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What is Trump's Real Policy in Syria?

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[Getty]

As U.S. President Donald Trump stated in a press conference April 3, “I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home”, he stunned the policy community in Washington and other Western capitals, and solidified the widespread argument that his administration had “no Middle East strategy.” His announcement also raised new questions whether his strategy marks a continuation or a rupture of his predecessor Obama’s Middle East strategy. A few days later, Trump denounced the “mindless CHEMICAL attack in Syria” and put the blame on President Bashar Assad and his Russian and Iranian patrons. Trump warned there was “big price to pay” before news reported an airbase near the city of Homs was targeted by a series of missiles. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) rushed to praise Trump’s military move since the Syrian regime and its allies were to “see us and our resolve breaking, they see our determination to stay in Syria waning... but, President Trump can reset the table here.”⁽¹⁾

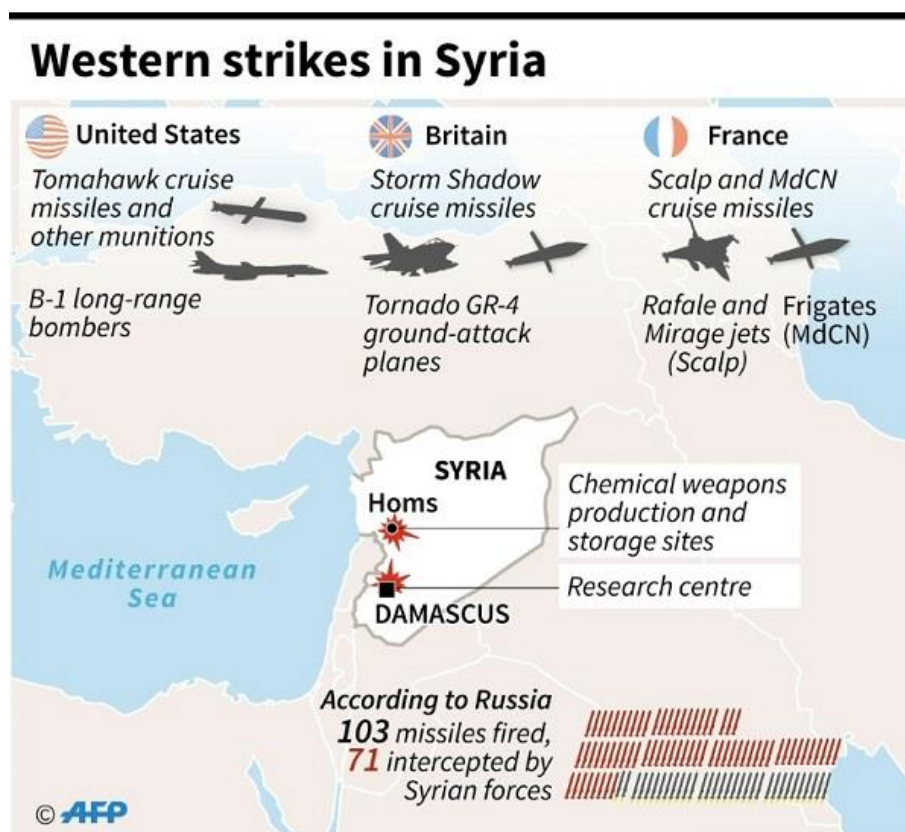
There has been an open-ended debate over Trump’s strategy toward not only Syria, but also vis-à-vis the entire Middle East. For instance, Steven Cook senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) argues that Trump has preemptively declared “mission accomplished” in his efforts to eradicate ISIS, “delivering a blow in the process to Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and everyone in the United States concerned about the consolidation of Iranian and Russian influence in the Middle East.”⁽²⁾ The Washington Post pointedly called Trump’s real Syria policy “hypocrisy”, and that Trump has shown “little interest in owning the end game in Syria.”⁽³⁾ In this paper, Robert Ford former U.S. Ambassador to Syria [2010-2014] and senior fellow at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, examines how Trump perceives the Syrian crisis; and why there has been no coherent policy vis-à-vis the seven-year civil war, that has contested the legitimacy of the Assad regime, and served as magnet to attract global and regional powers as well as several radical militias.

We Know the Trump Administration's Tactics, But Endgame?

Observers may be forgiven for not understanding the American policy in Syria. The Trump administration has a few obvious objectives and has employed several tools. However, it is difficult to understand how those objectives and tools will resolve the problems they are supposed to fix over the medium and long term. In other words, the sum total of the tactical decisions, taken individually over the course of months, do not add up to a coherent strategy to fix Syria.

Fixing Syria is not the Trump administration's goal. Instead, its goals are more limited. Since the 2016 election campaign, Trump has been clear that he wants to destroy ISIS. It would also be reasonable to conclude that the Trump administration wants to deter the Syrian government from using chemical weapons again (or at least nerve agents again) inside Syria; after the April 13 airstrikes UN Ambassador Haley told the Security Council that the U.S. forces were "locked and loaded".⁽⁴⁾ And finally, while President Trump has never mentioned it, some influential Defense Secretary Mattis said that U.S. forces in Syria would not only fight ISIS but also help achieve a political settlement to the broad Syrian civil war.

Fighting ISIS, deterring chemical weapons usage and hoping for a political settlement are tactics that do not tie together to a coherent strategy to resolve the Syrian conflict or even contain extremists indefinitely. Trump and his military and diplomatic teams continue to put forward only short-term, tactical responses without saying what the Americans seek long-term in Syria or how to achieve it.



[AFP]

What Does Trump Consider Vital in Syria?

Were the President to publicly state his conception of American national interests in Syria now, he would probably list the following:

- Syria is not that important.
- Syria should not be a base for extremist terror groups which can threaten the U.S. or, maybe, our close allies.
- Syria should not be a base for Iran to threaten Israel or extend its influence more broadly in the Middle East.
- Syria should not be a conflict that erodes the wobbly international consensus against CW usage.

This is a minimalist list but probably best frames what kinds of developments would trigger a strong Trump response. This definition of interests does not require departure of the Russians from Syria or the Turks. It does not necessarily even require withdrawal of all Iranian elements of influence in Syria.

Importantly, the list also excludes a Trump administration commitment to a political settlement in Syria based on a reformed Syrian government along the lines of the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012 and UN Security Council resolutions 2254 of 2015. The President has long rejected pressing hard to achieve a new government in Syria. Reacting to the state collapse in much of Iraq after the 2003 American invasion, and the U.S. aid to rebel groups that escalated the Syrian civil war, Trump excoriated President Bush's policy in Iraq, and Obama's policy in Syria, in an April 27, 2016 campaign speech, saying that "It all began with a dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interests in becoming a western democracy. We tore up what institutions they had and then were surprised at what we unleashed. Civil war, religious fanaticism, thousands of Americans and just killed be lives, lives, lives wasted. Horribly wasted. Many trillions of dollars were lost as a result. The vacuum was created that ISIS would fill. Iran, too, would rush in and fill that void ..."(5)

After his election, Trump did not change his mind. Speaking after a long set of meetings about Afghanistan, Trump emphasized in remarks at the White House on August 21, 2017 that "We will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. Those days are now over...We are not asking others to change their way of life..."(6)

Signaling their disregard for the Syrian political process, Washington declined to attend the Astana talks in May 2018, triggering a Russian denunciation.(7) The Americans may be reluctant to attend even as observers due to their sensitivity about Iran's presence in Astana. They place more hope in the UN-led process led by veteran diplomat Staffan de

Mistura. Defense Secretary Mattis has referred several times to the importance of a UN-led negotiation achieving a political resolution to the Syrian war. Mattis even met on April 30 with UN Special envoy de Mistura, the first time a U.S. Defense Secretary strayed so directly into the lane of Syrian diplomacy that normally belongs to the U.S. Department of State.(8) Mattis and other military and diplomatic officials believe that resolving the future of the Syrian Kurdish territories, and perhaps even undercutting future extremist recruitment among different Syrian communities, depends on a political deal that involves a new constitution, Syrian government reforms and new elections as De Mistura has urged. De Mistura himself has called the Astana process that the Americans are avoiding “complementary” and “supportive” to his UN-led process.(9) De Mistura’s own process favored by the Americans is going nowhere; and thus the U.S. military and U.S. diplomats are stymied. Moreover, as Trump does not perceive Syria to be a vital American concern in any case, he wants Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia to stabilize and rebuild Syria.(10) Trump was angry that the Saudis declined his request for \$4 billion to help with American operations in eastern Syria.(11) Thus, the Trump administration does not agree precisely on what is at stake in the broader Syrian civil war and has no realistic policy to address it or to address the possible extremist recruitment in the large swathes of Syria, including its major cities, now under Assad’s loose control.

Fighting ISIS for now

If the administration lacks a policy to address extremism in the whole of Syria, it is trying hard to address extremism in eastern Syria. The President has boasted of successes on the ground against ISIS, such as the capture of Raqqa which he called “a critical breakthrough” bringing “the end of the Caliphate within sight.” in an October 21, 2017 White House statement.(12) Similarly, Trump highlighted the Iraqi Security Force capture of five senior ISIS figures inside Syria in a tweet posted on May 10.(13)

Trump and his advisors agree that the United States has to destroy ISIS in eastern Syria but there is no agreement on what exactly that entails. The disagreement burst into view in March 2018. Trump’s announced at an Ohio political speech that the U.S. forces in Syria would be withdrawn very soon; Trump also halted the planned expenditure of \$200 million in monies to stabilize and rebuild parts of eastern Syria controlled by American forces and their Syrian Kurdish and Arab local force allies called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).(14)

Trump’s actions caused his national security team to push back, warning that a premature withdrawal would enable ISIS to return. They also perceive reviving shattered government services in eastern Syria vital to keeping ISIS from returning. Reportedly, the President in early April agreed to keep the 2,000 troops in Syria but only for some months, not years, to allow US forces and their local allies to finish off ISIS and prepare local security forces.(15) US officials keep emphasizing that the U.S. has only one mission in Syria: to

destroy ISIS and ensure it does not return. They have not explained benchmarks or a timeline to achieve that.

In the absence of timelines and benchmarks, the American military mission's tactical objectives have widened. In February 2018 U.S. air units smashed an advancing Syrian government force, backed with Russian mercenaries, advancing on the Conoco gas field held by the SDF. Since February, there have been regular skirmishes near Deir Zour between Syrian government forces, and its militia allies, and SDF forces with airstrikes from the Americans. These skirmishes are not against ISIS; they are clashes between forces in the Syrian civil war contesting control in eastern Syria.

Meanwhile, a small American force, joined by a very small French force, is patrolling in Manbij near the Turkish border. It is not there to fight ISIS; the SDF captured Manbij in 2016. Instead, the force is there to deter Turkish forces that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has threatened will enter Manbij to eject Syrian Kurdish YPG militia fighters there. The American military is also enmeshed in the economics of eastern Syria. The Americans have intervened militarily to ensure the SDF controls the Conoco gas field that the Assad government seeks to recapture. That is a battle over an economic asset, not a battle over ISIS. In April American Middle East forces commander General Joseph Votel highlighted the American forces also have a role in addressing "long-term reconstruction issues" in Syria.⁽¹⁶⁾ While Trump has halted the \$200 million in civilian monies for eastern Syria, the U.S. military continues to help smaller reconstruction projects with an unhindered \$20 million fund from the counter-terrorism budget.⁽¹⁷⁾



[STATISTA]

Where are the Americans Going?

Over the longer term, Democratic Federation of Northern Syria created by the PYD and its militia will depend heavily on sustained American military and economic support. After its elections in September and December 2017, which the bloc led by the PYD easily dominated, the Federation has local and regional councils. The Syrian Government rejected the elections before they were held; the Deputy Foreign Minister in August 2017 called them a joke.⁽¹⁸⁾ The Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, had a more moderate tone in September 2017 saying that Damascus was willing to negotiate with the Syrian Kurds an autonomy arrangement that would leave the Kurds inside Syrian borders.⁽¹⁹⁾ However, the Syrian Government's track record respecting ceasefires and governance deals with opposition elements in western Syria is very poor. The Syrian government regularly sought either to absorb, control or crush opposition-led or independent civilian councils and administrations.⁽²⁰⁾ As it ponders how to manage its relations with the Democratic Federation, Damascus will not want to acknowledge elections held outside its control and recognize institutions that sprang up from those elections. It will worry about the precedent applied to other parts of Syria. Viewed from Baathist, unrepentant Damascus, accepting short-term, de facto partition may be better than accepting the Democratic Federation as it now stands.

The PYD welcomes a permanent U.S. presence in eastern Syria to deter Syrian government encroachment as well as Turkish intervention.⁽²¹⁾ Some U.S. policymakers and analysts hope that a sustained American presence in eastern Syria, and the consolidation of an autonomous region there will eventually compel Assad to negotiate a political deal. They argue that without control of the region's hydrocarbons, and the wide wheat lands of eastern Syria, the Assad government faces economic ruin.⁽²²⁾ Hopes that economic stress will oblige Assad to make deep political reforms ignore his government's consistent refusal even under massive military assault to make concessions, and his Russian and Iranian allies have never pressed him hard to do so. In addition, the PYD already negotiated a deal with Damascus to divide oil receipts in the Democratic Federation territories⁽²³⁾. Meanwhile, the eastern wheat fields are suffering from a precipitous drop in water tables due to overexploitation during the heyday of Baathist agricultural expansion. They also are vulnerable to reduced rainfall associated with climate change⁽²⁴⁾. Looking ahead, the Democratic Federation, surrounded by a hostile Turkey and Syria, and an Iranian-influenced Iraq, would depend on the United States – precisely what Trump perceives as outside American interests.

Pushing Iran Back in or from Syria

If securing the Democratic Federation requires a longer and larger American commitment than Trump will want to endure, there are policymakers and analysts in Washington who urge that the American forces not just fight ISIS and defend the SDF; but, also work to roll back Iranian influence in Syria. Trump noted that Macron and the Americans “don't

want to give Iran an open season on the Mediterranean.”(25) Trump himself said during the April 25 visit of French President Macron that the U.S. would “leave a strong and lasting footprint” in Syria.(26) In addition to the French, the Israelis and the Saudis have urged Trump to keep the troops in eastern Syria as a means of restraining Iranian influence in Syria.(27) and (28) Trump declared on April 25 that the U.S. would block any Iranian land access to the Mediterranean.(29) U.S. Middle East forces commander General Votel told the press on April 26 that supporting the SDF would help ensure denial of the land route for Iran.(30) In addition, Washington has decided to maintain its presence at Tanf near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders and warned the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to stay 55 kilometers away from it or face attack, again in order to disrupt IRGC land movement to and from Iraq.(31)

Blocking Iranian land access through eastern Syria might look good but in reality, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has never enjoyed such land access. Nonetheless, it built up over a period of years a formidable militia presence in western Syria. It has long used Damascus airport and more recently other military airports in western Syria. The land route would be cheaper for Teheran but is not essential to maintaining and even augmenting its presence in western Syria.

By contrast, sharp Israeli airstrikes have complicated Iran’s consolidation of its military presence in western Syria. The Israel government has escalated its airstrikes in Syria against military infrastructure of the IRGC and its militias since February 2018 to impede the Iranian build up, including a raid against Damascus airport itself.(32) Russia has demonstrated repeatedly that it will not seek to block Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and even Syrian targets provided they do not threaten Russian forces or the emerging battlefield success of the Syrian government. The Americans have played little direct role against Iran in western Syria. Were American warplanes to act in western Syria, they would have to accept the risk of confronting the Russians whose attitude and relations towards Israel differ from their attitude towards the United States. Trump is likely content to have the Israeli Air Force conduct the strikes and take the risks of combat.

So far, the combat risks for Israel have been manageable. Without Russian air cover from Israeli attack, the IRGC has avoided escalating against Israel. Neither has it begun to withdraw from Syria as the Israelis and Americans prefer, however. Instead, the Iranians likely will disperse their activities more widely while they continue to consolidate their political gains in Lebanon and Syria. The Iranians might also accept a Russia-brokered agreement that would trade Iran moving militias farther from Israel in return for a halt to Israeli airstrikes. The Russians could play this mediating role, but not the Americans in view of the very hostile relations between Teheran and Washington and the lack of an American negotiating channel with either Iran or the Syrian government. Instead, the Trump administration can do little more than watch unless it is willing to launch a major

military intervention and face down Russia. Obama did not think Syria was worth such a risk to the United States, and Trump does not either.

U.S. Hold in the East Long Term Carries Risks Too

Maintaining forces in eastern Syria carries risks too. The Iranians and Assad have vowed to confront the presence of American forces.⁽³³⁾ ⁽³⁴⁾ They will test American resolve in eastern Syria through unconventional attacks and harassment against American and SDF elements and leaders. The Iranians are reaching out to Syrian tribal figures, urging them to resist the American presence in eastern Syria.⁽³⁵⁾ ⁽³⁶⁾ The Syrian and Iranian effort to foment resistance against the American presence will benefit from the continued presence and activities of the Syrian intelligence services which are still on the ground in eastern Syria with the permission of the PYD-controlled Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.⁽³⁷⁾

A U.S. Defense Department Inspector General report published in April 2018 noted the difficulties the American military faces stabilizing areas the U.S. military controls in eastern Syria. It highlighted the lack of a host-government partner and an assassination campaign against local leaders.⁽³⁸⁾ The assassinations could be the work of ISIS, or Syria and Iran, or Turkey or some combination of them. Over time, the Syrians and Iranians will develop tactics to address American force-protection measures. Therefore, the operating environment in which the U.S. military and the handful of diplomatic and development officers will likely become more dangerous and could again test Trump's endurance and patience for a mission whose overall impact on Iranian forces in western Syria, or the moribund UN peace process, won't be great.

Conclusion: No Entanglements Politics

President Trump could fairly say that he is developing a narrower definition of American interests in Syria. Securing even those more narrowly defined interests will be hard: Iran is most unlikely to quit western Syria, and the U.S. and Israel cannot compel it to do so, while the Americans have no ability to prevent ISIS regenerating in areas of Syria outside their control. There is a built-in tension that would erupt inside the Administration if U.S. personnel in Syria take casualties or other costs rise sharply. Trump wants to avoid entanglements in Syria, and essentially wants to hand it off to regional states and Russia. Some policymakers hope sustained Syrian Kurdish control of eastern Syria will bring the Assad government to the negotiating table and meaningful compromise.

Hope is not analysis, however. The hard analysis is that Russia, Iran, Syria and ultimately even Turkey want the Americans out of eastern Syria and will work against what the Americans are doing with the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and the SDF. This balance of forces indicates the Americans will have repeated difficulties and costs in Syria – exactly what Donald Trump doesn't want. Trump, in the end, is the strong-willed

president. The Syrian Kurds would be wise to have a Plan B that does not include a long-term U.S. military presence.

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