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The Washington Post's Syria Fixation



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Josh Rogin's oped in the *Washington Post* last week charged that the Biden administration seems to have forgotten about Syria these days," asking "Does Biden even care about Syria"? It is difficult to imagine what the United States could do about a failed state such as Syria, and why it should be the responsibility of the United States.

By any measure of strategic importance—size, wealth, internal stability—Syria is simply not an important player in the politics of the Middle East. In addition, like Iraq and Lebanon, Syria's population is a fragile mosaic of ethnic and sectarian communities that

don't respond well to foreign interference. Humanitarian aid should be extended, but that's as far as it goes.

A series of non-Arab states—Russia, Israel, Iran, and Turkey—have exploited the vulnerability and weakness of Syria over the past decade. If outside actors hadn't interfered in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad would not have remained in power. In view of the challenges that confront the Biden administration, the possibility of “fixing” Syria is well out of the question. And even if Syria were “fixed,” whatever that would mean, it would have no impact on the greater challenges that bedevil the Middle East.

Since Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafiz al-Assad, nearly twenty-five years ago, Syria's domestic politics have become more fractured and unpredictable. Nevertheless, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger convinced both Democratic and Republican administrations that the “Arabs cannot make war without Egypt, but cannot make peace without Syria.” The Assad dynasty—father and son—is approaching 55 years, and there is no reason to believe that Syria can be restored as an effective nation-state until the Assad dynasty comes to an end. In the meantime, there has been no accountability for the mass murders of civilians that father and son have orchestrated.

Another reason for ignoring Rogin's criticism of the Biden administration is that he and other oped writers seem to know so little about Syria and the U.S. role in Syria. They consistently echo the Pentagon's declaration of having about 500 troops in Syria, but the actual figure probably is much higher. Over the years, the media have paid little attention to the increased use of contractors and mercenaries in combat zones such as Syria. A year ago, the Department of Defense stated that there were more than 6,500 military contractors in Iraq and Syria, but avoided any reference to how many of these contractors were engaged in armed security along with military personnel.

A study from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) noted in 2021 that nearly 8,000 contractors had died in various post-9/11 conflicts, which is greater than the killings of U.S. military personnel. More contractors were killed in Afghanistan over a twenty-year period than military personnel, and the killing of contractors in Iraq nearly equals the loss of military personnel. We know very little about the situation in Syria, but there is no sign that the appropriate congressional committees have any interest in exploring the actual situation.

There are many reasons why an over-worked President Biden may not be interested in taking on the problem of Syria, and one reason may be the lack of credit President Obama received for taking on the problem of Assad's use of chemical weapons. The conventional

wisdom is that Obama issued a “red line” to prevent further use of chemicals, but was ignored by Assad. The fact of the matter is that Obama and Russian President Putin entered a cooperative arrangement to force President Assad to concede that he held chemical weapons and to join the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In this fashion, Russian-American cooperation dealt with one of the world’s largest arsenals of chemical weapons. Some 1,300 tons of deadly chemicals were destroyed by September 2014. The diplomatic arrangement led to the removal of the chemicals from Syria, taking the chemicals to NATO naval ships, and then transferring the chemicals to a U.S. naval warship capable of destroying the chemicals. Coercive diplomacy worked, but Obama received criticism from the mainstream media for failing to use military force following the declaration of the “red line.”

But Biden shouldn’t stop at Syria, according to Frank Fukuyama, the author of the “The End of History,” which prematurely declared absolute victory for Western democracy and liberalism in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to Fukuyama, then deputy director of policy planning at the Department of State, the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the last ideological alternative to liberalism. He added that World War II ended fascism; the communist governments in East and Central Europe had imploded; and even China was headed in the direction of liberal and progressive order.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in April 2023, Fukuyama and Nino Evgenidze, urge the United States to get involved in Georgian politics. They deplore Georgia’s “slide into authoritarianism,” and promote sanctions against members of the Georgia government. Like Syria in the Middle East, applying any measure of strategic importance—size, wealth, internal stability—it is clear that Georgia simply is not an important player in the politics of the Caucasus. The mainstream media constantly refers to the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, but typically ignore the machinations of the Bush administration to bring Georgia into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and to encourage Georgian leaders to challenge Russia’s traditional influence in their country. The roots of Russian use of force in Georgia is more complicated than conventional wisdom would suggest.

More importantly, since 9/11, the United States has been in a constant state of war. Countless civilians have been killed by U.S. operations and drone attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and beyond. In 2015, Obama revealed that a U.S. strike in the Afghan-Pakistan border region killed a U.S. aid worker held hostage. In that same year, the U.S. bombed a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan, killing 22

doctors and staff. It's long past time for the United States to stop trying to be the world's policeman, a role that has become central to the creation of our burgeoning national security state.

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