

House Hawks Kill Bipartisan Effort to End War in Syria

Matt Gaetz sponsored a resolution in the House, supported by the Congressional Progressive Caucus, to force congressional oversight of the continued U.S. military presence in Syria.

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Ahead of a Wednesday vote on his resolution to force congressional oversight on the continuation of U.S. military operations in Syria, Rep. Matt Gaetz Fla. was feeling bullish. "Hope springs eternal," he told The Intercept when asked whether the measure would pass. The resolution was ultimately voted down on Wednesday night with 47 Republicans joining 56 Democrats in support of the bill. Despite the resolution's defeat, it was just the beginning in a string of efforts to end U.S. military operations abroad, according to its sponsor.

"Syria is my lead-off hitter. We're going to take a trip around the globe. We may go to Yemen, we may have stops in Niger, we may have stops in Sudan, maybe ultimately, we'll end in Ukraine," Gaetz said.

The Obama administration's ambassador to Syria, a leading voice in favor of aggressively confronting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the time, also backed the effort by Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., to force U.S. withdrawal from the country within 180 days.

Robert Ford argued [in a letter to Congress](#) in support of Gaetz's legislation that the U.S. mission has no clear objective. "After more than eight years of military operations in Syria there is no definition of what the 'enduring' defeat of ISIS would look like," Ford writes in the letter, which was obtained by The Intercept and confirmed as authentic by Ford. "We owe our soldiers serving there in harm's way a serious debate about whether their mission is, in fact, achievable."

The resolution also has the support of former Obama ambassador to Syria

Robert Ford, at the time an advocate of expansive support for the Syrian opposition. He now says it's time to go. From a letter he wrote: pic.twitter.com/UW2G7YMsZw

— Ryan Grim (@ryangrim) [March 7, 2023](#)

On Tuesday evening, the Congressional Progressive Caucus, or CPC, circulated a message to its membership urging a yes vote, producing a serious bipartisan coalition.

"This measure to remove unauthorized deployment of U.S. Armed Forces in Syria unless a specific statutory authorization is enacted within six months is largely consistent with previous bipartisan efforts led by CPC Members to terminate such unauthorized military presence within one year, for which 130 House Democrats voted yes last year," read the message to members.

At the same time that Gaetz's resolution was being debated on the House floor, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee took up the question of whether to end the [military force authorizations](#) that provided the legal basis for decades of war in Iraq.

"I am encouraged that the kerfuffle my Syria legislation has brought to the Republican conference may lead us to a broader discussion about the 2001 AUMF, the 2002 AUMF, and it's obviously well past time for us to reconsider those authorizations in light of the world we live in in 2023."

CPC member Ro Khanna, D-Calif., who voted for the resolution said that attitudes towards U.S. involvement in foreign conflict were shifting on both sides of the aisle.

"There is a new generation of thinking on two central issues. A concern about wars and entanglements over the last 20 years that have not made us safer, and a concern over the offshoring of our domestic production over bad trade deals that have left the working class and middle class poorer," Khanna said. "I believe that this new generation of political leaders can help fix those two mistakes that the country has made and that there is an emerging consensus that we should not have our troops fighting overseas without congressional authorization."

An original version of Gaetz's measure offered just 15 days for troops to leave Syria, but he amended it to six months in the hope of drawing real support. The new measure, a war powers resolution that is privileged on the House floor, would allow troops to stay longer if Congress debated on and authorized the intervention.

Gaetz's introduction of the resolution, particularly with such a short timetable that would doom it to lopsided defeat, kicked off a flurry of lobbying to try to turn it into a bipartisan coalition, involving progressive groups like Just Foreign Policy and Demand Progress and conservative ones such as FreedomWorks, Concerned Veterans for America, and [Citizens for Renewing America](#). But the speed with which it came to the floor left little time for grassroots mobilization.

"The CPC has been leading on this front and nothing has changed. I wish Gaetz worked more closely with the coalition of groups that have been working on this and the CPC," said Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., deputy chair of the CPC, who worked with Gaetz to get

the legislation to a place where Democrats could back it. “Nonetheless, I am a yes on the resolution.”

Gaetz did not respond to a request for comment.

Ford had previously supported a 2021 legislative push by New York Democratic Rep. Jamaal Bowman, whose amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act would have given the U.S. one year to exit Syria. Bowman’s measure won the support of 21 Republicans and roughly half of the Democratic caucus. Despite the rise of an anti-interventionist wing of the GOP, the votes to oppose American adventures overseas continue to come largely from Democrats. In July 2022, Bowman pushed for another floor vote, this time picking up 25 Republicans and winning [the Democratic caucus 130-88](#).

In 2019, Gaetz and a handful of other Republicans backed President Donald Trump’s push for an end to the U.S. presence there and were joined by Omar and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., who bucked their party to back Trump’s proposed withdrawal. But like Trump’s Afghanistan withdrawal, he never actually did it, losing the internal power struggle to supporters of a continued occupation.

Opposition to US intervention in Syria has been bipartisan since the earliest days of the crisis. In 2013, [Daily Kos](#) and [HuffPost](#) ran whip counts ahead of a vote called for by Obama to authorize the use of force, pressuring progressives to vote no. [HuffPost tallied 243 members](#) of Congress planning to vote no or leaning no before Obama pulled the legislation from the floor.

In 2014, Ford resigned his position, frustrated that the Obama administration was not providing enough support to the opposition to, at minimum, force al-Assad to the negotiating table. The need to minimize U.S. involvement undermined the purpose of that involvement, he argued. In other words, go big or go home — and Ford is now arguing that U.S. troops ought to go home and that the Gaetz measure is a vehicle to help make that happen. “And remember that ‘go big’ offers no guarantee of success,” he said when I asked if the idiom appropriately summed up his argument. “We went big in Iraq and had mixed results.”

Ford noted in his letter that leftist Kurdish forces in Syria, with U.S. support, had claimed the last piece of ISIS territory in March 2019 and the Pentagon has assessed that ISIS now lacks the capacity to strike the U.S. at home. Militias aligned with Iran have taken the opportunity of U.S. presence in the region to launch attacks on American troops, who number roughly 900, not counting contractors.

The legal rationale for U.S. occupation is dubious at best. With ISIS suppressed, the administration has suggested the purpose of the occupation is to act as a bulwark against Iran. The Washington Post [previously reported](#):

The balance of power in Syria’s multisided conflict depends on the American presence. Where U.S. troops retreat, American officials see an opening for the Syrian military or forces from Russia or Turkey to advance. Some U.S. officials have stressed that the American deployment precludes Iranian forces from establishing a “land bridge” that would allow them to more easily supply weapons to their Hezbollah allies in Lebanon.

“It’s about keeping a balance,” said one senior official, speaking on condition of

anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with the media.

In fact, Iran already has a direct “land bridge” through eastern Syria to Lebanon; the U.S. occupation merely adds some time to the Iranian truckers’ journey. More to the point, said Ford, there is no authorization to deploy troops overseas to counter Iran. “The 2001 authorization of the use of military force was all about Al Qaeda and, to a secondary extent, the Taliban and Afghanistan,” he said. “It wasn’t about Iranian or pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria.”

Vermont’s newly elected Democrat, Rep. Becca Balint, who also voted yes on the resolution, said it is critical to restore congressional oversight of foreign wars. But she also raised concern over the plight of Syrian Kurds who have long fought alongside U.S. forces, and could suffer increased attacks from Turkey which claims their autonomous enclave as an existential threat.

“For me, it’s important to plant a stake around tightening things up on the war power act but also making sure there is long term support in place for the Syrian Kurds,” Balint said. “A lot of people are talking about the Kurds and it’s a concern so many of us have. I have a 15-year-old son and I was talking to him about this last night. One of the things that we talked about is that there are always people involved in conflict between two sides and we can lose sight of those people in the long term. It’s critical we make sure those people are protected.”

Ford argued that U.S. withdrawal would facilitate the kind of negotiations needed to bring a measure of stability to the region. The Kurdish separatists, while enjoying significant amounts of autonomy, would be pushed into direct talks with the Syrian government over a power-sharing agreement. The Turks have resisted talks with the U.S. over security at the Syrian border, angered at the U.S. alliance with the Kurdish separatists.

“We have enough leverage in my view with Turkey to help protect the Kurds,” Khanna said when asked whether he shared Balint’s concern. “We could provide the Kurds with aid and support like we have in Ukraine, and if the president wants to make the case for a certain presence that is required for America to protect the Kurds, then he should come to Congress and work with us to make that case.”

Trump, while urging a withdrawal, also said he’d leave behind a force to “[keep the oil](#).” He suggested a major American firm like Exxon Mobil would come in to exploit Syria’s oil, but so far, no big American company has been involved, and the Kurds are exporting oil largely in collaboration with al-Assad’s government.

Asked about the ongoing sanctions of the al-Assad regime, Ford said it was time to take a hard look at whether they were working and at what cost. “That’s a very separate issue from our troop presence,” he said. “I would just say two things. First, the sanctions are not delivering political concessions from Bashar al-Assad. And then the second thing I would say is, it’s disingenuous for those who justify the sanctions to say that they don’t harm ordinary Syrians living in government-controlled territories. They obviously do.

“All I can say is we’re inflicting pain without getting much for it.”

Update: Wednesday, March 8, 2023

This article and headline have been updated to include the results of a House vote, as well

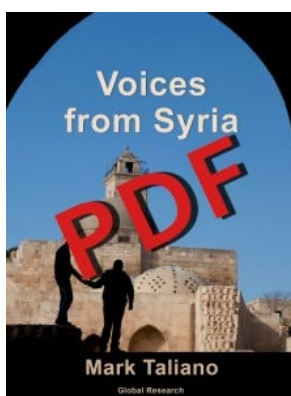
as quotes from Gaetz, Khanna, and Balint.

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