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18.12.2024

Syria: Will the United States Try to Stop Israeli Militarism in the Middle East?



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For the past several decades, the United States and Israel have tried to isolate Syria in the Middle East. Only U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, after the October War in 1973, tried and succeeded in bringing Syria into the step-by-step peace process negotiations with Israel. Since then, however, U.S. efforts to negotiate a peace such as the Reagan plan in 1982 or the unsuccessful efforts to arrange an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon have ignored any role for Syria. Currently, U.S. tolerance of Israeli military power against Syria complicates the task of reducing the violence and allowing the Syrian rebels to have the time and space to establish a stable government in Damascus.

For most of its history, Syrian authority has been marked by instability due to authoritarian leadership and a diverse population. The fragmented nature of Syrian society; the absence of

a strong national identity; and the debilitating conflict with Israel have contributed to weak governance. Any Syrian government, particularly the current one that tries to take hold after 14 years of confrontation, will face a difficult geopolitical environment that limits policy options; inhibits risk-taking; and compromises central authority. The various ethnic divisions, even among the majority Sunni Moslems, will make it difficult to achieve political and economic cohesion.

One hundred years ago, the wife of the British consul described inter-communal relations in a way that still fits: “They hate one another. The Sunnis excommunicate the Shias, and both hate the Druze; all detest the Alawites; the Maronites do not love anybody but themselves are duly abhorred by all; the Greek Orthodox abominate the Greek Catholics and the Latins; and all despise the Jews.” The Alawites, who have politically dominated the country in recent times, were singled out for persecution in the past by the Sunni majority. Most of the population in Syria is Moslem, but 20 percent of the Moslems belong to various schismatic sects.

Today, Syria is in predictable chaos, and the presence of numerous foreign powers adds to the conflict. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have made it particularly difficult for the new regime by launching hundreds of air strikes against Syria, and seizing territory beyond the Golan Heights that provided a sightline to Damascus. Former Israeli Air Force officers commented on social media that these attacks were carried out as part of an operation based on plans that were drawn up years ago.

Turkey has backed various Syrian rebel groups along the Syrian-Turkish border, and plans to continue the fight against Syrian Kurds based in northeastern Syria, where the Kurds have support from nearly 1,000 U.S. military personnel. Among the foreign powers in Syria, Turkey has the greatest access and influence with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which led the fight against former president Bahshar al-Assad.

There are several favorable signs that point to opportunities for HTS. The Russians appear to be preparing to withdraw forces from some of its bases in Syria. Unfortunately, it is likely that Ukraine will pay the price for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s humiliation in Syria. Moscow’s setback in Syria may make it harder to get Russia to enter negotiations with Ukraine to end a war that is reaching the three-year mark.

Iran’s initial reluctance to get engaged in any effort to save the Assad regime or to threaten the new Syrian transition government also points to a possible opportunity for HTS. Iran has withdrawn its Quds forces that consisted mainly of refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan

who had fled to Iran. Syria had been the only state in Iran's "Axis of Resistance" to weaken Israel. Iran's ability to arm Hezbollah forces in Lebanon will become far more difficult.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; the U.S. mainstream media; and Biden's national security team are jointly assigning credit to the United States and Israel for allowing the Syrian rebels to swiftly take over the government. In actual fact, if there is one foreign power that deserves the credit for the rebel takeover, it would be the courageous fighters from Ukraine who have fought the Russian army to a standstill and made it impossible for Russia to provide necessary support to former Syrian President al-Assad. Iran's preoccupation with Israeli military power and the defeat suffered by Hezbollah prevented any support role for Assad.

Israel can be counted on to make every effort to destabilize the transition government in Syria, and only the United States could threaten to cut off military aid to Israel that could bring a stop to Israeli air strikes. It seems unlikely that either the Biden administration or the incoming Trump mob will consider doing so. Even worse, the Netanyahu government, which seems to favor protracted fighting everywhere, could decide to use its air power in the wake of two successful raids against Iran in April and October 2024, to try to destroy Iran's nuclear program.

There are conflicting signals coming from the Biden administration. On the one hand, the United States has entered discussions with officials from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the wake of its overthrow of the Assad government. The United States considers HTS a terrorist organization, so the Biden administration's willingness to engage in discussions is a healthy sign. But the Biden administration is still deploying air power in Syria against Islamic State militants. Nor has Biden ever indicated a willingness to put a stop to the obscene militancy of Israel against its Arab neighbors, particularly the Palestinians. The United States would benefit from the emergence of a stable government in Damascus that will not resort to terrorism at home or abroad. Over the long run, this could lead to a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East.

It is difficult to imagine that a Trump administration will apply any pressure against the Netanyahu government, and it is particularly threatening that both the Netanyahu national security team and the incoming Trump team support the notion of military force against Iran. Indeed, Trump and his national security appointees have threatened to walk away from the Syrian situation, which Trump wanted to do in his first term.

The military engagement of U.S., Israeli, and Turkish forces will make it difficult for the application of international diplomacy that could ameliorate the current situation in Syria. But

if the United States were willing to lead an international coalition made up of European states, Japan, and Australia, it is possible that a stable interim government could be created in Syria. But if Trump decides to enforce a rigid “American First” policy and refuses to engage in an international effort to end the violence, then the Syrian situation will worsen. If so, as Garrison Keillor used to say, “things will get worse before they get worse.”

DECEMBER 17, 2024

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