



America Is Getting Sucked into Another Middle East Quagmire

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June 20, 2017

It's sadly evident that 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 United States should stay out of purposeless wars in the Middle East.

Now his own appointees are dragging the country into the Syrian conflict. Jumping into a multisided civil war, filled with parties who deserve to lose, would be dubious even if America had some recognizable interest at stake. But the United States does not. Worse, if Washington becomes an active combatant, it would 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. President Bashar al-Assad refused to compromise with peaceful demonstrators. But the latter, backed by Washington's seeming commitment to his ouster, saw little reason to accept anything less. Minority religious and other groups, having seen how the play ended in Iraq when the secular dictator was overthrown, preferred the devil they knew. Outsiders—individuals, groups and nations—joined the bloody fray. From whence developed one of the more horrid civil wars in human history.

The good news, such as it was, for America was that the United States had no cause for involvement. Syria had been a Soviet client state during the Cold War, but had neither attacked nor threatened America. Assad was essentially a geographical nullity for Washington.

Damascus was a more active enemy of Israel but had lost repeated military confrontations and was observing a cold peace. Syria even tolerated Israel's destruction of a nuclear reactor. The Assad regime meddled in Lebanese politics, mostly a humanitarian rather than strategic concern. Syria's alliance with Iran was more a sign of weakness than strength for both regimes. The Bush administration's misbegotten invasion of Iraq far more dramatically shifted the regional balance of power in Iran's direction than did any action ever taken by Damascus.

The belief from hindsight that the Obama administration merely need to 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 in judging Washington's ability to remake the Middle East. Hillary Clinton would have done no better in Syria as America's governor-general than she did as U.S. secretary of state.

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 United States. 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 counterproductive 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. Washington should have learned from the debacles in Iraq and Libya that who replaces the dictator is as important as getting rid of the dictator. Forcing out Assad would have triggered the second round in the civil war, in which the radicals almost certainly would have triumphed. Then there would have been calls for the United States to save Christians, Yazidis, Druze and Alawites, as well as preventing the ISIS flag from flying over Damascus. One can imagine just how long the American people would have stomached involvement in that fight.

Washington doesn't like Syria's allies, but that is no change from before. Although Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran and Russia all backed the Assad government, they 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. Iran remains under siege in the Gulf, opposed by well-armed Saudi Arabia, most of the smaller Gulf States and Israel, backed by Washington's ample military strength. Moscow has asserted its interests, but in influence still lags dramatically behind America. Indeed, given the hideous mess that the United States has consistently made of Middle Eastern affairs, Washington should welcome having another great power to share the blame for future follies.

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 United States also has twice struck Iranian-backed militias in Syria's south as well as destroyed an Iranian drone, near an American training base.

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