Syria, the United States, and the Left

written by Ella Wind | January 23, 2019

As the war in Syria draws to a close, the debate on the U.S. left over that conflict seems as intractable as ever. The immediacy of Syrian politics for Americans seems to ebb and flow as the war impinges on a shifting but surprisingly broad scope of issues salient to U.S. politics: migration, Islamism, foreign intervention, terrorism, and relations with Iran and Russia. At times its relevance crashes in sudden waves. The photo of Alan Kurdi washed up on a beach seemed to suddenly offer the possibility of a more concerted international effort to resettle refugees humanely. But other waves come, just as fierce as those before. For many, the ISIS-affiliated attacks in France seemed to sweep away the sympathy for the plight of refugees just as quickly as Kurdi's photo had brought it.

The controversies feel near-mechanical at this point. There are of course the now well-trodden quarrels over the veracity of reports on gas attacks or on the origins of various groups inside Syria. A more general debate pivots on uncovering the "true" nature of the opposition and revolt: Was it an anti-democratic uprising to install an Islamist regime, or was it a democratic and secular revolutionary attempt? What was the exact ratio of these two opposed camps, and when did one or the other take dominance?

As with other international conflicts, there has been contention over how to characterize the involvement of third countries. Many argue that censure of Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria should take second place to condemnation of the United States and its allies' role. A less persuasive version of this argument, which claims that the United States is at root the primary cause of the world's woes, suffers from a bizarre version of U.S.-centrism, being overly dismissive of the importance of internal and regional political dynamics. A more compelling case for the U.S. left to retain a primary focus on the imperialism of their own country is offered by Noam Chomsky: "Even if the United States was responsible for 2 percent of the violence in the world instead of the majority of it, it would be that 2 percent I would be primarily responsible for. And that is a simple ethical judgment."[1]

This essay does not seek to make an intervention on any of these well-worn debates, as necessary as any of them might be. Whether or not one accepts Chomsky's argument about a primary moral responsibility for one's own country's actions, it does seem that there is an especially large gap on the U.S. left regarding a big-picture understanding of the nature of U.S. involvement in Syria over the past eight years. A less muddled analysis of our government's actions and intentions is needed.

The argument has often been made that the left is so weak that any foreign policy stance it takes is mostly irrelevant in any case. Yet, in the last few years, with the rise of left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America with some degree of influence on American politics, a future in which leftist debates over far-flung countries might have actual consequences has become less difficult to imagine.[2] These debates about moral responsibility are not merely philosophical but also

empirical questions. The correct diagnosis requires an accurate understanding of the situation to be resolved. Such an understanding of Syria is unquestionably absent on the left today.

Drawing Clarity from Complexity

It is true that the Syrian situation is incredibly complex. The degree of temporal and geographical variation of the war impedes clear assessment of the conflict's most relevant events and actors. Syria in the last eight years has contained multiple uprisings and multiple subconflicts that have created a pile of information for observers to sift through. Of course, one obvious challenge is that of separating fact from fiction in a war reported largely via smuggled videos, second-hand recounting, and citizen journalists. Yet beyond this, the media must undertake the task of distilling this heap of facts into a coherent analysis—understanding which events constitute game changers and which are minor side stories. All this in a country that, prior to the 2011 uprising, was of almost no interest to most Americans, who only have the barest knowledge of the historical, political, and social context of the region, especially beyond its intersection with U.S. affairs. The difficulty of this undertaking is a major reason why it is possible for two people, each basing their analysis on well-established facts, to arrive at such wildly differing narratives.

The Syrian conflict can be described as having passed through five stages. Of course, these stages generally don't have clear-cut turning points. They overlap, in part due to the wide geographical variation in how the war's dynamics have unfolded. In the coastal areas around Latakia and Tartous, where Alawites are concentrated, the regime has managed to hold a relatively firm grip on power throughout the conflict, although not without challenges. Syria's major cities—Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus—running like an urban spine down the non-coastal Western region of Syria from the Turkish to the Lebanese borders, have wavered between being held by various militias and the regime. Eastern Syria, where the relatively less dense population clusters around the fertile agricultural strips and bodies of water breaking up the otherwise arid desert landscape, has seen fierce fighting in the second half of the conflict because of the strategic importance of its oil and wheat fields, its shared border with Iraq, and its concentration of Kurdish populations.

Stages of the Conflict

The first stage of the Syrian conflict was dominated by the grassroots uprising sparked in February 2011 in the small southern city of Deraa. It began when the regime arrested and brutally tortured schoolboys who had graffitied anti-regime slogans on a wall. Public outrage grew when police fired live rounds into the crowds of the boys' families. Demonstrations erupted across the country, led by the smaller urban centers of marginalized rural provinces and later by the large (but also marginalized) city of Homs. The brutal tactics used by security forces against peaceful protesters swayed many people from soft support or timid neutrality to open anger at the regime.

This was followed by the militarization of the opposition, a process that began slowly in the second half of 2011 but picked up speed significantly over the course of 2012. The early stage of militarization was spearheaded by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a somewhat hodge-podge group composed of defected military officers and ordinary Syrians who had taken up arms. From even its earliest days, the FSA operated somewhere on the spectrum between an official organization and a brand name, the adoption of which by a militia would signal a broad orientation toward democracy, secularism, and Syrian identity.[3]

By late 2012, militarization edged toward the third phase, in which the FSA began to be eclipsed by militias relatively more oriented toward Islamism and in some cases with much less concern for representing Syrians qua Syrians. This turn was driven by the superior fighting capabilities and heightened discipline of militia fighters who were veterans of other struggles in the region, coupled

with the escalating race by Gulf funders and others to build client networks inside Syria via massive quantities of arms shipments.[4]

ISIS' emergence onto the world stage would give birth to the fourth stage of Syria's tragedy. In 2014, the capture of Mosul dominated international news headlines, with the group seemingly (for those who had not been following Syria) coming out of nowhere. In September, Obama announced the beginning of an open-ended campaign of airstrikes in Iraq and eastern Syria against ISIS and the obscure "Khorasan" group.[5] While Russia had supported the Assad regime with military and political aid from the beginning of the conflict, in September 2015 it undertook a full-scale intervention alongside an Iranian-led ground offensive, granting Syria's civil war the dubious distinction of being the first conflict Russia had fought outside of the borders of the former USSR since its fall.[6] While this constituted a major turn for the geopolitics of the conflict, for many of those on the ground in Syria, the professional airstrikes of these major powers were not a terribly dissimilar experience from the barrel bombs dropped by the regime for the previous years.

In 2017, the three-year blitz by the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces, their Kurdish-led on-the-ground proxy force, finally brought ISIS completely to its knees. The Russian-Iranian surge, along with the latitude given to Assad to not have to deal with ISIS, all but sealed Assad's victory over the other rebel militias. A sixth stage is now emerging, that of the final negotiations over the terms of the victory, for which some questions still remain unanswered: What happens to the Kurds in a postwar Assadist Syria? What happens to the millions of refugees stranded abroad by this brutal conflict? And what will United States postwar policy toward Syria look like?

U.S. Goals and Strategies in Syria

The nature, depth, and goals of U.S. involvement in Syria have been a huge source of confusion on the U.S. left and elsewhere. As with other confusions around the conflict, these are based on a misunderstanding of the relative importance of a variety of programs of intervention and how they have changed over time.

From amidst the noise, we can draw out a signal of broad trends in Washington's orientation. From the perspective of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment, Syria and the Arab Spring have essentially offered a range of possible outcomes, none of which are ideal. It is true that the United States has a historically cold relationship with the Assad regime.[7] Yet this did not mean that the uprising was viewed as an unambiguously clear chance for the United States to oust him. The most fitting interpretation of the many contradictory statements and leaked policy documents regarding Syria indicates that the various branches and institutions tasked with developing foreign policy and military strategy were wracked by debate over "the autocrats you know or the Islamic extremists you fear."[8] The United States saw itself presented with a set of unpalatable solutions, among which it attempted to navigate toward those that offered the highest chance of survival for its client regimes in the Middle East and the least direct threat to its interests. This meant that while Washington, at periods, hoped to weaken Assad, it always remained skeptical of a full takeover by the much less-known popular revolutionary movements or militia groups that organized themselves in Syria in the last eight years.

The Obama administration's ambiguity on challenging Assad too aggressively was well-illustrated in the August 2013 decision not to attack the regime after the Syrian military crossed Obama's stated "red line" by gassing hundreds of civilians in a Damascus suburb. While many worried that a U.S. attack seemed likely, Obama chose to seek congressional approval. This stalling created space for Russia to offer a deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program, allowing the United States to save face on not following through on its threat.[9] While some attributed this to protests, in fact, demonstrations against the airstrikes were small and not very well-organized. The decision not to

strike came from within the government itself and was unlikely influenced by the minor public outcries where they occurred.

The broad orientation being stated, understanding the twists and turns of how the United States sought to pursue this vision requires a closer examination of the changes over time. Military intervention into Syria has taken place in large part via three large distinctive programs, which changed in relative importance as Washington responded to changes on the ground. In rough chronological order, first was the State Department's provision of nonlethal weaponry to the FSA; second, the covert CIA training program Timber Sycamore; and third, Operation Inherent Resolve, the Pentagon's formation of the anti-ISIS coalition in alliance with the Kurdish People's Protection Units, the YPG, in Syria. I will also discuss, to a lesser degree, the role of U.S. regional allies.

Support for the FSA

Early on in the conflict, the U.S. foreign policy establishment had extremely fractious internal disagreements around what sort of role Washington might play in Syria. Initially they settled on a policy of the State Department providing materials such as food rations, medical supplies, communications equipment, and vehicles to the FSA through the Supreme Military Council of the opposition, with the total value amounting to around $250 million dollars. These contributions were bolstered by additional supplies provided by Britain and France.[10]

These supplies were enough to give the militarized opposition hope for larger infusions of resources later but fell far short of anything that could overthrow the regime. Essentially, the supplies maintained the momentum of the war, leaving each side to be just weak enough to neither win nor lose. As the second year of the Arab Spring crept to a close, Syria did not seem to offer up any of the resolutions[11] that had been reached by that time in other Arab Spring countries, such as the geopolitical negotiations that led to transition in Yemen, the holding of Egypt's first legitimate elections in half a century, or the capture and killing of Qaddafi in Libya.

Instead, Hezbollah's definitive entrance into the war in 2012 on Assad's side, and escalating Iranian and Russian involvement, served to bolster the Syrian regime's lagging fortunes and further prolong the fighting. But the opposition's military capacities were also reinforced at the same time by a kaleidoscope of militia groups that gradually eclipsed the FSA. These groups, with their alliances and splits shifting with each turn on the battlefield, ranged from secular and nationalist to Islamist, with the latter growing ascendant. The program to supply the FSA was eventually suspended in December 2013 when shipments were seized by the Islamic Front.[12] In any case, by that point the Obama administration had turned its focus to other ways for dealing with the unfolding conflict in Syria.

Operation Timber Sycamore

In 2012, CIA Director David Petraeus first put forth the concept of a covert program to train rebels to fight Bashar al-Assad. This was initially shelved, considered too aggressive a step. It was not Bashar al-Assad's turning fortunes that would eventually put this option back on the table; rather Washington's regional allies dragged it deeper into the conflict. The influx of massive foreign support for the rebels from these allies over spring and summer 2012 led to an unprecedented proliferation of distinct armed groups across Syria. The United States at first sought to ensure that arms supplies were guided to the "right hands" by limiting shipments of any overly powerful weaponry, with the CIA monitoring arms supplies by the Turks, Qataris, and Saudis.[13]

But the war continued, and the voices calling for intervention in the form of more arms deliveries grew louder. In the spring of 2013, Obama granted the CIA permission to organize Timber

Sycamore—a Jordan-based program for providing arms and training to particular rebel groups, supplemented by backing from some Gulf countries.[14]

Yet the new administration remained wary of repeating the mistakes of the occupation of Iraq. Many attributed the major failure there to the total destruction of the country's government institutions. The administration did not want to risk any of the newly emergent militias simply taking power. Instead, the administration hoped that with a moderate strengthening of the rebels with whom it had relations, Assad could be persuaded to undertake a Yemen-style deal: a gentle transition of the head of state while leaving most of the governing institutions in place, guided by local and international powers. This fine balancing act was destined to fail. Of course, many others besides the United States administration had a stake in building client networks among rebels in Syria. The Americans were trying to add just the right amount of salt to a stew that had ten other cooks. And as money flowed in from other countries, groups, and individuals around the world, maintaining influence and discipline over any particular group only grew more complicated.

Ironically, the biggest game changer would come from a group that relied much less on this web of funding networks: ISIS.[15] With the capture of Mosul and the theft of at least half a billion dollars from banks in northern and western Iraq in summer 2014, the administration could no longer justify its primary focus on the regime. ISIS would have to take greater priority. The covert Timber Sycamore program continued on, but in September, Congress authorized the Pentagon to train and equip Syrian rebels against ISIS as part of an international coalition with NATO allies.[16] This entire program proved to be a fiasco. The $500 million training program began with the initial goal of producing 5,000 fighters. In the end, it produced around five. Beyond the more direct challenges of attacks from other militia groups, the program's failure was attributable at least in part to the rebel fighters' frustrations over being directed to fight ISIS instead of Assad—the whole reason many had taken up arms in the first place.[17]

Timber Sycamore, which was more targeted against Assad, was somewhat more successful in its mission. In 2015, using tank-destroying missiles, militias from the program trounced government forces in northern Syria. But Russian intervention on the side of the regime soon overwhelmed them, just as the U.S. administration was becoming increasingly oriented to dedicating its military efforts to defeating ISIS. Trump's official closing of the $1 billion program in 2017 did not therefore constitute a major turning point: It was already clearly on its last legs.[18]

While both the CIA program and the Pentagon train-and-equip efforts fizzled out, another experiment in how the United States would weigh in on the Syrian outcome would prove more enduring, and its beginnings constitute a major turning point of the Syrian civil war overall. This program, like the train-and-equip program, was not focused on fighting Bashar al-Assad, Iran, or Russia, but in taking out ISIS. However, in this case, Washington's chosen proxy fighters on the ground were more effective, perhaps because for them also it was the fight against ISIS, rather than Assad, that was their own urgent concern.

Operation Inherent Resolve

ISIS' origins and continued presence in Iraq, coupled with their insistence on relative financial independence—preferring oil smuggling and extortion to begging wealthy foreign funders for money—meant that their expansion into Syria began from the Iraq border into the country's concentration of oil fields in the northeast.

ISIS' push into northeast Syria had brought them into intense conflict with the YPG, the Kurdish militia affiliated with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, which had long challenged the government of Turkey. The YPG had in previous years wrested control of Syria's majority Kurdish

areas from the Assad regime. Since the uprising, they had also established a unified military and political dominance in what had previously been a more heterogeneous Kurdish political landscape. When Washington first announced an open-ended military campaign against ISIS in September 2014, it saw eastern Syria's Kurdish regions as a tangential concern to the majority Sunni Arab regions captured by ISIS, such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

This changed in a period of a few weeks with the battle for Kobane. As YPG fighters successfully slowed the advances of ISIS militants, U.S. policymakers took notice and soon began providing intensive military support to the YPG in the form of airstrikes. From August to December of 2014, the United States self-reported having conducted 559 airstrikes in Syria, of which over three-fourths took place in Kobane.[19] But because of the YPG's deep ties to the PKK, designated by the United States as a terrorist group, a workaround for a legal military alliance needed to be created. Thus was born the "Syrian Democratic Forces," a YPG-dominated group that also incorporates some minor Sunni Arab militias approved by the United States.[20] The group acquired other regional and international backers, including France, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.[21]

In a pattern that would be repeated across every major city in Syria that had been captured by ISIS, the U.S. coalition showered the city with hundreds or thousands of airstrikes while YPG fighters provided the ground support. As the strategy proved militarily effective, Washington put more boots on the ground (estimates range from 2,000 to 4,000 at the peak). By 2017, the total cost of operations related to ISIS since fall 2014 was announced to be $14.3 billion, with an average daily cost of $13.6 million, far eclipsing any of the other forms of United States involvement in Syria.[22] By the metric of human life, the impact has been devastating: The coalition is estimated to have conducted over 15,000 strikes in eastern Syria, killing at least 6,575 civilians, and many of the "liberated" cities were left hollowed out, with infrastructure destroyed, residents displaced, and few prospects for rehabilitation in the medium term.[23]

Abdelaziz Alhamza is a founding member of *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, a major underground reporting effort that smuggled out information on life in Raqqa under ISIS. In an interview with the *New Yorker* after the United States coalition announced it had successfully shaken ISIS' grip on its former capital, he explained why American and SDF celebrations of Raqqa's recapture were not matched among Raqqans themselves:

> I am not happy. How could I be? It is true that ISIS is defeated now in Raqqa. But ninety percent of the city is destroyed; there is rubble everywhere. Thousands have been killed. Hundreds of thousands are living in miserable conditions. People are sleeping outdoors in the desert heat. They are lucky if they have a tent. …
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> People told me that when the international coalition started bombing Raqqa, in 2015, the air strikes were targeted at ISIS fighters, at their headquarters and their vehicles. They knew that being home was not a problem, they would be safe. They did fear Russian air strikes and Assad's forces. But then the strategy of the coalition seemed to change; the strikes seemed more random, less accurate. They felt that the main goal was only to get rid of ISIS without caring enough about thousands of civilians who are living there.[24]

While the foreign policy establishment's main insight from the failures of Iraq is that destroying governing institutions to overthrow a dictator may do more harm than good, one wonders if a future lesson from Syria may be that the indiscriminate razing of cities to save them from occupation by a tyrannical jihadist group is rather counterproductive as well.

Misreading of the United States Intervention

By virtually every metric, the intervention against ISIS has been the major intervention of the United States in Syria. If we can use dollars as a proxy, the FSA provisions amounted to a few hundreds of millions of dollars in cumulative costs, and the CIA program came to $1 billion. The failed anti-ISIS effort, the train-and-equip program coupled with the eastern Syria airstrikes campaign, completely eclipses the costs of all of the other programs summed, clocking in at well over $14 billion in spending (and still rising).

And yet, what the average American has in mind when discussing (whether criticizing or praising) "United States intervention in Syria" remains myopically limited to intervention against Bashar al-Assad. This can be illustrated in a number of ways. For example, Google Trends, which provides a metric for analyzing the volume of search queries over periods of time, shows that searches for "United States intervention in Syria" show distinctive peaks around April 2017 and 2018—not around the times when United States announced new escalations of the anti-ISIS coalition or when air strikes reached their peak, but when the United States threatened to strike assets held by Bashar al-Assad.

Similarly, while some protests have taken place whenever the United States has proposed airstrikes against assets belonging to Assad, there have been virtually no protests against the United States anti-ISIS airstrikes in either Iraq or Syria.

The reason we have diverged so far from the actual facts of U.S. involvement appears to be overdetermined by a number of overlapping factors. It seems as if many of us have an overly narrow conception of the form U.S. imperialism should be expected to take—that Washington should be expected to intervene primarily for the purpose of regime change and not against non-state actors found in a given country. Of course, many U.S. interventions do have the goal of regime change. But the rise of non-state groups engaged in asymmetrical warfare against the United States has led to the rise of military involvement against non-state targets in Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and elsewhere. The shift to this type of warfare aligns with the "jihadist threat" of small militia groups replacing the threat of Communism, which was largely represented by USSR-aligned governments. Massive and prolonged bombing campaigns against militia groups shouldn't be unexpected, yet they still seem to go much less noticed than do similar actions against governments, even if they are just as fatal, morally dubious, and costly.

Second, some faulty analysis results from falsely assuming an identity between the goals of U.S. allies and of the U.S. policy establishment itself. Washington of course deserves criticism for the many immoral actions taken by countries to which it provides weaponry and support. Yet it is an analytical overstep to claim that the entirety of these countries' actions simply represent Washington's true intentions that the U.S. is unable to carry out on its own because of PR optics. It should be clear by now from the public and heated fights between U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar or Canada, as well as the U.S. funding for a group affiliated with the PKK, longtime bugbear of the Turkish government, that allies held together by a bundle of shared goals may still at times find themselves with different interests and different strategic perspectives that may lead them to act not in coordination, but at odds with one another. Even the often lumped-together "Gulf Arab countries" have had a range of policy orientations toward Syria. This is not to excuse the immorality of alliances of convenience with bad actors, but rather to point out that a theory of allies' perfectly homogenous interests across the board tends to obscure more than it clarifies.

Some might point to another argument: If we misunderstood the American intervention, it is because the American media seek to hide the truth about Syria because of their single-minded focus on smear. This is a peculiar explanation. For all their faults, mainstream U.S outlets like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have done extensive reporting on the anti-ISIS coalition, including some admirable investigative work revealing both the human toll and the undercounting of deaths in U.S.

reports.[25] U.S. officials have publicly spoken with journalists about Operation Inherent Resolve and its deep military involvement in eastern Syria, including regularly with outlets like the BBC. Airwars, a transparency project based at the University of London, has done a great journalistic service by providing independent and well-verified assessments of international military actions in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently*[26] has reported extensively on the "war of annihilation" committed by the U.S. bombing campaign.

It is not the primary-source journalists who have failed to undertake their fourth-estate duties. Rather, in this case many leftist writers on Syria resemble those who scour the obscure corners of the Internet for evidence of the New World Order, while sufficient evidence of the unprecedented power of society's "cabal" of CEOs and Senators gets reported in the news every day. While latching onto every occurrence[27] that supports the thesis that the United States has been on a single-minded and undifferentiated campaign from day one to take Assad out of power at whatever cost, they ignore the many other facts working against their thesis.

In many cases, these analyses of U.S. policy in Syria merely misrepresent by omission, devoting entire articles or interviews to explicating the U.S. establishment's unquenchable thirst to oust Assad and put the rebels in power, while failing to even mention the fact of the larger U.S. bombing campaign against ISIS already many years underway.[28] Another often-used form of misrepresentation is to demonstrate the scale and ferocity of the U.S. intervention by a series of factual tidbits related to the topic, without a sense of scale, importance, or relationship between them. Take this paragraph from a recent article in by Greg Shupak in *Jacobin*:

> The U.S. admits it has between 2,000 and 4,000 American troops in Syria. Between late 2016 and May 2017, the U.S. bombed pro-government forces at least three times. The U.S.'s support for armed groups in Syria has gone far beyond its backing of Kurdish groups, as America and its conservative allies in the Middle East have supported groups fighting the Syrian government, including reactionary religious fundamentalists guilty of sectarian violence.[29]

All of these facts are true of course; they aren't pulled out of thin air. But through their list-like juxtaposition, they present a picture of the American intervention that seems to imply the anti-ISIS intervention is a minor side-project to the primary goal of overthrowing Assad via the backing of Islamist groups. In fact, the 2,000 troops acknowledged by the Pentagon in Syria are there supporting the U.S. coalition against ISIS, in cooperation with the SDF—a fairly important contextualization that gets obscured.

As another example, Shupak is technically correct that the United States has bombed government forces in Syria "at least three times." He refers to an article discussing three such attacks—the 2016 air raid in Deir Ezzor, Donald Trump's airstrike against the government Shayrat airbase following the Khan Shaykun chemical attack, and the attack on government forces in the Al-Tanf deconfliction zone in May 2017. What is not mentioned is the fact that almost all the U.S. strikes against the Assad government occurred when its forces threatened to encroach on the SDF and were not part of any effort to topple the regime.

Whether such analyses can be attributed to a genuinely naïve lack of knowledge or a concerted effort to present only a certain picture, they have contributed to the poor understanding on the left of the extensive U.S. involvement in Syria. While the debates over gas attacks, how to characterize the opposition, and the origins of ISIS continue to rage on, clear and informed discussion of the U.S. strategy of airstrikes against ISIS remains in short supply.

Loose Threads

The war in Syria is drawing to a close, and, for the near and medium term, the Assad regime looks to have won. Still, some questions about the postwar situation remain, most pressing among them the future of the Kurds and of the many Syrians who have left. Washington will have some influence on the final terms of the victory, though with the current administration in place, the left's ability to shape these terms in the next few years will remain admittedly limited.

Rojava

In Syria, the Kurdish strategy has often been called realpolitik—a fine-grained balancing act between the different powers to ensure achieving some gains in a postwar Syria. While the YPG has already conceded on the point of an independent Kurdish nation-state, they have called for a federal system that secures minority rights for Kurds and retains YPG policing of Kurdish-majority areas.[30] On the balance sheet in their favor in negotiations, the SDF currently controls roughly a quarter of the country, making it the single largest power-broker besides the regime. Furthermore, the regions they hold include strategic oil fields and breadbasket areas. The ability to reacquire access to this territory without a drawn-out fight has obvious appeal to the regime, and Assad's deputy prime minister has opened the door for discussion of Kurdish demands.[31]

The de facto Kurdish autonomous region in Syria is formally known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria but is still commonly known as Rojava. Social arrangements there have many positive aspects, including democratic structures and feminist practices. Yet, as Yasser Munif points out, there were also hundreds of other local councils practicing democratic governance in Arab-majority areas of Syria.[32] The Rojava project was able to survive and thrive initially due largely to a strategic decision on the part of the Assad regime to withdraw its military forces from Kurdish-majority areas in July 2012, to free up troops for fighting elsewhere and to placate the historically rebellious Kurdish regions.[33] This divide-and-conquer strategy worked, perhaps better than the regime could have imagined. Cooperation remained limited between Arab-majority and Kurdish-majority militias on major military offensives against the regime. The arrival of ISIS on the scene further exacerbated the split, as the group represented the primary existential threat to the Kurds in eastern Syria, while militias in the Arab-majority regions faced Assad and Russian airstrikes as a greater danger.

In the short term, adhering to the terms of the regime's divide-and-conquer strategy has been successful for the Kurds. But now, the regime looks poised to win the entire war. It is possible that the threat of YPG's military capacities on their own could compel the regime to continue with some version of a pacification. But the Assad regime's ability to tolerate a radical experiment in democracy anywhere in Syria, as it retains a tight authoritarian grip on the rest of the country, seems questionable at best. Such an arrangement will only become more difficult due to the neighborhood in which Rojava sits. As a reconsolidated Assad regime seeks to rebuild relations with its neighbors, who have already made their opposition to the Rojava project clear, it will also have a growing material interest in returning the Kurds to their pre-2011 status as fully dominated under a centralized regime.

The Kurds' territorial wins in the last several years are due in great part to their intensive four-year military alliance with the United States. While the YPG's battlefield capabilities against ISIS were enough to attract the United States to recruit them as proxy fighters, their effectiveness against the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian militaries, freed up from fighting on other fronts, as well as from potential Turkish and Iraqi pressures at the borders, seem less sure. At the very least, it seems likely that some assurances of further U.S. backing are indeed required to garner Kurds the leverage needed to tip negotiations over potential Syrian federalism in their favor.

For this reason, many leftists hope the United States stays in eastern Syria to protect the Kurds'

autonomous and democratic future. In an article in *In These Times*, Meredith Tax addresses many of the arguments used by the left to oppose interventionist policies, arguing that Washington should honor its military commitments to the Kurds to ensure the continuation of a progressive enclave faced with "jihadis and fascist states that want to destroy them."[34] Yet this is revealing of where the realpolitik strategy of the Rojava project becomes muddled.

The United States faces a great deal of pressure from both the Iraqi government and its NATO ally Turkey to discourage the creation of any sort of Kurdish territory in the region. Both of these countries have engaged in decades-long campaigns to brutally suppress movements for Kurdish autonomy in their own countries.

Essentially, the United States faces two mutually exclusive choices in Syria: abandoning the Kurds when it comes to holding up their tacit end of the bargain in the anti-ISIS coalition, or further antagonizing several of the region's major poles of power by maintaining an expensive and dangerous military presence in northeast Syria until a deal favorable to the Kurds is achieved (if it is achieved at all).

Making confident forecasts about Trump's foreign policies is a fool's errand, and Syria is no exception. On the one hand, Trump has made statements to the effect of intending to leave Syria as soon as possible, while his senior foreign policy advisers seem intent on remaining indefinitely.[35]

Yet, an example just across the border already provides grounds for the prediction that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's realpolitik may rely on an overly optimistic view of Washington's commitment to establishing a Kurdish region. The Kurds in Iraq also served as U.S. proxies against ISIS, and following the success of that military campaign, Masoud Barzani, the president of the region of Iraqi Kurdistan, held a September 2017 referendum for statehood, with the confidence that Iraqi Kurds could reap the rewards of their U.S. alliance.

In response, the Iraqi government sent troops into territories that had been held by Kurdish armed groups for three years and then expanded even further into Kurdish-held territories, seizing even the strategic Kirkuk oil fields, with the dual blessing of Iran and Turkey. In contrast to Barzani's calculations, U.S. officials publicly scolded him for holding the referendum and sat on the sidelines as the oil fields were seized.[36] Considering that so many of the same geopolitical conditions were in place in Iraq as now hold in Syria, no one should be especially surprised if the United States once again steps aside to let a central government roll over Kurdish territorial gains won with the help of U.S. weaponry, airstrikes, and training.

Of course, the U.S. military establishment has no deep interest in ensuring human rights abroad—its alliance with the Kurds had nothing to do with the democratic nature of the Rojava project and everything to do with the Kurds seeing ISIS as the primary threat, whereas Arab militias were much more reluctant to turn their guns away from Assad to fight Washington's war on ISIS.

Seen from this view, relying on an alliance with the United States to mitigate potential rollbacks in autonomy under Assad's reconsolidated Syria, with its two anti-Kurdish neighbors, seems more like a high stakes, risky gamble than shrewd realpolitik.

The Refugees, Exiles, and Emigrants

Syria has been the largest contributor to the world's worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Of the country's original population of 22 million, around 5.6 million have registered as refugees with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and another 6.1 million people are internally displaced.[37] Furthermore, these numbers may understate the number of Syrians who have fled the

country since the beginning of the conflict, as the count of refugees (defined as those officially registered with the UN under the Convention on the Status of Refugees) misses Syrians who chose not to register, reside in the United States under temporary protected status, have pending asylum applications, or live in places like the Gulf that are not signatories to any refugee conventions.[38]

The last anticipated major battle of the war—the battle for Idlib—is unlikely to end with a trickle of people fleeing. Up until now, many of the agreements negotiated to banish fighters and accused fighters from areas recaptured by the regime have sent them on buses to the rebel stronghold of Idlib. When Idlib is taken back, there will be no other "Idlib" to send them to—rather, we can expect to see another major surge of people fleeing over the borders, as many as 700,000 according to some estimates.[39]

What happens to the Syrians living outside the country once the final battles are fought? With increasing insistence, politicians in Damascus, Beirut, and Amman are claiming Syria is now a safe place for those refugees to return to. The Syrian state media have been posting photos and accounts of such returns as part of their victory lap.

For many refugees, perhaps especially for the majority residing in countries neighboring Syria, there is an ardent desire to return. Refugees in these countries face especially high barriers to accessing basic legal protections, economic opportunities, and services—a study of 400 returnees earlier this year found that lack of secure income was the primary reason for the return of 61 percent of those who came back.[40]

But there is good reason to believe that many refugees will never again live in their home country. First there is the obvious reason that at this point, some who left Syria have been living abroad for as long as seven years—enough time to find work, start a family, learn a new language, and lay down roots in a new place. Economic success abroad, for those who have found it, adds another obstacle to justifying return to a now war-ravaged country. In countries with a relatively straight-forward path to naturalization, achieving full citizenship provides yet another substantial tie to their new homes.

Many young Syrian men left primarily to flee mandatory military service. To go back and not be drafted, they must pay an $8,000 fee, quite a hefty sum for people who may be looking to return primarily for economic reasons.[41]

The regime's implementation of Law No. 10 presents another potential barrier to return. Law No. 10 of 2018 grants the government authority to confiscate and redevelop property without due process or compensation to owners, and it will be especially onerous to displaced residents who cannot return to the country to make property claims in the designated 30-day window.[42]

Beyond these practicalities, a great number of Syrians have very little faith in regime promises for amnesty, and with good reason. In areas recaptured by the regime where amnesty was supposedly implemented, returnees have been reported to face significant threats, arrests, and even death.[43]

In terms of refugees, the debate in the American left should be rather simple. In the face of continuing anti-refugee rhetoric, we should push to roll back the revised form of Trump's Muslim ban, expand the quotas for accepting refugees to the United States from Syria and other unsafe countries, and fight for an extension of Temporary Protected Status for Syrians. Where this proposal becomes more controversial is in the understanding in the pro-refugee movement of what caused Syrians to become refugees in the first place. This relies in part on an understanding of why, for many Syrians, a Syria under Assad will never again feel like a home they can return to, and an acknowledgment of the destruction Assad has wrought on his own people. It also requires an

acknowledgment that depictions painting all Syrians opposed to Assad as jihadis or jihadi-sympathizers serve as fuel to the fire driving Islamophobic anti-refugee attitudes on the right and center of the American political spectrum.

Unfortunately, Syria is unlikely to be the last civil war of its kind. Authoritarianism and strife in the region remain in ample supply and may even be growing stronger. Yet the U.S. left is growing stronger too, and may have more sway over foreign policy in the future. A clearer understanding of what happened in Syria, where our collective blind spots were, and what went so wrong is essential if the left is to have a better grasp on future conflicts.

Notes

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3. Although of course, each group's commitments to any of these principles might vary significantly.
4. Aron Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition," The Century Foundation, Oct. 17, 2017.
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7. That being said, the absolute and uninterrupted chill of the relationship has been overstated by some contemporary commentators. It is easy to forget nowadays that before the Arab Spring an Obama-brokered agreement between Syria and Israel was seen as something that could be in the cards: Seymour Hersh, "Syria Calling," *The New Yorker*. Syria was also cooperative in the initial years of Bush's "War on Terror," serving as one of the most common destinations for prisoners subjected to extraordinary rendition: Ian Cobain, "CIA rendition: more than a quarter of countries 'offered covert support,'" *Guardian,* Feb. 5, 2013.
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12. Mark Landler, "U.S. Considers Resuming Nonlethal Aid to Syrian Opposition," *New York Times,* Jan. 9, 2014.
13. Eric Schmitt, "CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition," *New York Times,* June 21, 2012; Nour Malas, "Syrian Rebels Get Missiles," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 17, 2012.

14. Aron Lund, “How Assad’s Enemies Gave Up”; C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid from CIA,” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2013.
15. Despite the persistent curiosity around the question of who funds ISIS, the answer appears to be mostly—itself. Most credible reporting points to the majority of ISIS funding coming from a combination of oil and antiquities-smuggling activities supplemented with taxation and theft from local populations in the areas it has conquered.
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17. Paul McLeary, “The Pentagon Wasted $500 Million Training Syrian Rebels. It’s About to Try Again,” *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 18, 2018.
18. Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, “Behind the Sudden Death of a $1 Billion Secret CIA War in Syria,” *New York Times,* Aug. 2, 2017.
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