



## Syria and Iraq in the Age of Trump: Challenges to American Interests

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Now that the Trump Administration has taken over the reins of American diplomatic and military power, questions arise about how it intends to preserve America's posture in Syria and Iraq. The most recent developments in Syria's civil war seem to have [deprived](#) the United States of at least some influence over the future of that country. Moreover, President Donald Trump's nonchalant attitude about Iraq during his presidential campaign and since winning the presidency, and especially [his advocacy of pirating the country's oil](#), have resulted in an assured recession of American leverage in Baghdad. To be sure, given the Trump Administration's foreign policy confusion in the Middle East, indeed around the world, American engagement in Syria and Iraq risks a total rollback with dire consequences for American strategic interests throughout the entire region.

In its stead, a loose Russian-Turkish-Iranian condominium is rising in Syria despite some specific differences in interests and ambitions between Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran. Russia seems to have successfully [cashed in its chips](#) there by both cementing its institutional diplomatic and military presence and controlling the tempo and agenda of future discussions regarding the country's future, from Astana in Kazakhstan to the United Nations in Geneva. Turkey has finally arrived at a conclusion necessitated by its rapprochement with Russia and [declared](#) through its Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek that "[t]he facts on the ground have changed dramatically, so Turkey can no longer insist on a settlement without Assad, it's not realistic." And Iran has been able to justify its original decision to stand by the Syrian dictator, whom it [sees as central](#) to its strategic agenda for the eastern Mediterranean. The United States thus appears unimportant and inconsequential despite being involved in the Syrian debacle from its outset in 2011.

In Iraq, all three countries find a receptive political audience that has arisen to the seat of power, ironically on the heels of an ill-advised American invasion in 2003. Despite generous American military and economic assistance under the Obama Administration, Iraq has [accepted](#) Russian pledges to deliver what the country needs to fight the Islamic State (IS) and improve its oil sector. Turkey, on the other hand, was able since the formal end of the American occupation in 2011 to [forge relations](#) with both Baghdad, despite some differences regarding northern Iraq, and Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region. Finally, Iran has arguably [won the lion's share](#) in Iraq by both engineering a dominant political position with its many Iran-friendly Shiite parties and establishing and controlling Shiite militias that have participated in the government's military

operations against the Islamic State. Iraq has [actually become](#) a hub of intelligence sharing between Baghdad, Moscow, Damascus, and Tehran.

## Current Strategic Realities in Syria

The Obama Administration's cautious approach to the Syrian civil war as it progressed into an open conflict involving domestic and foreign actors may have laid the groundwork for even a less committed Trump Administration policy in Syria. Currently, the United States deploys about 500 troops in Syria in a [Train and Equip](#) program that has seen many iterations because of the changing goal posts of the former administration's policy in Syria. In its last version, the program is slated for training Syrian Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish, and other fighters deployed primarily against the Islamic State in the northeast. The US Air Force is also engaged in air operations against the organization in both countries as well as against Jabhat Fath al-Sham, formerly the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, in northwest Syria, the [latest](#) taking place one day before the end of President Barack Obama's term.

Politically, and after [deciding](#) early on that there was no military solution to the Syrian crisis, since 2012 the United States has been involved in arranging for a political solution that it understood could not be achieved without Russian involvement, given Moscow's historical relations with the country. Washington was also instrumental in arriving at agreements for ceasefires, cessations of hostilities, and separation of combatants, only to discover that Moscow alone had the last word. In fact, because of the lack of a credible impact on the actual Syrian battlefield, American political leverage was never sufficient to produce Washington's desired outcomes. What always obtained were gradual but sure elements of a *pax Russica* in Syria, from broken ceasefires to secure a military advantage for the Syrian regime, to aerial bombardments to allow field victories, to ending, finally and conclusively, rebel control in all urban centers across the country.

Today, the already unprepared, untested, and fearfully clueless Trump Administration looks out on a Syrian landscape arguably bereft of crucial points of leverage. During his campaign, President Trump [opined](#) that fighting IS in Syria could be left to the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran and that the United States [could collaborate](#) against it with the Kremlin, although Russia neither seriously fought the organization when it could nor plans to allow for a large American role lest the United States get the credit for eradicating it. Moreover, the Trump Administration seems to be so enamored of the Russian leadership that it may simply "trust" it to do what is necessary in Syria—American long-term interests in the wider region be damned.

Individually, Russia, Turkey, and Iran agree on a common strategic interest in the survival of the Syrian state yet they diverge on short- and medium-term goals that do not augur well for US interests. Russia wants to ensure complete dominance over Syria as a base for its wider regional ambitions and has made itself arguably the single most important outside player in the eastern

Mediterranean. While the [communiqué](#) of the Astana meeting of January 23-24, 2017, highlighted the participation of Turkey and Iran in the discussions about consolidating the current ceasefire in Syria, it was clear that Russia was and will remain the pivotal actor as the parties move into serious political negotiations in Geneva in February. Even the Syrian opposition's [objections](#) to Iran's role in the future were left to Moscow to address.

Turkey aims to have a pivotal role in northern Syria vis-à-vis the ethnic Kurds to prevent their self-rule there. In fact, its recent announcement about Asad's indispensability is logical given his rejection of an Iraqi Kurdistan-like enclave that may pave the way for a Kurdish state in the future—a position that Turkey also does not accept. As a participant in, and organizer of, the Astana discussions, Turkey [rejected](#) the participation of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) which, ironically, constitute the most powerful military formation the American Train and Equip program has readied in northern Syria. And this in addition to the tense Turkish-American relations arising from Washington's refusal thus far to hand over the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara has accused of orchestrating the military putsch against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2016.

As for Iran, and despite differing perspectives that have surfaced from Russia about current discussions regarding Syria, it is not hard to divine reasons for its rejection of a US role there. In fact, Iran prefers to continue its sole condominium over Syria in its grand design for a *pax Iranica* from Tehran to Damascus; accepting to share control with Russia and Turkey could not be helped given the former's domination and capabilities and the latter's strategic location. But for the United States to be present in Astana to help in consolidating the current ceasefire was too much for Tehran to accept, after it [accused](#) Washington of supporting terrorism in Syria and Iraq. Only after Russia's insistence did Iran yield on the matter, although given circumstances, the American delegation [was composed](#) of the US ambassador to Kazakhstan and a small entourage and had a mere observer status.

### **Inhospitable Iraq**

Russia, Turkey, and Iran currently benefit—and will in the future—from the weakening American hand in Iraq. United States policy there at present is progressively governed by two considerations that are sometimes interrelated, other times separate: the ongoing battle against the Islamic State and the unpredictable competition with Iran over one of the Middle East's most strategically pivotal states. As the fight against IS advances toward an eventual and undoubtedly consequential victory, thus obviating the need for American soldiers, the competition over influence in Iraq will likely remain a dynamic aspect in both American foreign policy in the Middle East and Iran's relations with its Iraqi neighbor—not to mention the currently uncertain future developments between Iran and the United States.

As an important aspect of its commitment to the security of Iraq, the United States [deploys](#) about 5,000 special operations and training personnel to help in the battle against IS. They also conduct counter-insurgency operations, [direct](#) the targeting of IS positions by American and allied aircraft, and train Kurdish Peshmerga forces who, along with the Iraqi Army (and Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces [PMF]), are currently [engaged](#) in liberating Mosul and its environs.

However, the American military presence in Iraq faces unpredictable conditions. First and foremost, it runs contrary to Iranian ambitions in the country despite the troops' utility against IS. Since the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iran has decried the American military deployment next door and has demanded its end. Its military allies in the PMF, [numbering](#) some 100,000, [reject](#) cooperating with US forces and have ignored American warnings about their participation in the Mosul offensive and other battles despite complaints of human rights abuses and war crimes against Iraqi civilians.

Second, the United States' strategic competition with Iran in Iraq is part of a larger rivalry that is difficult to win if there are no clearly justified objectives secured by American power. Indeed, Iran will always push for limiting American presence in its neighborhood if Washington cannot prove that it is essential in the region—for example, as a force against terrorism. Since the collapse of the Iraqi Army in 2014 ahead of a ragtag contingent of IS fighters, Iraq's security forces, with American help, have been able to regroup and wage a successful campaign that liberated formerly IS-held areas and are on their way to do the same in Mosul. It is thus doubtful that American troops will continue to be welcomed and deployed in Iraq once the battle against IS concludes. In fact, once that happens, Iran and its clients in Baghdad will clamor for a swift exit that would truly be the final application of the Status of Forces Agreement signed between Iraq and the United States in 2008.

Third, it is hard to gauge how the United States will deal with the possibility of the breakup of the Iraqi state along ethnic lines. Iraqi Kurdistan's president, Masoud Barzani, recently [warned](#) that Kurdish independence “is neither a rumor nor a dream” and that the Kurds are awaiting the right conditions to achieve it peacefully. However and whenever that comes, it is likely to be opposed by the Iraqi political community and may in fact lead to military conflict, thus forcing American troops to leave the country since they are unlikely to take sides in the potential conflagration.

Fourth, and finally, American military presence in Iraq may indeed hinge on what becomes of President Trump's [repeated refrain](#) about controlling Iraq's oil. Naturally, Iraqis interpreted the president's latest speech at the CIA as another harbinger of the infamous, militant American foreign policy. While it is more likely than not that the president's bravado and out-of-the-box thinking will not become reality, given the ingrained aversion to war and foreign adventures among the American public, no observer of the affair can doubt that it will either put American troops in

Iraq in great jeopardy or force their quick departure to avoid a renewed and protracted insurgency by Iraqis—both Sunnis and Shiites—anxious to once again teach the American invader a lesson.

### **Preventing a New Levantine Order**

At the start of a new administration whose *modus operandi* has so far exposed an alarming lack of knowledge and diplomacy, a detrimental slowness of action, and a woeful non-commitment to American strategic interests in the Middle East and around the world, it may be dangerous yet timely to lament a potential passing of a *pax Americana* in the eastern Mediterranean. One hopes that the US Senate's confirmation of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State may arrest the quick decline of American fortunes in both Syria and Iraq. But for this to happen, the new secretary, his staff, and others involved in formulating American foreign policy should be cognizant of the following policy options at their disposal.

First, while American military leverage in Syria may be gradually eroding as Russia, Turkey, and Iran exploit their battlefield victories, the United States can still exercise a degree of political influence on Russia and Turkey to be able to secure for itself a coveted seat at the negotiating table. It must be clear to all three countries, however, that only US prestige and economic power can make an agreement on Syria just, equitable, and sustainable, and that what matters are political negotiations in Geneva about the future of Syria. Furthermore, Russia still needs America's help in lifting sanctions imposed on it because of its Ukrainian adventure; Turkey cannot fully shun NATO or its relations with the United States; and Iran must try to safeguard itself from a belligerent Trump foreign policy.

Second, as hopes for a better American position in Iraq fades with time and under the pressure of changing political conditions there, the United States must be able to use whatever goodwill and leverage it has accumulated with Iraq's current Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi to try to steer the Iraqi body politic toward increased reconciliation and social peace. As a representative of constitutional authority and moderation, he could act to unify the nationalist elements of the political system to chart at least a modicum of an independent foreign policy that can be open on both Iraq's Arab hinterland, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Iran's reformist camp. Iraq needs both, politically and economically, and its political center must be encouraged and coaxed toward that goal.

Third, while not directly involved in internal Syrian and Iraqi political or military dynamics, the GCC must always be ready to play a decisive role in Syria and Iraq and must offer its assistance. As the Trump Administration begins its foray into the quicksand of the Middle East, the question arises about the council's preparedness to contribute to the task of assuring a positive outcome in the two countries. To be sure, the GCC should assure the new administration that it can be the steady and stable rock upon which American policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian

Gulf rests. Reciprocally, the Trump Administration should seek to protect American national interests in the Middle East through constant consultations with GCC capitals, political coordination, and military cooperation that can promote peace and stability in the wider region.