

Reply to Greg Shupak

October 27, 2019



Greg Shupak and I, as he notes, differ on one key interpretation of U.S. intervention in Syria. For him, the U.S. intervention, as it shifted its focus to defeating ISIS, never meant a shift away from an anti-Assad stance; rather, it was another means to pursue it. In his analysis, the U.S. control over a vast swath of Eastern Syria, in coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), would be used in the future as a means to toppling or weakening the Assad regime. He sees the continued presence of U.S. military bases in Syria, following the defeat of ISIS, as a signal of the Washington's deep commitments to such a goal. Shupak's specific ideas of how this might be achieved are not totally clear (not that this is required, considering how unpredictable turns of events in Syria can be). But many others who share a view that the U.S. intervention in Eastern Syria has an end goal of holding onto some control in the country assert that weakening the government would be achieved by some kind of support for an autonomous region in Eastern Syria, in coordination with the SDF.

It seems to me that events of the past weeks tend to confirm the interpretation of U.S. foreign policy in Syria that I provided in my original article written months ago:

"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)."

I speculated that the late 2017 U.S.-permitted invasion of the Kurdish region of Iraq by the Iraqi government following that region's independence referendum seemed to foretell the fate of the SDF in Syria. Of course, as I write, the United States is currently engaged in a sudden and rapid withdrawal of troops from Rojava. While the outrage over the withdrawal from across the political spectrum illustrates the contingency of this outcome, it has always been hard for me to imagine a scenario where the United States stays in East Syria for the long term, for the reasons I cited in my article.

Shupak asks if I am opposed to sanctions on Syria. I am opposed to sanctions which hurt ordinary people in Syria, who wait in long lines for hours for fuel for basic needs such as cooking, heating their homes, and driving their cars. And I am certainly opposed to any blockage of aid provision, this despite many credible reports of the regime stockpiling aid provision and blocking aid provision to areas in opposition control.

However, as I wrote at the beginning of my article, I was writing not to provide a prescription but an analysis that I felt had been missing. My humanitarian opposition to sanctions, which were imposed on Syria between 2004 and 2012, does not change my interpretation that the U.S. shifted its focus away from the regime sometime around 2013/2014. That these sanctions have not been lifted since then does not surprise me, but considering their small economic impact on the U.S., I do not take their continued existence as strong evidence of the U.S. seeking to topple Assad. Similarly, expressing my opposition to the U.S. arming various sides in civil wars, a position I indeed hold, was not a goal of my article, which is why I did not mention it.

My article sought to clarify key points in the analysis of the Syrian civil war. As such, I focused on what I thought I were the most substantial and essential aspects of the war without too much undue meandering (even with my efforts to be concise, I am thankful the editors allowed me some leeway on their maximum word limit).

Shupak asks why I did not mention the sanctions. I could have mentioned the 2011 and 2012 sanctions, but it would not have added much to my already-stated point that the U.S. sought to weaken the government in the early years of the civil war. He asks why I did not mention the military bases in Syria, but it would have also merely reinforced the many other statistics I used to affirm that the U.S. was deeply involved in military action in East Syria. I will say that I am a bit surprised that Shupak sees the continued existence of bases in Syria as such clear-cut evidence of U.S. long term intentions in Syria - the defeat was so recent that I would have been hesitant to lend any interpretation to the continued presence of bases either way.

He asks why I did not mention Israel, but the same question could be asked about the involvement of the Gulf states, or Turkey, or other NATO allies in Syria to which I could have devoted a whole article alone. Besides, as I wrote, "it is an analytical overstep to claim that the entirety of [U.S. allies'] actions simply represent Washington's true intentions that the U.S. is unable to carry out on its own because of PR optics... a theory of allies' perfectly homogeneous interests across the board tends to obscure more than it clarifies." It seems to me that the past few weeks' events in Syria also confirm this analysis. In short, it does not strike me that the inclusion of any of these facts would substantially change the portrayal of U.S. involvement that I provided.

I can now better understand why Shupak's article juxtaposes various types of American involvement in Syria without much care for whether this involvement is against Assad or ISIS. It certainly makes sense if your view is that U.S. involvement against ISIS is merely a cover to later topple the government. But while the history of the Syrian civil war is still far from complete, it seems like recent events render Shupak's account increasingly untenable.