

U.S. Occupation of Syria Will Continue

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The sudden unannounced arrival of the top US military officer General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a dusty American base in Syria's remote northeast on Friday may call to mind a famous quote by Dick Cheney, vice-president in the George W Bush presidency:

"The good Lord didn't see fit to put oil and gas only where there are democratically elected regimes friendly to the United States. Occasionally we have to operate in places where, all considered, one would not normally choose to go. But we go where the business is."

According to eyewitness accounts, as recently as last week, on 27 February, US troops transported at least 34 tankers filled with stolen Syrian oil through the illegal Al-Mahmoudiya border crossing to their bases in Iraq. In the estimation of the Syrian foreign ministry, the cumulative losses incurred by the country's oil and gas sector on account of theft and other US actions were to the tune of \$107 billion as of August last year.

Oil is a unique mineral that anaesthetises thought, blurs vision, corrupts. But according to a [Reuters report](#), Milley's visit was about something else than oil — purportedly "to assess efforts to prevent a resurgence" of the Islamic State militant group and "review safeguards for American forces against attacks, including from drones flown by Iran-backed militia."

Now, that is a stretch for two reasons — one, there are only around 900 US troops all in all in Syria and Milley doesn't have to undertake such routine mission; two, there is actually no history of the Islamic State [ISIS] having ever attacked the US forces in Syria.

On the contrary, the folklore among regional states is that the US mentors the Islamic State, gives training to the cadres of the shadowy militant group at the remote American base at Al-Tanf on the Syrian-Iraqi border, and even provides logistical support to the group's operations in Syria's desert region.

It is unclear whether Milley met with commanders of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic

Forces that have been the main ally of US forces in north-eastern Syria.

One plausible explanation will be that Milley came on White House instructions against the backdrop of a [legislation to end the US involvement in Syria](#) that will be up for a vote in the US Congress this week. US Congressman Matt Gaetz (Republican from Florida) who last month introduced a War Powers Resolution to direct President Joe Biden to remove the US Armed Forces from Syria has frontally attacked Milley's visit.

Gaetz said in a statement on Friday,

"If General Milley wants this war so bad, he should explain what we are fighting for and why it is worth American treasure and blood. An America First foreign policy demands realism, rational thought, and seriousness."

He pointed out that

"Syria is a quagmire of a tinderbox. America has no discernible interest in continuing to fund a fight where alliances shift faster than the desert sands."

But Milley is unfazed. Asked by reporters if he believed the Syria deployment is worth it, Milley said,

"I happen to think that's important." Milley added, "So I think that an enduring defeat of ISIS and continuing to support our friends and allies in the region ... I think those are important tasks that can be done."

Congressman Gaetz tabled the draft legislation following a [press release](#) by the US Central Command on February 17 announcing that four service members were wounded during a helicopter raid in northeastern Syria when an explosion was triggered from the ground.

The bottom line is that there is no rationale other than geopolitical considerations for the continued US occupation of about a third of Syrian territory. These considerations are principally:

- Need to keep US footprint in the strategic Eastern Mediterranean;
- US' troubled relations with Turkey;
- Israel's security;
- Russian bases in Syria;
- the Russian-Syrian-Iranian axis; and, most important,
- the geo-strategy to keep Syria weak and divided for the foreseeable future.

A commentary last year in the government-owned China Daily poignantly captured the Syrian tragedy:

"The alleged plunder of Syrian oil by the United States and its proxies will only worsen conditions in the sanctions-hit country as it struggles to rebuild after years of war... consumption of Syria's limited resources by the hegemonic power and its proxy groups in the troubled nation will encourage militancy and undermine efforts to stabilise the wider region."

The commentary cited the Syrian Foreign Ministry to the effect that the presence of US

forces in the country's northeast and the plundering of Syrian oil is an attempt to obstruct a political solution and undermines stability and security. It said

“the way Washington is acting and its unlimited support of terrorist groups show the hypocrisy of the US in the region, a situation that is no longer acceptable morally or politically.”

The Assad government's normalisation process with the regional states in the Gulf — especially, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar — as well as Egypt and Turkey has put the US in a predicament. It is particularly galling for the US that Russia is mediating the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov [announced on Monday](#) that his country, Turkey, Iran, and Syria are discussing organising a meeting of their respective foreign ministers —

“We are working on it. I can say that we agreed not to disclose details for the time being; not everything is so simple; we must work discretely on the principles of quiet diplomacy,” he added in an oblique reference to devious attempts to derail the process.

Suffice it to say that Washington is increasingly left with no option but to stir up the Syrian pot again and create turmoil with a view to create an alibi for the continued occupation of Syria. The Syrian government has drawn attention to this in a [statement condemning](#) Milley's “illegal visit to an illegal US military base.”

The statement alleged that

“the international community knows very well that Daesh [ISIS] is an illegitimate offspring of US intelligence... [and] the support provided by the US forces to terrorist and separatist militias in the areas of its occupation is a declared American stance aimed at prolonging the terrorist war against Syria for goals that are no longer hidden from anyone.”

Milley himself has been candid that the US military occupation must continue. Given Milley's professional reputation as a ‘yes’ man, who is acutely conscious of the ‘wind factor’ (as the Chinese would say) in the corridors of power in DC at any given time, it is entirely conceivable that President Biden will now get exactly the feedback and recommendation he needs to block the momentum in the US Congress for withdrawal of American troops from Syria.

The Moscow daily [Vedmosti reported](#) today, citing an informed diplomatic source, that Assad plans to pay an official visit to Russia in mid-March. Assad last visited Russia in September 2021.

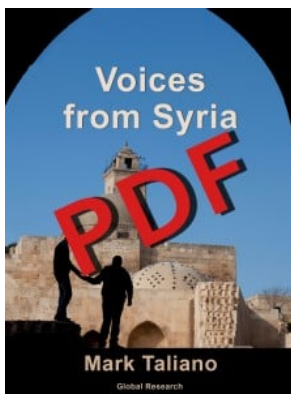
The Russian daily estimated that humanitarian issues relating to the recent earthquake and Russian assistance would be the focus of the talks, but it is also “important for the parties to compare each other's positions and develop common approaches” on a range of political issues. Russia, Turkey, Iran and Syria have a common position calling for an end to the [7-year old US occupation](#) of Syria.

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Featured image: US Joint Chiefs Chair, General Mark Milley (L) paid an unannounced visit to a US military base in Northeast Syria, March 3, 2023 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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