



Why more military action in Syria is (still) a bad idea

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Buoyed by President Trump's airstrike on the Assad regime, Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., have called on Trump to ramp up military action in Syria. Nor are they alone in calling for more aggressive action. From Hillary Clinton and Tom Friedman to a host of former Obama officials, a large bipartisan swath of the foreign policy community favors more assertive U.S. action in Syria.

But no matter how frustrated Washington is about the mess in Syria, and no matter how satisfying it may have been to see the U.S. finally land a blow against Assad, more military action in Syria is still a bad idea.

Most fundamentally, the U.S. would be signing up for yet another long, costly, and dangerous failure in a Muslim-majority nation. We only need to look at Afghanistan and Iraq to understand how things would go in Syria. In fact, the situation in Syria is even riskier and less inviting than Afghanistan or Iraq. The U.S. would be wading into a mess that involves not just a civil war, not just the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, but also the active military efforts of both Russia and Iran. A unilateral U.S. military campaign of any kind would be costly and run the risk of creating new conflicts with Russia and Iran.

Even if the U.S. were able to establish full military control over Syria, the victory would be a hollow one. The U.S. would still lack a suitable political partner among the Syrian rebel groups, and would have no way to ensure they were able to govern.

The track record from U.S. military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq is grim. Not only did the U.S. fail to enable stable and peaceful solutions there, but those invasions and occupations fueled more conflict and more terrorism, eventually helping give rise to the Islamic State and spreading trouble throughout the Middle East.

The case for intervention is weakened further since the U.S. has no real national security rationale for intervening in the Syrian civil war. As brutal as Bashar al-Assad's regime has been,

the security of the U.S. does not depend on whether he or one of his opponents governs Syria. And regardless of who eventually wins the civil war, a severely weakened Syria will be in no position to threaten the U.S.

Nor does the rapidly weakening Islamic State provide sufficient justification for a major increase in U.S. efforts in Syria. The U.S. coalition has already made significant advances on Islamic State's position in Raqqa. It is only a matter of time before the last holdouts flee and Raqqa is liberated. At that point, the conventional battle against ISIS will end and the military will no longer be the right tool for hunting down individual terrorists.

As the U.S. has discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, military forces eventually wind up becoming targets for terrorists. In short, increased military intervention cannot produce more security for the U.S., but it would certainly produce more American deaths.

Even if the only goal of military intervention were to create safe zones, it would be a bad idea.

Setting up safe zones will require lots of U.S. troops backed up by serious airpower. This still raises the risk of escalating tensions with the Russians, still puts American forces in harm's way, and does nothing to resolve the Syrian civil war. The U.S. would simply end up presiding over a massive and deeply miserable refugee camp. Then, having taken responsibility for the Syrian people's safety, the pressures on the U.S. to do more to end the civil war would mount.

Safe zones are just a long step down a slippery slope. A better idea to help the Syrian people would be to find permanent resettlement solutions for the millions of refugees currently stuck in Lebanon and Turkey, or struggling to find safe havens in Europe.

The U.S. has paid dearly for its mistakes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere over the past 15 years; it should not repeat them in Syria. President Barack Obama understood the trap Syria represented, and to his credit withstood a great deal of criticism over the years while sticking to his decision not to intervene. Trump has also said he does not intend to "go into Syria." Let's hope he can withstand all the praise for his recent actions and the calls for him to do more.

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