

Why the Hell Is the US Occupying Syria?

Why has every US president from Obama to Trump to Biden launched airstrikes inside the country? Is the US mission in Syria actually about fighting terrorism, or does it go deeper?

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In early March, Syria's foreign ministry condemned a surprise visit by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley to an army base in northeast Syria, with Syrian media dubbing it "illegal" and a "flagrant violation of the sovereignty and integrity" of Syrian territory, adding that the US ought to "immediately" cease support for "separatist armed groups". The article, [published by VOA](#), also casually notes that the US has "about 900" troops deployed in "several bases and posts across northeastern Syria" allegedly as part of the fight against ISIS.

Nearly a decade since US forces officially entered Syria and ISIS is still America's reason for staying? How is this possible after numerous assurances from US officials — [including a US president](#) — that ISIS has been defeated? Why has every American president from [Obama](#) to [Trump](#) to [Biden](#) launched airstrikes inside the country? Is the US mission in Syria actually about fighting terrorism, or does it go deeper? And most puzzling, *why the hell is the US occupying Syria?*

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Breaking [numerous promises to the contrary](#), President Obama announced in late 2015 that the US would be deploying troops into Syria to "fight ISIS". The number [started with 50](#), which [soon became 250](#). In October 2017, a US general said there are [4,000 troops in Syria](#), and two months later, the Pentagon [put the number at 2,000](#). As of this article's publication, the consensus seems to be 900 US troops, although there's [reason to suspect](#) the number may actually be higher or lower. Regardless, US forces have occupied parts of Syria now for almost a decade. But why?

"When I took it over it was a mess," Trump [told reporters](#) at the White House back in March 2019. "The [ISIS] caliphate is gone as of tonight."

Just a few days later, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders [told](#) reporters that [ISIS had lost all of its territory in Syria](#), adding that Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan briefed Trump and that the Pentagon “made the call” that ISIS had been “eliminated” completely in Syria.

In October, the warmongering hell spawn from South Carolina known as as Senator Lindsey Graham [released a statement](#) on US allies in Syria who “fought so bravely” to destroy ISIS:

“By continuing to maintain control of the oil fields in Syria, we will deny [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad and Iran a monetary windfall. By increasing production of the oil fields, we will be helping our Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) allies who fought so bravely to destroy the ISIS Caliphate. We can also use some of the revenues from future oil sales to pay for our military commitment in Syria.”

He added:

“While I agree that America is not the policeman of the world, I firmly believe the American military is the most capable to protect America and should be used wisely to do so. A wise use of American military power would be to have a small but capable military partnership with SDF elements to prevent the reemergence of ISIS and maintain control of ISIS held fighters. To do this, America must also continue to control the skies over Syria.”

In other words, even if ISIS is mostly — if not entirely — defeated, the US should continue to occupy the country indefinitely to, *y’know*, make sure they don’t come back — aka the same argument for every US occupation from Afghanistan to Iraq: we have to stay, because if we don’t, something bad might happen. Heavy paranoia makes up the very fabric of every argument trying to justify more war: It’s not a fear of what we *know* [so much as a fear of what we don’t know](#). It doesn’t matter if ISIS is defeated. It doesn’t even matter if ISIS exists at all. The point is they *could* come back. The point is they *could* exist — just like weapons of mass destruction *could* have existed in Iraq when US troops invaded back in 2003.

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Despite promising a withdrawal of US troops, President Trump [flip-flopped on the issue](#) in late 2019 and ordered “hundreds of additional troops and armored vehicles” into Syria to guard the Deir Ezzor oil fields.

“We’re keeping the oil,” Trump [said](#) in October. “I’ve always said that — keep the oil. We want to keep the oil, \$45 million a month. Keep the oil. We’ve secured the oil.”

By November, the head of US Central Command [admitted](#) there is no “end date” on the US occupation of Syria.

The following year, Tom Bowman, an NPR reporter embedded in Syria, [told](#) the publication that President Trump initially wanted all US forces out but “agreed to keep a small number, about 600 or so, to secure these oil fields not only from ISIS but also from Syrian government and Russian forces.”

But if Syria’s oil is to be kept from what remains of ISIS, from Russia, and from Syria, who actually gets to keep it?

In April 2020, Delta Crescent, a newly-formed US-based oil company with [ties](#) to the Republican Party was granted a one-year sanctions waiver in order to “advise and assist” oil production in northeast Syria. An anonymous State Department official told *The Daily Beast* that [US officials decided oil produced in northeast Syria “did not really” belong to the Syrian government](#), and a former senior US military official also told the publication that the US actively trained a unit within the SDF to specifically protect oil fields where Delta Crescent would be operating.

By August, CNN [reported](#) that Delta Crescent, which was formed “for the sole purpose” of securing Syrian oil, was granted an exclusive sanctions waiver to “develop and upgrade” more than half of the country’s oil fields under SDF control.

Later that month, Pentagon spokesperson Jessica McNulty [assured](#) *Politico* that the Department of Defense “does not have an affiliation with any private companies in regard to the oil fields in northeast Syria” but then added that US forces in the region are “securing” critical petroleum infrastructure.

When the Biden administration took over in January 2021, it became clear that the waiver for Delta Crescent would be discontinued, and yet throughout much of the year, the company reportedly [continued to receive waiver extensions](#) from Biden as a “formality” meant to help Delta Crescent “wind down” operations.

In November 2021, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (which handles regulation and enforcement of US sanctions) issued a new general rule for Syria, granting permission for non-governmental organizations to operate “assistance-related investment activities in support of certain not-for-profit” activities in Syria.

Less than two years later, Delta Crescent’s [website no longer exists](#), and UK-based oil company Gulfsands — which holds oil investments in Syria and [founding ties](#) to Delta Crescent — [announced](#) that they are coming up with ways to find “indigenous solution[s]” to Syria’s “humanitarian” crisis. Gulfsands labeled their “humanitarian” drilling mission “Project Hope” and claims it will sell oil through accredited traders, with revenues going towards paying for humanitarian projects.

And while western powers deliberate on which favored companies will be gifted the rights to drill in Syria, several media outlets have [published reports](#) showing long lines of US convoys transporting tankers full of oil from Syria to US bases in Iraq. The US [denies](#) it is stealing Syrian oil, yet it’s hard not to believe such accusations when everyone from US presidents to US senators have blatantly stated otherwise.

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So, why the hell is the US occupying Syria?

First, the Assad government has a longstanding trade relationship with China and Russia, with a storied history of [buying weapons](#) and [selling oil](#). The US government would much prefer opening business to US companies like Raytheon and Exxon and closing business to companies like Rosoboronexport — Russia’s state-owned weapons manufacturer. The invisible hand of the free market works in mysterious ways.

Second, confrontation with Iran is the ultimate goal for US foreign policy in the Middle East, and Syria is one more strategic stepping stone in the process. In 2010, the US proposed

dropping five year-long sanctions against Syria in return for the country dropping ties with Iran. Assad [rejected](#) the offer.

And lastly, US troops remain in Syria because regime change in Syria is simply part of US foreign policy and has been for years.

In 2011, before [accusations of chemical weapons attacks](#) and even before ISIS, [Obama flat-out demanded that Assad step down](#). He then proceeded to provide training and armaments to “[rebel](#)” groups in Syria through a [covert CIA project](#) that ultimately ended up [putting weapons in the hands of actual terrorists](#) — not counting the [CIA](#), of course.

Years prior, President Bush levied [economic sanctions against Syria](#). Bush also famously labeled Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as part of the “Axis of Evil” and later, perhaps less famously, then-Undersecretary of State John Bolton gave a speech in 2002 entitled “Beyond the Axis of Evil” and added Cuba, Libya, and Syria to the list.

Wesley Clark, a former commander of NATO’s forces in Europe, claimed he met a senior military officer in November 2001 who [told him](#) the US planned to attack Iraq first before taking action against Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Iran.

Additionally, months before 9/11, [neoconservative](#) David Wurmser, with the assistance of his American Enterprise Institute colleague Douglas Feith, [drafted a set of war plans](#) for the US and Israel to “strike fatally, not merely disarm, the centers of radicalism in the region — the regimes of Damascus [Syria], Baghdad [Iraq], Tripoli [Libya], Tehran [Iran], and Gaza [the Palestinians]” to establish the recognition that fighting either the United States or Israel is suicidal.

Ultimately, the more the Syrian conflict sucks up the attention and resources of Syrian allies like Iran and Russia, the greater America’s influence becomes. US intervention in the country has less to do with WMDs, ISIS, or defeating terrorism, and everything to do with weapons sales, oil, regime change, and more specifically, regional power games, global hegemony, and grand imperialist designs shat out by neocon think tanks.

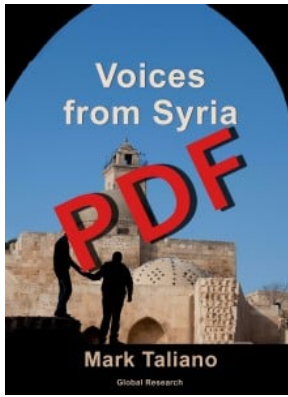
And *that’s* why the hell the US is occupying Syria.

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