

The US Occupation of Syria That ‘Never Happened’

With billions of dollars’ worth of weapons sent and thousands of US soldiers stationed, how was the myth of US non-intervention in Syria created, asks IAN SINCLAIR

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“IT never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn’t happening. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest. The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them.”

Sadly, Harold Pinter’s [Nobel Prize for Literature lecture](#) continues to be as relevant today as when he gave it in 2005.

And nothing confirms the accuracy of the British playwright’s incisive words better than the ongoing US intervention in Syria.

“Do you think the presence of the US military in Syria is illegal?” Chinese reporter Edward Xu asked Faran Haq, deputy spokesperson for the UN secretary-general, during a March press conference.

[Haq’s jaw-dropping reply?](#) “There’s no US armed forces inside of Syria... I believe there’s military activity. But, in terms of a ground presence in Syria, I’m not aware of that.”

Back in the real world, US troops have been on the ground in Syria since 2015.

In a 2017 briefing with journalists US army Major General James B Jarrad, who was the then head of the US-led special operations taskforce in Syria and Iraq, let slip there were 4,000 US troops in Syria, before backtracking.

Today, most reports estimate the number of US troops at around 900, though in March Associated Press noted there was also “an undisclosed number of contractors” and US

special forces who are not included in the official count.

Part of the confusion is likely because senior US officials deliberately misled the Donald Trump administration — which was keen to withdraw troops — on the size of the US military footprint in Syria.

“We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there,” James Jeffrey explained in [an interview with the Defense One website](#) in 2020 after he had stepped down as US special representative for Syria engagement.

Whatever the true number is, in 2018 New Yorker magazine reported there are 12 US bases in Syria, including four airfields — all in the east of the country.

Speaking in May 2022, Joshua Landis, professor of Middle Eastern studies at the University of Oklahoma, explained the US, working with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), controls around 25 per cent of Syria — an area about the size of Croatia, the New Yorker estimated.

There have been occasional attacks on the US forces there too. In January 2019, four US personnel were killed and in March this year, a drone attack on a US base killed one US contractor and wounded seven US troops.

Other than reports of assassinations of high-level ISIS leaders, I’m not aware of any serious independent investigation into the impact the US troops are having on the local population while in Syria.

Why are US forces on the ground?

An April Agence France-Presse report printed in the Guardian repeated the US government’s initial justification, noting: “US troops remain in Syria... as part of a US-led coalition battling the remnants of [Isis], which remains active in Syria and neighbouring Iraq.”

However, with the military campaign against Isis “nearly completed,” in September 2018 the Washington Post noted the US government “had redefined its goals” in Syria.

These now included “the exit of all Iranian military and proxy forces from Syria, and establishment of a stable, non-threatening government acceptable to all Syrians and the international community.”

Trump himself suggested another reason for the US occupation of Syria.

“We are leaving soldiers to secure the oil,” he stated in 2019. “And we may have to fight for the oil. It’s OK. Maybe somebody else wants the oil, in which case they have a hell of a fight. But there’s massive amounts of oil.”

Some analysts question whether this is correct, though the respected energy expert Daniel Yergin did explain oil “was very important to the Assad regime before the civil war because it produced 25 per cent of the total government revenues.”

According to a March 2018 New York Times report the US forces control most of Syria’s oil wealth, with influential Republican Senator Lindsey Graham arguing by continuing “to maintain control of the oil fields in Syria, we will deny Assad and Iran a monetary windfall.”

Of course, this also gives the US significant leverage with the Syrian government and its international supporters moving forward.

Furthermore, Western media reports rarely consider whether the US occupation is legal, even though their presence is opposed by the Syrian government and not authorised by the UN.

Like the US-Britain-enabled mass slaughter in Yemen, the US occupation of Syria is hiding in plain sight.

There are news reports published in the mainstream media about the US intervention in Syria, but there has never been the kind of sustained, searching front-page coverage the issue deserves.

As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argued in 1988's groundbreaking work on the political economy of the mass media, *Manufacturing Consent*, "A careful reader looking for a fact can sometimes find it with diligence and a sceptical eye tells us nothing about whether that fact received the attention and context it deserved, whether it was intelligible to the reader or effectively distorted or suppressed."

A similar US-British government-friendly amnesia courses through the broader coverage and discussion of the Western involvement in the Syrian war.

In February 2017, Dr Jamie Allinson, a senior lecturer in politics and international relations at the University of Edinburgh, argued it is a myth that "the US has pursued a policy of regime change to topple the Ba'athist Assad regime."

The Middle East specialist went on to make the extraordinary claim that "the amount of weaponry and ammunition actually supplied by the US has been highly limited and the precondition of its supply was that it be used against Isis rather than Assad."

Similarly, two years earlier [a Guardian editorial](#) referred to the West's "refusal to intervene against Bashar al-Assad," while in 2016 Paul Mason, then at Channel 4, blindly asserted the US had "stood aloof from the Syrian conflict."

Contrast these claims with statements from key figures in the US government and mainstream press reports.

"Washington did provide aid on a large scale to Syrian armed opposition," Steven Simon, the senior director for the Middle East and North Africa at the US National Security Council during the Obama administration, explained in 2018.

While the Pentagon ran a programme to train rebels to fight Isis, according to a January 2016 New York Times report, the CIA ran a separate, larger programme "which focuses on rebel groups fighting the Syrian military."

According to reports in the New York Times, the US has been involved in helping to send arms to the Syrian opposition forces since at least mid-2012.

Citing US officials, in June 2015 [the Washington Post revealed](#): "The CIA has trained and equipped nearly 10,000 fighters sent into Syria over the past several years," spending £1 billion a year, making it "one the agency's largest covert operations."

Robert Malley, the White House co-ordinator on the Middle East, north Africa, and Gulf region in the Obama administration, made the obvious point to the Real News Network the same year: “We became part of the regime change — by definition, even if we denied it — once we’re supplying the armed opposition which had only one goal... which was to topple the regime.”

US secretary of state John Kerry was [even clearer in September 2013](#): “President Obama’s policy is that Assad must go.”

No doubt the US government is very happy with the media and academic-fuelled memory-holing of US intervention in Syria and beyond.

After all, it creates the unscrutinised political space for the US and its allies, including Britain, to project military and political power with minimal pushback from the general public and civil society.

And while the officials, journalists and academics that have got US intervention in Syria so wrong usually end up “failing upwards,” those on the business end of the Western military machine aren’t so lucky.

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