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Column: Joining Syrian war is madness

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President Donald Trump doesn't know much about other nations or international affairs. Still, during the campaign he had at least one very sensible foreign policy belief: the U.S. should stay out of purposeless wars in the Middle East.

Now his appointees are dragging the country into the Syrian conflict. Washington could find itself in a military standoff with Shia-giant Iran, NATO ally Turkey, and nuclear-armed Russia over minimal geopolitical stakes.

In short, the administration's slide toward confrontation in Syria policy is mad.

Syria almost certainly is the greatest tragedy growing out of the 2011 Arab Spring. But America had no cause for involvement. Syria had been a Soviet client state during the Cold War, but had neither attacked nor threatened America.

The belief from hindsight that the Obama administration merely need have backed the right opposition faction to have defenestrated Assad, established a democratic Syria, and promoted religious and ethnic harmony always was a fantasy. One need only look next door at Iraq to judge Washington's ability at remaking the Middle East.

Nothing in the ensuing six years of horrendous conflict changed the imperative for America to stay out. The Islamic State and other radical groups took advantage of Syria's implosion, but they threatened virtually every government in the region, not the U.S.

Yet their rise was promoted by Washington's nominal allies — Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States — who were more determined to oust Assad than defeat Islamic radicalism. America's attempt to forge an anti-ISIS coalition merely encouraged the Gulf States to pull back, and Riyadh to launch its own counter-productive sectarian war against Yemen.

Moreover, while the odious Assad regime is no friend, it was the single strongest force blocking the advance of the Islamic State and other Islamists. Forcing out Assad would have triggered the second round in the civil war, in which the radicals almost certainly would have triumphed.

Washington doesn't like Syria's allies, but in backing the Assad government Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran and Russia are desperately attempting to salvage the past, not optimistically working to remake the future. However the conflict ends, the Assad government will be but a shell of its former self.

The Trump administration's slow walk into war is extremely dangerous. Washington has been introducing special operation forces to aid Kurdish and Arab forces advancing on Raqqa, the ISIS capital.

With Turkey and its allies devoting more effort to attacking Kurdish militias than Islamic State militants, Washington recently put American troops between warring factions. The U.S. also has twice struck Iranian-backed militias in Syria's south as well as destroyed an Iranian drone, near an American training base.

The administration took a far more dangerous step when it shot down a Syrian jet which had been attacking the coalition Syrian Democratic Forces backed by Washington. No Americans had been threatened. Rather, explained a U.S. military spokesman, Washington acted out of "collective self-defense of coalition partnered forces."

When did the U.S. Congress declare war on the Syrian government and its allies? U.S. Central Command stated that its objective was "to de-escalate" and not to issue "any ultimatums." At the same time, however, it announced that "The coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend coalition or partner forces from any threat."

Which raises the question: is the Trump administration prepared if the Syrian air defense system targets U.S. planes? How will the administration respond if Iran spurs retaliation on American forces through friendly Shia militias in both Iraq and Syria? Is the president ready to shoot down Turkish and Russian warplanes if they attack insurgents backed by America?

Fighting the Assad government would greatly complicate Washington's task. Iran could put U.S. forces across the region at risk. Turkey could play a game of chicken backed by Russia.

Worse, Moscow responded by suspending the hotline used to avoid inadvertent aerial confrontations, and threatening to track U.S. planes operating in Syria. If shots are fired, it won't matter who started the fight: the globe's two biggest nuclear powers would be on the brink of war over nothing.

The U.S. has no fundamental interests in Syria. Washington is incapable of imposing any sort of stable order. The U.S. is creating a military confrontation with three nations, including its great nuclear rival.

President Trump should rediscover the common sense expressed by candidate Trump. After being at war in the Middle East for decades, Washington should leave the fighting to others.

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