

# The Middle East's Tinderbox Is Heating Up Again

There are danger signs all over the region, and Trump seems totally unprepared.

A Syrian man rides a motorcycle past a destroyed building in an area that was hit by a reported airstrike in the district of Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib province on Tuesday.

Zein Al-Rifai/AFP/Getty Images

After a monthslong stretch of merely sporadic violence and simmering tensions, the Middle East seems on the verge of another fiery eruption, and there are no outside powers with the interest or leverage to douse the flames.

The smoke is starting to billow from three well-worn hot spots.

First, there is Idlib province in northern Syria, on the Turkish border, home to 3 million civilians—half of them refugees displaced by war from other parts of the country—and roughly 70,000 anti-regime rebels, many of them jihadis. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has vowed to wipe out all anti-regime forces in air and ground campaigns that will unavoidably kill thousands of civilians, a fact that hasn't bothered him in previous assaults. His allies, the Russians and Iranians, say they will help, and in fact the bombing has begun.

Meanwhile, Turkey has set up watchtowers within Idlib and warned Assad against an incursion, saying that crossing into Idlib would constitute a "red line," though it's unclear what that means. At the same time, the Turks have closed their border to refugees or jihadis who are seeking to flee the impending mayhem.

Deborah Amos, a veteran Middle East reporter for NPR, calls the coming clash "the last worst battle of the war." Idlib, she said in an email, is "the final refuge for civilians forced out of Aleppo, Douma, and Ghouta," and, if Assad's plans are played out, it will likely be the site of "a catastrophic humanitarian crisis."

On Monday, President Trump tweeted:

*President Bashar al-Assad of Syria must not recklessly attack Idlib Province. The Russians and Iranians would be making a grave humanitarian mistake to take*

*part in this potential human tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of people could be killed. Don't let that happen!*

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 3, 2018

It was a bizarre missive. Telling Assad that he must not “recklessly” attack Idlib suggests that it might be all right to attack the province deliberately. And his kicker (“Don’t let that happen!”) is the cry of an onlooker, as if the United States has no stake in what’s about to happen, no political or military influence to tilt the course of events.

In fact, we *don't* have much influence and never had very much, even when whole divisions of U.S. armed forces prowled the Middle East and seasoned commanders and diplomats rallied to dampen, deter, or defuse acts of aggression. The Trump administration’s recent efforts have been ephemeral at best. Joshua Landis, professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma and a noted Syria specialist, said in an email, “The U.S. made similar statements before the Deraa offensive—the last province to fall several months ago—but did nothing when Syria and Russia pushed ahead.”

Whether or not the dilemmas are resolved, the prognosis is grim.

In the region’s previous eruptions, outside powers—whether the United States, Russia, the United Nations, the Arab League, or some combination of actors—have sometimes tried to step in to quell the violence. Now these powers have limited leverage or mixed motives. Turkey might seem to be an obvious object of diplomatic pressure, either to open its borders or to prepare to repel the Syrian-Russian assault. But its relations with NATO allies are frayed, its appetite for refugees is nil, and it considers Russia a burgeoning ally. That new relationship might prove productive in broaching a peaceful settlement, but, as Landis has tweeted, the two countries’ interests are at odds in this conflict: Russia wants Assad to win, and the battle of Idlib might put him over the top; Turkey has no love for the jihadis, but it wants above all to keep hundreds of thousands more Syrians—whatever their affiliations or lack thereof—from pouring across its border.

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The second site of looming conflict is Iraq—or, more precisely, Iran’s growing influence of, and expansion into, Iraq. On Friday, Reuters reported that Iran is supplying ballistic missiles to its allied Shiite militias in Iraq. These missiles have the range to strike Israel, Saudi Arabia, and U.S. forces in the region.

It could well be that the motive here is strictly to *deter* those countries from attacking Iran. (If they strike Iran, Iran strikes them.) But that doesn’t make the situation any less fraught with danger. The annals of history are blood-soaked with nations brandishing offensive weapons for defensive purposes, then getting clobbered or otherwise sucked into a war because some opposing nation interprets the situation differently.

But there’s something strange about this story: As of mid-afternoon Tuesday, Reuters remains the only news agency to report the presence of the missiles. Spokespeople for the Iraqi government denounce the story as “without evidence” but stop short of denying it outright. The Iranians have said nothing, but whether or not the story is true, they might want the world to believe it is in order to give them a free deterrent. (They should be careful, though: In 2002-03, Saddam Hussein helped spread the myth that he had weapons of mass destruction, believing it would deter the Americans from invading; the ploy backfired, to say the least.)

This leads to the region’s third cauldron of conflict: It is not far-fetched to wonder if the story is untrue and, if that turns out to be the case, to speculate that the Israelis planted it in order to provide a pretext for attacking Iran’s military sites in Iraq—of which there are many, regardless of whether they harbor ballistic missiles.

Several news agencies have reported in recent days that Israel is preparing to launch such attacks. Israel has long been concerned about the emergence of a “Shiite crescent,” one contiguous landmass from Iran through Iraq to Syria and perhaps beyond. The presence of ballistic missiles in Iraq—with the range to hit Israel and Saudi Arabia—might inflame those fears.

In that sense, it doesn’t matter whether the story about Iranian missiles in Iraq is true: If it is true, it may prompt a preemptive strike by Israel; if it isn’t true, it may help legitimize a *preventive* strike by Israel, in anticipation of such deliveries.

The question is whether, given the American presence in Iraq, Israel would go

this far without Washington's permission. According to Israel's public broadcast network KAN, U.S. officials have flashed Tel Aviv a big red light, telling Israeli defense officials, "Leave Iraq to us."

It is not clear from this report whether the big stoplight that was flashed came from the Pentagon, the State Department, or the White House—or whether Trump might be persuaded by his friend, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to change the light to green.

How Trump deals with the array of renewed conflicts erupting in the region is another matter entirely. His administration has no policy beyond vague bromides, no *strategy* by even the loosest definition of that word, and no diplomatic tactics up its sleeve. If past crises are precedent, it is unlikely that the National Security Council has held a Cabinet-level meeting on the issues at hand.

Juicy excerpts from Bob Woodward's new book, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, appeared in Tuesday's Washington Post. The revelations are gripping, though not terribly surprising: Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis told a friend that Trump has the understanding of "a fifth- or sixth-grader." White House chief of staff John Kelly described him as "unhinged" and "an idiot." A few aides took dangerous policy papers off his desk to keep him from signing them. And many of these remarks were prompted by fairly simple matters. The Middle East is the opposite of simple. Achieving peace is almost impossible (and Trump thought it would be so easy, he gave the portfolio to Jared Kushner).

In most cases, the best the United States—or any outside power—can do is to blow out a few of the matches lighting up the landscape. Even really smart people who know what they're doing have a hard time of it. An unhinged idiot with the mentality of a sixth-grader should be kept away. Let him play golf as often as he wants.

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Source: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/09/syria-iran-iraq-the-middle-east-looks-set-to-explode-again.html>

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