

US troops would not be targets if they left unwelcome region

OPINION

MORNING STAR – The killing of three US soldiers along the Jordan-Syria border is inseparable from the war in Gaza. It risks a spiralling Middle East war, a risk heightened by the reflex blaming of Iran and the clamour for revenge driven by hawkish US politicians in an election year. Attacks on US forces will always be presented in mass media as unprovoked. British politicians too will depict them as acts of illegal terrorism that need to be punished to shore up the “international rules-based order”. We should therefore be clear: US troops would not be under attack in the Middle East if they were not stationed in the Middle East, often against the wishes of the host countries.

Sunday’s attack was launched by a group called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. US troops in Iraq have come under fire dozens of times since Israel’s invasion of Gaza began.

What won’t get a mention in most media reports is that the Iraqi government has told them to leave. Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said earlier this month that their “destabilising” presence incited spill-over attacks from the Gaza war that could escalate into a new civil war in the long-suffering country.

It’s not even the first time. The Iraqi parliament voted to expel all US troops more than four years ago after the US illegally murdered Iranian general Qassim Soleimani while he was visiting Iraq as its government’s guest. Stationing your troops in a country against its wishes is not upholding an “international rules-based order” — it is an act of contempt for international law.

Tower 22, where the three US soldiers were killed, is close to the intersection of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq and is described as a “critical logistical base for US forces in Syria”. US forces are certainly not in Syria at its government’s invitation. Officially, 900 troops remain there to prevent a revival of the Islamic State terror group.

Ex-president Donald Trump was more honest when he admitted they were there “only for the oil,” and Syrian authorities have complained that the US illegally exports about 80 percent of the country’s oil output through contracts signed with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast.

It is true that Iran has links to many armed groups in the region, with the spread of Iran-backed militias in Iraq one of the many unintended consequences of Britain and the US’s unprovoked attack on the latter.

But if the Middle East and North Africa have been flooded with weapons, it is not primarily by Iran.

The wanton destruction of Libya by NATO powers in 2010–11 saw groups seize stockpiles of weapons and ammo that were then sold abroad.

The US threw lorryloads of armaments into the Syrian war, admitting that many of the recipients ended up aligning with ISIS. At the weekend, the *New York Times* reported that a fair proportion of Hamas’s arsenal in Gaza is actually Israeli in origin.

The way to stop attacks like this prompting a downward spiral is to work for peace.

Israel’s allies need to cut off the weapons and logistical support enabling its Gaza genocide, which is the cause of the current escalation in attacks on Western forces and Israel-linked shipping.

The US should be pressed to respect international law and withdraw its troops from Iraq and Syria, where they are not welcome.

And we should call time on an arms trade that spreads murder and mayhem throughout the world, routinely blowing up in the faces of the countries that provide these arms to a staggering array of customers in pursuit of short-term outcomes in conflicts like those in Libya or Syria, without thought of what may follow.



The map shows the strategic location of the US military base known as Tower 22 in northeastern Jordan near the Syrian and Iraqi borders that was hit by a drone strike on January 28, 2024, killing three American soldiers and injuring more than 40 others.

Bring American forces home from Iraq and Syria now



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Scholar

OPINION

The drone attack on Sunday that killed three US service members at an outpost in Jordan near the Syria border is more likely to increase rather than decrease US military involvement in the region.

This is unfortunate, and doubly so coming at a time when the Biden administration was showing signs of considering a withdrawal of the 900 US troops in Syria and 2,500 in Iraq. Just last week, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin intimated that a joint US-Iraqi review might lead to a drawdown of at least some of the troops in Iraq. Other reporting points to discussions within the administration about possibly removing the troops now in Syria.

It is unclear why the administration chose this time to consider what was already a long-overdue withdrawal of these troops. The answer probably involves the upsurge in regional violence stemming from Israel’s devastating assault on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and associated anger against the United States for its backing of Israel. Since the Israeli assault began, US military installations in Iraq have been attacked more than 60 times and those in Syria more than 90 times.

The attacks underscore how much these residual US deployments have entailed costs and risks far out of proportion to any positive gains they can achieve. They have been sitting-duck targets within easy reach of militias and other elements wishing to make a violent anti-US statement. Even without deaths, US service members have paid a price, such as in the form of traumatic brain injuries from missile attacks.

The now-familiar tit-for-tat sequence in which American airstrikes against militias in Iraq or Syria alternate with more militia attacks on the US installations illustrates a perverse form of mission creep. Whatever the original mission of the US troop presence itself becomes the main concern. The tit-for-tats also carry the risk of escalation into a larger conflict.

This weekend’s attack just across the border in Jordan is likely to become part of the same risk-laden sequence. A White House statement promised to “hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner our choosing”.

This will lead the administration to shelve for the time being any ideas it had about bringing home the troops — out of fear of showing weakness amid the inevitable criticism from domestic political opponents. The better course would be to interpret the attack as one more demonstration of how the troop presence in Syria and Iraq represents a needless vulnerability for the US that ought to be ended sooner rather than later.

The official rationale for the presence on both those countries is to prevent a rise of the group known as Daesh or ISIS. But the motivations have always involved more than that. The presence in Iraq is, in some respects, a legacy of the US war begun there in 2003, which has imparted the sense of ownership that often follows a large-scale military intervention. The fixation with Iran and a desire to match Iranian presence and influence in these countries have constituted another motivation. As for ISIS, although it has shown resilience, it is nowhere near what it was in 2014 when



A US soldier (L) stands near a military vehicle during a patrol near the Syrian-Turkish border in Syria’s northeastern Hasakah province on August 21, 2022.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP

it ruled a de facto mini-state across much of western Iraq and northeastern Syria. If the group ever were to begin approaching that status again, much more than the small US contingents in Syria and Iraq would be needed to counter it. To those who might argue that ISIS already is resurgent, one is entitled to ask exactly what good the presence of those contingents is doing in keeping ISIS down.

With regard to any armed group, the foremost US concern ought to be not how the group plays in some local conflict but rather the risk of it striking US interests, either at home or abroad. In that regard, the most relevant fact, repeatedly demonstrated with other groups in other places, is that anger at a foreign military presence is one of the chief motivations for attacks.

To the extent that ISIS has been kept down, this is partly due to popular opposition in Iraq and Syria to the group’s brutal methods that it displayed when it had its mini-state. It is

partly due to the efforts of security forces in those two countries. And it is partly due to the efforts of the foreign state most extensively involved in those countries — Iran.

Iran is very much an enemy of ISIS. It has been a victim of highly lethal ISIS attacks within Iran, including bombings in the heart of Tehran in 2017 and, earlier this month, an attack on a memorial ceremony in the city of Kerman that killed nearly 100 Iranians. Iran was a major player in the earlier efforts to undo the ISIS mini-state.

Combating ISIS is a shared interest of Iran and the United States, as illustrated by the United States allegedly sharing — quite properly, in conformity with the duty to warn — information about the planned ISIS attack in Kerman. It would be in US interests to have Iran continue to do the heavy lifting in holding down ISIS — and to have Iran, not the United States, risk any resulting reprisals.

The article first appeared on *Responsible Statecraft*.