

## Neocons Cheer As Trump's Military Escalation in Syria Risks Global War

by Ben Norton via jill - *Alternet Saturday, Jun 24 2017, 4:28am*

international / prose / post

Donald Trump campaigned (inconsistently) on a pledge to pursue a foreign policy that broke with the interventionist orthodoxy in Washington. He even correctly [noted](#) that past U.S. "foreign interventions unleashed ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya."

Given the persistent hypocrisy and myriad contradictions in his campaign, it may come as no surprise that just over five months into his presidency, Trump has abandoned any pretense of resisting imperial wars. The president is now pursuing a classically militaristic approach that is strikingly similar to what his opponent, Hillary Clinton, had called for.

Trump's [new] hawkishness is most apparent in Syria, where his administration has ramped up U.S. military aggression and might be hurtling towards a direct confrontation with Iran and Russia.

Colin Kahl, a former top U.S. Middle East policy official under Obama who is by no means an anti-war stalwart, recently warned that the country is on "the path to quagmire, a possible clash with Russia and the war with Iran some in Trump's administration (and outside think tanks) want."

Numerous U.S. attacks near a military base at a border area in southeast Syria called al-Tanf risk pushing the conflict into what could well become a global war.

It is looking more and more like the U.S. is also reviving goals to divide Syria on sectarian religious and ethnic lines, in order to weaken the government and its close ally Iran.

The Carnegie Middle East Center, a centrist Pentagon-funded think tank, has even acknowledged that the Trump administration is more than willing to deprioritize the fight against ISIS to do so.

Meanwhile, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists alike are rejoicing at the Trump administration's belligerence. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the notorious Iran-contra figure [Elliott Abrams](#) applauded Trump for his "surprisingly standard foreign policy." He wrote admirably, "This is not a revolutionary administration. The broad lines of its policy fit easily within those of the last few decades."

Abrams, a posterboy for neoconservative war hawks, served as a top foreign policy official in the administrations of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. Although he was criminally convicted of misleading Congress over the Iran-contra scandal, in which the U.S. smuggled cocaine and sold weapons to far-right death squads in Latin America, he went on to join Bush's State Department, where he became an architect of the illegal U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Given Abrams' record, his celebration of Trump's policy on the Syrian-Iraqi border is one of the most chilling signs of how dangerous the escalating U.S. military intervention could be.

### Rapid escalation against Iran and Russia

The tensions in Syria erupted May 18 and carried through to June 20. In this month, the Trump

administration carried out three attacks on Syrian government-allied forces, destroyed two Iran-made drones and shot down a Syrian army warplane — the U.S. Air Force's first air-to-air engagement in 18 years.

These incidents came in the aftermath of the U.S.' launching of 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria's Shayrat airbase on April 6, which destroyed some 20 percent of the government's planes, according to the Pentagon.

When the Trump administration downed a Syrian aircraft on June 19, Russia warned it will begin to consider U.S. planes as "targets." The next day, U.S. officials accused a Russian aircraft of "provocatively" and "rapidly" flying toward an American spy plane and buzzing it within just five feet. (The Russian defense ministry denied the claims and said it was the U.S. spy plane that made "a provocative turn toward" its aircraft.)

In the meantime, the U.S. has quietly deployed [more troops](#) to southeast Syria, where it has also for the first time sent long-range rocket launchers known as high mobility artillery rocket systems, or HIMARS, which can fire missiles up to nearly 200 miles away. Though the U.S. claims to be operating within a "deconfliction zone," where it is training a band of rebels, it is reportedly operating more than 100 miles from its de facto base.

### **'Mad Dog' is calling the shots — and wants war with Iran**

President Trump has effectively [handed over power](#) to the Department of Defense to set his foreign policy and carry out major operations without his approval. "What I do is I authorize my military," Trump declared in April. "We have given them total authorization, and that's what they're doing." A White House official told the Los Angeles Times that this policy has enabled the military to take a "more aggressive approach."

The generals are in charge, while Trump golfs at his Mar-a-Lago resort. Secretary of Defense James Mattis (known by the moniker "Mad Dog," which he earned while presiding over the razing of the Iraqi city of Fallujah) and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, another former four-star general, are calling the shots. They are supplemented by Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, an ex-general, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford.

Naturally, the Pentagon's go-to solution to foreign-policy problems has been even greater military force. It is presently moving to send 3,000 to 5,000 new troops to Afghanistan, where the U.S. has been waging a war for 16 years that has brought only misery, destruction and death to the country's weary people.

The defining characteristic of the Trump administration's foreign policy from the beginning has been virulent aggression against Iran. Mattis has for decades depicted the country as public enemy number-one.

This staunch anti-Iran posturing is a key reason for the Trump administration's record-shattering \$110 billion arms deal with the draconian Saudi absolute monarchy. While Iran is pouring resources into the fight against ISIS, the Trump administration seems more intent on ramping up tensions with Iran than squashing the genocidal Salafi-jihadist group.

### **De-prioritizing the fight against ISIS**

A report by the Carnegie Middle East Center, an influential U.S. government-funded think-tank,

noted that the U.S. does not want ISIS to be defeated if Iran and its allies, the Syrian government and Hezbollah, are the ones to do it.

In the final paragraph of a research report, the Carnegie Middle East Center's senior editor Michael Young observed, "the greatest paradox, one nobody in Washington will mention, is that in the greater game between Iran and the U.S., the Americans do not want the Islamic State in Deir Ezzor to be defeated by anyone but themselves—certainly not by Tehran's allies."

The report added: "[the U.S.] seeks to expand its sway along the Syrian-Iraqi border, which is unacceptable to Iran. No wonder. The standoff in southeastern Syria only really makes sense if we assume that Washington also intends to hinder Iranian moves and gain leverage that potentially allows it to shape a political endgame in the Syrian conflict."

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, of which the Middle East Center is a part, is hardly an anti-war bastion. It is funded by the U.S. government, along with other American allies and large corporations. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense and Defense Intelligence Agency provided huge funds to the think tank, according to its annual report, along with the U.K. Department for International Development, the Ford Foundation, the Japanese embassy, and the foundation of British-Syrian billionaire Asfari, a top funder of the Syrian opposition.

The Trump administration's three attacks on Syrian government-allied forces in southeast Syria took place near al-Tanf, a critically important region along the Syrian-Iraqi border. The U.S. has created a base at al-Tanf, where it is training Sunni militants as a supposed proxy force against ISIS.

If the Syrian government retakes this strategically significant area, its ally Iran will have a land path from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon that leads straight through the cities of Baghdad, Ramadi, Damascus and Beirut, reestablishing the so-called Axis of Resistance against American empire and Israeli aggression. The U.S. and its Sunni allies are hellbent on preventing this scenario from taking form.

In order to weaken Iran and the Syrian government, it seems that the Trump administration is intent on reviving the imperial dream of dividing Syria along sectarian lines. The spearhead of its divide-and-conquer policy is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Syrian militia comprised primarily of Kurdish fighters whose situation is precarious at best.

### **'The risk of sliding into a big war is rising'**

The dangers of the Trump administration's policy spiraling into a hot war with Iran or even Russia can hardly be underestimated. And the threat festers while conspiracy-minded Democrats obsessively depict Russia as a foreign bogeyman controlling Trump's every move.

A former top foreign policy official in the Barack Obama administration has candidly acknowledged these perils, noting that Trump's policy in Syria bears striking similarities to the kind counseled by neoconservatives and liberal interventionists over the years.

"Watch Syria. The risk of sliding into a big war is rising," warned [Colin Kahl](#) in a series of tweets on June 19.

During the Obama era, Kahl served as deputy assistant to the president and national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden. While in government, he supported the Syrian armed opposition, like so many of his colleagues. These days, however, Kahl is faced with the dire consequences of direct American intervention in Syria, and he is terrified of what he sees.

"The days of the [anti-]ISIS campaign happening in strategically marginal parts of Syria are over. The two halves of the Syrian war are merging," Kahl wrote.

When pressured by Charles Lister, an analyst who has long lobbied for U.S.-led regime change in Syria and who works for the Middle East Institute, a think tank funded by the U.S. State Department and Gulf monarchies, Kahl replied, "My personal view? We shouldn't be at Tanf. We set up an Alamo we now have to defend."

During the presidential campaign, Trump's supporters touted his flirtations with anti-interventionist rhetoric to increase his appeal. Trump played off this perception to cast himself as the anti-establishment candidate contrasted with Hillary Clinton, who even the New York Times (which endorsed her) acknowledged was the most hawkish candidate in the race.

But some warned from the beginning that Trump was inconsistent and contradictory: he would criticize the Iraq war one moment and in the next, insist he would have perpetually occupied the Middle Eastern nation and stolen its oil. He condemned the disasters created by past U.S. military intervention, yet declared he would intentionally kill the family members of extremist Islamist militants (a war crime).

More than 100 days into the Trump era, the president has set the U.S. on the course for another disastrous conflict, this time with two of the most powerful militaries in the world. As Trump disengages from his administration's foreign policy and gives the military free rein, the hawks who would welcome such a scenario are filling the void.

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