 percent say the war in Iraq was not worth fighting, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, slightly higher than the 62 percent of civilians who feel the same way. Disagreement with the conflict in Afghanistan is lower — 58 percent of veterans and 59 percent of the general public believe that was not a worthy war. While some veterans support continued military engagement in Syria, more than half — 55 percent — oppose it.

Given all this, it is puzzling that veterans would support someone who has done nothing to end the wars that they increasingly oppose. Trump's record *doesn't* explain why Trump has their support, but the evidence shows that veterans are significantly more likely to approve of the job he is doing than the country as a whole. 56% of veterans approve of Trump's performance, but they can't be approving of Trump's moves to end endless wars because he has not made any

such moves. The phony Syria withdrawal reminds us that there are still more U.S. troops in Syria now than when Trump took office, and he has just committed hundreds of them to a dubious, illegal mission that they don't understand. One would think that this sort of careless misuse of the military would anger the veterans of other wars that were so bungled and mismanaged.

Trevor Thrall and John Glaser look closely at the president's record, and they point out that Trump has increased the U.S. military presence in several places since 2017:

It's also important to realize that he has expanded that footprint in several places. He ordered a surge of roughly 4,000 troops to Afghanistan. In his first two years in office, he quadrupled the number of boots on the ground in Syria and increased the overall U.S. military presence in the Middle East by more than 30 percent. He did this all while loosening the rules of engagement across numerous battlefields to enable a widened bombing campaign in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and beyond. And on Iran, Trump has adopted the most hawkish posture imaginable by essentially putting Washington and Tehran on a collision course, while stopping short of initiating a new war there.

Given all this sound and fury, it is fair to ask what Trump's posturing on endless wars really signifies. If Trump truly believed in the importance of ending American military involvement overseas, he could have overridden his advisers on the speed and shape of withdrawals from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. And he certainly didn't need to expand the war on terror in other places.

Trump's anti-Iranian hawkishness has taken the U.S. in the direction of deeper entanglement in the conflicts of the region rather than less. Whenever Trump signals some passing interest in pulling out of some part of the region, the Iran obsession that defines the administration's foreign policy in this part of the world kicks in and counteracts the earlier impulse. Trump likes to keep ratcheting up pressure on Iran with intensifying economic warfare, and in so doing he traps himself into agreeing to more deployments to the region that the military wants because of the rising tensions that his bankrupt Iran policy created. Trump's economic war on Iran has made another armed conflict much more likely, and putting a stop to the economic war is the first step in extricating the U.S. from the region.