

Make No Mistake, We Are Already at War in Syria

Trump's anti-war promises were just glib campaign rhetoric.

By [Philip Giraldi](#)

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Featured image: President Donald Trump walks with U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Michael Howard, commander of Joint Force Headquarters, at Arlington National Cemetery, May 29, 2017. Behind them are Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and U.S. Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (Flickr/CreativeCommons/DOD photo by U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brigitte N. Brantley)

Something peculiar happens to American presidents after they take office on January 20.

Campaign promises to right the easily perceived misdirections in foreign policy are abandoned, and the new program for dealing with the rest of the world winds up looking very much like the old one. Bill Clinton was an anti-Vietnam War draft dodger who preached the moral high ground for going to war before he turned around and got involved in the Balkans while also bombing Sudan and Afghanistan. George W. Bush promised non-interference and no nation-building overseas, but 9/11 converted him into an exemplar of how to do everything wrong as he sank into the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Barack Obama's margin of victory in 2008 was likely due to the perception that he was the peace candidate, particularly in contrast to his opponent Senator John McCain, but he wound up deeper in Afghanistan, out of, and then back into Iraq, interfering in Syria, and bringing about disastrous regime change in Libya while also allowing relations with Moscow to deteriorate. Donald Trump has surrounded himself with generals after promising no deeper involvement in foreign wars and the generals are telling him that winning wars only requires more soldiers on the ground and just a little more time and effort to stabilize things, all of which are self-serving formulae for policies that have already failed.

And then there are the perennial enemies, with Iran at the top of the list while Russia and China play supporting roles. Some would blame the foreign policy orientation on the Deep State, which certainly is suggestive, but I rather suspect that the flip-flops of recent presidents are also based on some other elements. First, none of them has been a veteran who experienced active duty, which makes war an abstraction observed second hand on PowerPoint in a briefing room rather than a reality. And second, the shaping of their views can be directly attributed to the pervasiveness of the establishment view on the appropriate role for the United States in the world.

Sometimes referred to as America's "civil religion," one can also call it "American exceptionalism" or the "leadership of the free world" or even "responsibility to protect" but the reality is that a broad consensus has developed in the United States that enables serial

interventionism with hardly a squeak of protest coming from the American people.

Donald Trump has been in office for five months and it would appear that at least some of the outlines of his foreign policy are beginning to take shape, though that may be exaggeration as no one seems to be in charge. The “America First” slogan seemingly does not apply to what is developing, as actual U.S. interests do not appear to be driving what takes place, and there does not seem to be any overriding principle that shapes the responses to the many challenges confronting Washington worldwide.

The two most important observations that one might make are both quite negative. First, lamentably, the promised détente with Russia has actually gone into reverse, with the relationship between the two countries [at the lowest point](#) since the time of the late, lamented Hillary Rodham Clinton as Secretary of State. Second, we are already at war with Syria even though the media and Congress seem blissfully unaware of that fact. We are also making aggressive moves intended to create a *casus belli* for going to [war with Iran](#), and are doubling down in Afghanistan with more troops on the way, so Donald Trump’s pledge to avoid pointless wars and nation-building were apparently little more than glib talking points intended to make Barack Obama look bad.

The situation with Russia can be repaired as Vladimir Putin is a realist head of state of a country that is vulnerable and willing to work with Washington, but it will require an end to the constant vituperation being directed against Moscow by the media and the Democratic Party. That process could easily spin out for another year with all parties now agreeing that Russia intervened in our election even though no one has yet presented any evidence that Russia did anything at all.

Syria is more complicated. Senators Tim Kaine and Rand Paul have [raised the alarm](#) over American involvement in that country, declaring the U.S. military intervention [to be illegal](#). Indeed it is, as it is a violation of the United Nations Charter and the American Constitution. No one has argued that Syria in any way threatens the United States, and the current policy is also an affront to common sense: like it or not Syria is a sovereign country in which we Americans have set up military bases and are supporting “rebels” ([including jihadis and terrorists](#)) who are seeking to overthrow the legitimate government. We have also established a so-called “de-confliction” zone in the southeast of the country to protect our proxies without the consent of the government in Damascus. All of that adds up to what is unambiguously unprovoked aggression, an act of war.

The war began in earnest when the Obama administration began building bases and sending Special Ops into Syria in the late summer of 2015, after the White House [announced](#) that it would

“allow airstrikes to defend Syrian rebels trained by the U.S. military from any attackers, even if the enemies hail from forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.”

That policy guaranteed escalation and direct American involvement in the conflict. In the last month, for the first time since the civil war in Syria began in 2011, the United States has directly attacked Syrian government forces or proxies four times, including two air attacks against Iranian militiamen allied to Damascus. Those moves were preceded by the April U.S. Navy launch of 59 cruise missiles in an attack directed against a Syrian air base. The recent

escalation has produced a response from Russia, which decried in the strongest terms the [latest](#) of these incidents, in which a U.S. F-18 Hornet shot down a Syrian SU-22 fighter-bomber.

Moscow has now threatened to act against any U.S.-led coalition aircraft flying over western Syria, a step that could in short order lead to a Russian-U.S. war in the Middle East.

Syria is currently under attack from the air forces of sixteen nations operating within its airspace loosely affiliated with the U.S. effort to bring about regime change. When Syria resists, it is routinely accused of using “forbidden” weapons by the mouthpieces of the terrorist groups operating inside the country under the American umbrella. Currently, the White House [is warning that](#) it has “identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime.” UN Ambassador Nikki Haley elaborated in a tweet,

“...further attacks will be blamed on Assad but also on Russia and Iran who support him...”

Syria will “pay a very heavy price” if a chemical attack takes place, according to the White House statement. The U.S. warning will inevitably motivate the so-called rebels to stage an attack themselves and blame it on Damascus, as they have done in the past. It also dangerously escalates the conflict by directly targeting both Russia and Iran as Syrian “accomplices” in war crimes. It is a very dangerous move by the Trump Administration and one that apparently was not coordinated with the Defense and State Departments, which were caught flat footed by the White House announcement. The nature and credibility of the information implicating Syria has not been revealed and is being regarded as an “intelligence matter.”

Much of this acting against actual U.S. interests has come about due to the “worthless ally” syndrome which has been prevalent in Washington for several decades. In the Middle East, where many of the problems begin, there is no coherent policy that has evolved beyond unconditional support for local “allies” Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Israel. This has meant in practical terms that the U.S. defers to Riyadh, Ankara, Cairo, and Tel Aviv in nearly all regional matters while it is also the guarantor of a feckless Afghan government.

So in spite of pledges to disengage from the cycle of warfare in the Middle East, the United States seems to be on course for direct involvement in a series of local conflicts with no clear “victory” and exit policy in place. Remove al-Assad and what comes next? What will the Russians do? Will America’s so-called allies Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia be satisfied with dismemberment of the Syrian state or will they insist on pushing on to Tehran? Who would fill that vacuum?

There are certainly other foreign policy black holes, to include the awful decision to rollback normalization with Cuba and the hot-then-cold moves against North Korea. Venezuela, a major U.S. oil supplier, is about to implode and it is not clear if the State Department has any contingency plan in place to deal with the crisis. But Russia and Syria are in a class by themselves as they have the potential to turn into Class A disasters, like Iraq or possibly even worse. And then there is Iran lurking, apparently hated by all the talking heads in Washington and inextricably linked to what is happening in Syria. It is more than capable of becoming the next catastrophe for a White House that is apparently staggering from crisis to crisis. What will Trump do? I am afraid that the lesson learned from the cruise missile

attack on a Syrian base in April was that using force is popular, repeat as necessary. That would be a major mistake, but there is every sign that some of the people around Trump have their eyes on escalating and “doing something” in Syria and also against Iran for starters, and if Russia gets in the way we can deal with them too.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest.

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