



# Abandoning Syria hands the Middle East to US adversaries

April 10, 2018 **Stephen Blank** *The Hill*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Military Innovation; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations

American forces are building military bases in Syria and providing vital humanitarian assistance to embattled minorities there, and yet President Trump is insisting that troops pull out. Doing so hands Syria to Isis, Iran, and Russia in defiance of Trump's other Middle Eastern policies proclaiming Iran an enemy and U.S. policy that aims to thwart Russia.

However, if we are to stay in Syria we must understand what that entails. In the Syrian case under both Presidents Obama and Trump the U.S. has conspicuously failed to act according to strategic rationale. This strategic ineptitude stems from the fact that we never developed a viable or credible political instrument as the basis for a future Syrian government.

This missing crucial element means that our forces, however noble their mission, can only achieve strategic failure. As long as we have no alternative to the war, Bashar Assad we will not be able to exert any positive influence on Syrian affairs or the region as Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara are now functioning as allies.

So while Trump's statements — coming out of nowhere — can be reinterpreted as bearing some logic, they actually represent graphic testimony to the strategic incompetence of Trump and the White House.

What has been happening in Syria is unspeakable. Assad and his helpers have repeatedly used chemical warfare on innocent civilians. Assad's guilt as a war criminal is clear and is a telling measure of the irresolution of international political and judicial organizations that are not even considering measures towards indicting him.

But beyond that Moscow, if not Tehran, is very complicit in his chemical warfare attacks. Of course, we have seen in the U.K. just how little regard Moscow has for the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1925, to which it is a signatory.

Adding to this is the fact that Russia sold chemical agents to Syria and remains its defender in the UN. As Michael Weiss has just written, "Strange how the opposition always manages to gas itself. It has super-secret stockpiles of chemical weapons, yet never uses them against the regime or Iranian militias even in less desperate times. And Russia always knows in advance when a "provocation" is coming."

Furthermore, beyond the scourge of chemical weapons used against innocents abroad there is reason to suspect, on the basis of a recent book by Raymond Zilinskas and Phillipe Mauger, that Russia's biological warfare program, organized despite the USSR's adherence to international treaties banning such weapons, continues to exist and may be flourishing.

Therefore, there is an urgent need not only to put Assad, and by extension Putin, in the dock as war criminals — and they have amply justified that appellation due to their conduct in Syria and Ukraine — there is an equally urgent need to restore the principles that treaties must be observed and that governments are not only accountable to their people but to the international community as a whole.

If we are to further establish those principles, it is necessary to find a political movement, organization, and leadership that can credibly serve as a counter to Assad in Syria.

Abandoning Syria to Assad — ISIS' best recruiting symbol — Iran, and Russia merely guarantees future war. For that reason, the U.S. forces supporting those who are hostile to Isis, Iran, and/or Russia are allies whose support we need and whose security depends on our resolution. But the harsh logic of international affairs dictates that troops not be committed for political objectives that are unattainable from the outset.

The new team coming into the Trump administration should realize that Jared Kushner's dalliance with Mohammad Bin Salman and the Saudis — let alone a peace plan for Israel and the Palestinians — will remain words written in sand if we cannot find and cultivate a credible alternative to Assad who must be held accountable for his crimes. Otherwise, not only will others repeat those crimes in the Middle East and elsewhere, the entire region will also not achieve any kind of equilibrium, not to mention peace. Iran, Isis, and Russia will be emboldened. Israel and our allies in the Gulf will be further isolated and disenchanted, and the U.S. will continue to shy away from realizing whatever interests it proclaims to be operative in the Middle East.

It is a tall order for us to have to retrieve our position now after years of incompetent policymaking. But if not now when? If not the U.S., then which nation will assert power in this violent neighborhood and to what ends?

*Stephen Blank, Ph.D., is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, focused on the geopolitics and geostrategy of the former Soviet Union, Russia and Eurasia. He is a former professor of Russian National Security Studies and National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. He is also a former MacArthur fellow at the U.S. Army War College.*