

In Syria “Withdrawal,” Less is Probably More

When US president Donald Trump announced his plan to relocate a few dozen US soldiers in Syria — getting them out of the way of a pending Turkish invasion — the Washington establishment exploded in rage at what it mis-characterized as a US “withdrawal” from Syria.

Instead of fighting that mis-characterization, Trump embraced it, pretending that an actual withdrawal was in progress and announcing on October 9 that “we’re bringing our folks back home. ”

If he’s telling the truth, hooray! But so far as I can discern, no, he isn’t telling the truth.

Since taking office (after campaigning on getting the US out of military quagmires in the Middle East and Central Asia), Trump has boosted US troop levels in Syria from 500 or fewer under Barack Obama to at least 2,000 and possibly as many as 4,000.

Even at its most ambitious, the supposed US “withdrawal” from Syria consisted of moving a few hundred soldiers across the border into Iraq, from which they could launch operations in Syria at will.

The Iraqi government objected to hosting more US troops on its soil, so now the plan has changed to deploying elements of an armored brigade combat team (“less than a battalion,” so call it “less than a thousand troops” depending on what kind of battalion) to protect Syrian oil fields from the Islamic State (and from Syria’s own government).

Exactly how many US soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines were in Syria prior to the supposed withdrawal? How many are there now? How many will be there by the end of the year?

That’s hard to say with any exactitude. Over the last several years (and not just on Trump’s watch), the US government’s troop level claims have become less specific and more general, less matters of public record and more notional state secrets.

But so far, according to those claims, Trump has escalated US involvement in every conflict he inherited from Obama, even after promising to do the opposite and even while pretending to do the opposite.

If past performance is an indicator of future results, what’s going on in Syria isn’t a US withdrawal at all. Instead of US forces departing the country, more troops and heavier weapons seem to be flowing into the country (and the region, including B-1B bombers to Saudi Arabia).

Will Trump's non-interventionist supporters finally notice or admit that, as usual, his rhetoric and his actions don't match? Fat chance.