

Everybody Betraying Everybody in Syria

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Just what have we witnessed in the recent events in Syria? It's hard to know, given the avalanche of superficial and over-the-top headlines in most US media: betrayal of the Kurds, handing Syria over to Russia, caving to Turkey's Erdogan, bestowing a gift upon Iran, allowing ISIS to once again run wild, the end of US leadership. Yet, the bottom line of the story is that after some eight years of civil conflict, the situation in Syria is basically reverting to the pre-conflict norm. The Syrian government is now close to re-establishing its sovereign control over the entire country. Indeed, Syria's sovereign control over its own country had been vigorously contested, even blocked, by many external interventions — mainly on the part of the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and a few European hangers-on — all hoping to exploit the early uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime and to overthrow it. In favor of what, was never clear.

Much of this picture has a long history. The US has been trying to covertly overthrow the Syrian regime off and on for some fifty years, joined on occasion by Israel or Saudi Arabia or Iraq, or Turkey or the UK. Most people assumed that when the Arab Spring broke out in Syria in 2011, civil uprisings there would lead to the early overthrow of another authoritarian regime. But they did not. This was in part due to Assad's brutal put-down of rebel forces, in part because of the strong support he received from Russia, Iran and Hizballah, and in part because large numbers of Syrian elites feared that whoever might take Assad's place — most likely one or another jihadi group — would be far worse, more radical and chaotic than Assad's strict but stable secular domestic rule.

Nonetheless, over this entire time, the US has been willing to support almost any motley array of forces, including extremist jihadi forces linked with al-Qaeda, to try to overthrow Assad. Washington has never gotten over the fact that Syria, for over half a century, hasn't bowed to US or Israeli hegemony in the region, and has all along been a strong supporter of Syria's secular — yes, secular — Arab nationalism. The US has therefore shown great willingness to “fight to the last Syrian” if necessary to achieve its ends.

As Assad's forces gradually regained control over the country, Washington resisted those efforts, even though large numbers of Syrians want to see an end to war and destruction. In the Middle East, after all, Assad's Syria has been by no means the worst regime alongside Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Saddam's Iraq, Iran and other states. If Washington disliked Assad before, it is even more angered that Assad appealed to Iran, Russia and Hizballah for support. Yet ironically, if the civil war, with its massive foreign support to the rebels, had not been so prolonged, Assad might not have needed Russian or Iranian support and presence. So, we reap what we sow. And it is important to remember that Assad still represents the internationally recognized, legitimate though often nasty and harsh government of Syria.

As part of the anti-Assad struggle, the US sought to maintain an autonomous area for the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria along the Turkish border. The hope was that it would remain an enclave of opposition to Assad and a base of US power within a divided Syria.

Which brings up the sad issue of the Kurds. What about Kurdish militia assistance in the struggle against ISIS? There is no doubt that the Syrian Kurds were effective in that struggle. But, it is not as if the Syrian Kurds are the only forces who can fight the now motley dregs of the Islamic Caliphate (ISIS). Assad, Russia, Iraq and Iran all have every reason in the world to see ISIS expunged off the map — long after the US and the Kurds are out of the picture. The Kurds are not essential to that picture.

Under these circumstances, I believe that President Trump is justified in pulling out US forces from Syria as part of an ongoing process of bringing a gradual end to Washington's endless wars. This war no longer serves any real purpose except to destabilize Syria, perpetuate its brutal civil conflict and provide an excuse to keep US troops on the ground and strengthen Iranian and Russian involvement in the struggle. Its refugees have helped destabilize EU politics. In terms of Trump's so-called "gift to Putin," the Russians have had a dominant foothold in Syria for many decades. So, there's not much new here.

It is indeed hard to keep track of the Syrian situation since there are so many players, each with their own agenda. Whose narrative you choose to identify with in this mess depends on what your agenda is in Syria.

Do you favor the Israeli agenda? Keep Syria permanently weak, divided, and without allies. Do anything that will hurt Iran. Maintain Israel as the dominant Middle Eastern power.

Like Russia's agenda? Russia is successfully working to regain its former centuries' old role in the Middle East in general — a position that briefly collapsed twenty years ago with the end of the USSR. Russia's agenda is above all driven by its strong opposition to any further US attempts at engineering regime change by coup against any and all governments globally that the US does not like. Remember that US intervention in Syria has not been sanctioned by international law, whereas both Russia and Iran were both formally invited to come in and assist the legally recognized Syrian government.

But, there is another striking feature of Russian diplomacy: it

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also seeks to maintain working ties with all, repeat *all*, players in the Middle East including seemingly incompatible ones: good ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, Qatar, the UAE, Yemen, the US, etc. At the same time, the US has refused to maintain any such comprehensive working ties across the region with forces it does not

like. Hence, it refuses to talk with key players like Iran, Syria and Hizballah or countenance a Russian role there. That kind of US posture has above all "served Putin" who has emerged as a master of regional diplomacy and compromise.

Turkey above all wants to keep the lid on all Kurdish political forces in the region that might facilitate Kurdish separatism inside Turkey, where the biggest Kurdish population in the Middle East lives. Hence, the Turkish effort to invade the Syrian Kurdish enclave. The Kurds there ultimately saw the handwriting on the wall and opted to come to terms with the regime in Damascus. That moment had to come.

How do we sum up Washington's agenda? Mixed. First, it supports almost anything Israel wants in the region. Second, it supports almost anything that will weaken and destabilize Iran, and hence anything that will weaken and destabilize Assad's Syria. Then the US supports Saudi Arabia in almost all its adventurist policies across the region and in keeping Yemen in bloody turmoil. The US also seeks to keep ISIS at bay, but so do Syria, Russia, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Then Washington seeks by almost any means to weaken Russia and Iran's position in the region. It also hopes to keep Turkey "loyal" to US goals in the region — a vain hope. Finally, it seeks to maintain US hegemony in the Persian Gulf under the pretext of protecting the free flow of oil. Of course, all Gulf producers want to sell their oil. And Asian consumers, such as India, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and others, have a far higher stake in keeping the oil flowing. So, protecting those Asian shipping lanes (which has not really been necessary anyway) is most appropriately handled by them.

As for Iran, it is determined to maintain allies in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria to the extent that it can. These allies are mainly important in a defensive operation against a concerted Israeli-Saudi-American drive to weaken Iran and all Shi'a across the region. Iran is only strong in its Shi'a identity to the extent that it is attacked for being Shi'a. So, Iran will seek to protect Shi'a populations in the region from oppression and discrimination from Sunni regimes, especially Saudi Arabia. Iran has no brief for the autonomy of any of the Kurds in the region lest it stir up Iran's own very

significant Kurdish population.

Iraq has so far been a small player on the regional state, but it will gain importance with every passing year as it struggles to reestablish a viable Iraqi state after the country was decimated by the US-led long war in Iraq.

What about the Kurds themselves, a highly complex and diverse force in the region? The Kurds are not united and may never attain unity. Kurds, after all, have been socialized within four different countries (Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) where they speak three quite different languages (Turkish, Arabic and Persian). Among themselves, they speak fairly distinct dialects of Kurdish in different regions. Kurds have dreamed of independence for over 100 years (one of the biggest ethnic groups in the world without an independent state), but they have been constantly thwarted by regional and international powers and have never been able to settle upon a common strategy. They have consistently been tactically exploited and utilized by outside powers for over a century (UK, US, France, Israel, Iran, Turkey and Syria) when they have periodically served the geopolitical purposes of those states. They have been routinely promised support for greater Kurdish autonomy, and then, when they outlive their usefulness, they have been routinely thrown to the winds. The US is only the latest state to “betray” the Kurds, by abandoning them this time — and the US did the same many decades ago under Henry Kissinger who joined the Shah in using them against Saddam Hussein and then discarding them to their fate.

The Syrian Kurds had hoped the US war party in Washington would embrace their cause indefinitely. They are certainly disappointed that has not happened, but they cannot have been surprised when the US eventually decided to abandon them when the Turks, Russians and Syrians all decided to put an end to their autonomous enclave in the name of a unified Syrian state.

Ultimately, Kurdish-Turkish rapprochement within Turkey is far from an impossible task, but it will take some time. There is a groundwork from the past to be built upon. Once relations with Turkey’s own Kurds inside Turkey have been regularized, Turkey will likely be far more relaxed about the Syrian Kurds, who in any case will need to settle on an arrangement for some kind of modest local status in Syria. Turkey, after all, came to accept an autonomous Kurdish zone in Iraq and has deep economic relations with it.

The most vociferous voices in Washington for sticking by the Kurds in Syria come from several sources. First, from

those who reflexively oppose any policy of Trump under any circumstances anywhere. Second, those interventionists who seek to maintain US armed presence in the region at almost all costs — the untiring US global task in their eyes is never finished. Third, there are many who want to keep Israel strategically happy and empowered.

The interventionist crowd in Washington wants the US in Syria indefinitely as proof of our “credibility” to fight everybody’s war and to maintain American “leadership” — read hegemony — in the region. Sadly, the prolonged war agenda would not seem to do anybody in the region any good, including the US.

About the Author

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