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## George Orwell's 1984 in Washington

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In a world aflame, the Biden administration launched a new round of airstrikes against Iranian-linked forces backing the Syrian government. American officials claimed “self-defense”—for America’s invading force illegally occupying Syria’s land, plundering its resources, and sanctioning its government. Washington foreign policy, meet George Orwell’s *1984*.

How many conflicts does the administration want? The United States is fighting a proxy war against nuclear-armed Russia that could go hot despite Washington’s intentions. The U.S. ostentatiously provides intelligence, training, and weapons to kill Russian personnel, bombard Russian bases, and destroy Russian materiel. The risk of escalation by Moscow, which has far more at stake than the U.S. in Ukraine, is great.

Washington also is filled with talk of a real, not proxy, war against another serious military power with nuclear weapons. For China, Taiwan is a nationalistic and security imperative. Washington’s barely disguised commitment to defend an island state some 100 miles off China’s coast risks a Cuban Missile Crisis in reverse. What could possibly go wrong?

Yet Washington continues to waste American lives, materiel, and credibility for barely discernible objectives in the Middle East. Intervening in Lebanon’s bitter civil war cost hundreds of U.S. Marines their lives. Backing Israel’s colonization of Palestinian lands has made Americans a terrorist target. Invading Iraq resulted in the deaths of thousands and wounding of tens of thousands of U.S. and allied personnel—and turned the country into a charnel house with hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

Deploying faux humanitarian claims to oust Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi left that land a wreck, violent and divided a decade later. Support for Saudi Arabia’s aggressive war against Yemen ravaged the region’s poorest nation, leaving hundreds of thousands of dead. And America’s botched attempt to oust Syria’s secular dictator led to a *de facto* alliance with brutal jihadists, including al-Qaeda’s local affiliate. The Syrian people ultimately faced rule by either the despotic Assad regime or terrible variants of bloody Islamists.

Although this civil war is largely over and the Islamic State, an outgrowth of Washington's Iraq invasion, has been defeated, the U.S. continues to occupy Syria. The country serves no American security interest. Damascus was long allied with Moscow but is of minimal strategic value. Although Syria is no friend of Israel, the latter is a nuclear-armed power more than capable of defending itself.

Washington articulates humanitarian concerns regarding Syria, but such claims are risible. For decades the U.S. has allied with brutal Middle Eastern dictatorships. In Syria, America's authoritarian Gulf allies backed the worst jihadist factions. The ouster of Assad never was likely to produce a democratic renaissance. Today the Biden administration, pressed by Congress, is overtly *starving the Syrian people*.

Advocates of this policy are either cynics or fools. The former is most likely. For instance, James Jeffrey, who as the Trump administration's special envoy for Syria explicitly misled the president and undermined American security, says current policy is intended to turn Syria into a "quagmire" to discomfit Moscow. Refreshingly, he eschewed unconvincing cant about hurting the Syrian people to help them. For Jeffrey, they are an expendable means to America's policy ends, but Washington shouldn't be destroying countries and impoverishing peoples simply because the ruling regime is friendly with Moscow.

Still, there are officials in Washington who claim that reducing to penury people who suffered through a decade-long civil war will force the victorious autocrat to welcome back exiles, implement a democratic revolution, and cede power. Thus, today Washington systematically immiserates the country, seeking to block reconstruction. Every failure is met with demands that Washington double down again, irrespective of the human cost. It is tragic that Assad remains in control, but punishing the victims of his rule for its continuance is bizarre on its face. Washington's callous and ineffective approach brings to mind the late Madeleine Albright's cold dismissal of the presumed deaths of a half million Iraqi children due to economic sanctions: "We think the price is worth it."

Finally, officials offer a potpourri of other bizarre reasons to maintain an illegal military presence in another sovereign country. For instance, U.S. forces aid local Kurdish forces, interfere with Iranian cooperation with Damascus, and deny oil revenue to the Assad government. Yet America has no legal sanction to invade and occupy countries for these or other reasons.

Absent a permanent American military presence, which will never be accepted by Damascus or its neighbors, the Kurds need to reach an accord with the Syrian government, which would offer the best hope of ending Turkey's abusive occupation. Restoring Syrian border control may be the only way to convince Ankara to withdraw its military.

Iran is a malign regional actor but was invited by Damascus to help defend the latter from attack, especially from U.S.-supported insurgents. Washington has no legal authority to occupy Syria out of dislike for the Tehran government. Nor does the desire to bring down Assad and impose a new government give the U.S. license to loot Syria's natural resources. If Washington is entitled to steal other nations' oil, it should target states with abundant reserves worth grabbing, such as the kleptocratic and repressive Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

If the occupation was costless, it would be easier to overlook the lawless nature of America's military involvement. However, US personnel in Syria, along with those stationed in Iraq, have become prime military targets. Russia's forces, welcomed by Damascus, have harassed and threatened American units which illegally occupy Syrian territory. Such incidents have triggered sanctimonious caterwauling in Washington.

More dangerous have been drone and missile attacks from militias aligned with Iran. There have been casualties but, thankfully, no fatalities—yet. Reported Voice of America on Monday:

U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked with drones or rockets at least 24 times in recent days, including at least three attacks on Monday, according to U.S. defense officials. At least five of these attacks were launched after U.S. forces struck two facilities in eastern Syria used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and affiliated groups during the early morning hours of Friday. None of the attacks carried out since the U.S. retaliatory strikes on Friday have caused casualties or damage, according to defense officials. The latest attack on Monday used multiple rockets to target al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq, a defense official told VOA on condition of anonymity due to security sensitivities. Other multi-rocket attacks were launched against forces at Green Village and Mission Support Site Euphrates in Syria. On Sunday, a one-way attack drone was used against U.S. forces at a base near al-Shaddadi in northeastern Syria, and on Thursday another one-way attack drone targeted U.S. and coalition forces at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, according to U.S. officials.

American officials blame Iran, which they "hold responsible for these groups." Yet such attacks go back years and are continuing after the U.S. strikes. Rather than deter foreign forces, Washington's lawless presence encourages further attacks. The Biden administration has no good option. It can stand by, risking American casualties. Obviously unfair to American personnel, this approach is unlikely with an impending presidential election.

The administration also could intensify retaliatory action, risking more attacks in return. The Defense Department promised to "continue to do what we need to do." However, anti-U.S. forces appear determined to do the same and so far have demonstrated a higher

pain threshold. Moreover, the cost of protecting US forces is only going to rise. Reported the *Military Times*: “The U.S. has also heightened force protection in the Middle East in anticipation of more of these attacks, including activating a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery and two Patriot missile air defense battalions to locations in U.S. Central Command.”

Of course, even that might not be enough. As its final option, the administration could bomb Iran, risking a major escalation. Last week the Pentagon targeted weapons and ammunition facilities used by Tehran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps because the latter “works for the Supreme Leader and they are directing, facilitating, funding, training the militia groups that are attacking our troops in Iraq and Syria.” President Joe Biden apparently cautioned the Iranian leadership via diplomatic channels, while Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made a more public warning, that “these Iranian-backed attacks against U.S. forces are unacceptable and must stop.” He added: “Iran wants to hide its hand and deny its role in these attacks against our forces,” but “we will not let them. If attacks by Iran’s proxies against U.S. forces continue, we will not hesitate to take further necessary measures to protect our people.”

However, Tehran does not appear inclined to retreat, and might desire to draw Washington more deeply into Middle Eastern conflicts. Warned retired diplomat Ryan Crocker, should proxy forces “get lucky and kill 20 US military, the administration is gonna be compelled to make a major response, and in that target deck would have to be targets within Iran itself.” Although the U.S. would win any conventional contest, Tehran could mobilize irregular forces across the region against American forces and allies, including Israel. Although such groups are not under Iran’s direct control, they have their own reasons for targeting the U.S. and its allies.

Nor could Washington count on local support. Rising hostilities would encourage the Gulf monarchies to separate themselves from Washington. After all, Saudi Arabia recently reestablished relations with Syria and improved ties with Iran. Riyadh would prefer to avoid again becoming an Iranian target.

As tensions and attacks rise, the administration blames Tehran and its allies. Said one unnamed US defense official: “We are concerned about all elements of Iran's threat network increasing their attacks in a way that risks miscalculation or tipping the region into war.” However, it is *the U.S. government* which has illegally occupied foreign territory and unnecessarily placed American personnel in harm’s way.

So how many wars does the administration want?

Instead of becoming an increasingly active combatant in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, Washington should bring its forces home. The job of the American military is to defend America, not distant outposts in wastrel territories of a vast quasi-empire. Syria, though tragic, is no cause for war. That conflict ultimately can be solved only by the Syrian people.

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