The intervention of outside powers could leave the region as devastated as Central Europe in the 17th century.

CHARLES GLASS
A COUNTRY HOUSE IN THE HILLS WEST OF DAMASCUS symbolizes for me the futility of Syria's war, seven years old this spring. A friend had saved for years to build the chalet, where he and his wife and children enjoyed weekends and holidays. Rebels broke into the empty house at the war's outset to fire from the roof at Syrian soldiers. The troops responded with automatic weapons and mortar rounds that set the house ablaze. The rebels fled, the house burned, and neither side offered compensation.

I noticed on regular visits to Damascus the evolution of my friend's perspective. He directed his anger first at the soldiers for overreacting, then at the rebels for invading his house without permission or the possibility of defending it. As the war progressed, he chose to forget the house, just as he tried to ignore the war. That house represents Syria, its inhabitants at the mercy of forces they cannot control. My friend lingers on in Damascus to run the family business, but his wife and children have joined the mass exodus of Syrians overseas.

Many Syrians among the 5 million or so who escaped hope to return when the war ends. It should be over, but it isn't. Instead, Syria's skies have become a shooting gallery for Kurds hitting Turkish helicopters, Israelis downing Iranian drones, a Russian Su-25 succumbing to jihadi surface-to-air missiles. On the ground, Syria has long since slipped into the Lebanese trap of shifting shapes, altering alliances, and outside interference.

Lebanon's civil war lasted 15 years, a precedent that points to another eight for Syria. The antagonists in Lebanon at the outset in April 1975 were the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Christian Phalange Party. No one then foresaw that Israeli tanks would roll into Beirut seven years later, or that US Marines and America's Mediterranean fleet would become part of the equation. In Lebanon, the conflict evolved into a hydra-headed monster to become, in Hobbes's famous phrase, a war of all against all: right against left, Syrians against Muslims, Christians against Syrians, Israelis against Palestinians, Palestinians against one another, Druze against Maronites, Israelis against Shiites, and Shiites and Druze against Americans, ad infinitum. The fighting ended with a foreign-brokered agreement in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989. Along the way, 150,000 out of 3 million Lebanese died; many more suffered physical and psychic wounds; and perhaps a quarter of the population fled.

Lebanon then, like Syria now, confirmed Nuremberg prosecutor Hartley Shawcross's observation: "It is the crime of war which is at once the object and the parent of the other crimes." The defeat of the rebels in Aleppo, Syria's commercial center, in December 2016, along with the Assad regime's subsequent territorial gains and the impending elimination of the Islamic State's territorial base in Syria and Iraq, implied a denouement. Yet the war is flying along on its second wind: Turkey is attacking the Syrian Kurds; the United States has promised to establish a 30,000-strong Border Security Force of Kurdish warriors and Arab tribes in the northeast to "contain Iran"; Israeli Prime Minis-
clear whether the two sides will, as good NATO allies, cooperate or fight each other for Manbij and the rest of the northeast.

Syria’s fate, like Lebanon’s following the Israeli invasion of 1982, has fallen into the hands of foreigners. Russians, Iranians, Americans, and Turks, and to a lesser extent Saudis and Qataris, are determining the course of events there. In Sochi, Astana, and Geneva, Syrian supporters and some opponents of the government argue about their future—but Russia and the United States make the significant decisions. Syria is little more than a host to conflicts between Turks and Kurds, the United States and Iran, Israel and Hezbollah, and the big one: the United States and Russia.

Rather than encourage US-Russian agreement to end the war, the deep thinkers in Washington and Mar-a-Lago are urging the United States to wade deeper into the swamp. Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst and Bill Clinton’s director for Persian Gulf affairs at the National Security Council, is one of the few commentators to admit that Syria is a means to an end. In a strongly argued series on the American Enterprise Institute’s website, Pollack advocates using Syria as the most effective arena to hurt Iran. There are, he writes, “(1) places where they [the Iranians] are vulnerable and where we can cause more harm to them than they can do to us, [and] (2) places where our allies are vulnerable and need help to fend off an Iranian challenge.” Noting that “Syria is the best example of the first category,” Pollack suggests “ramping up American covert assistance to the Syrian opposition to try to bleed the Assad regime and its Iranian backers over time, exactly the way that the United States backed the Afghan Mujahideen as they bled the Soviets in Afghanistan—or as the Russians and Chinese did to the United States in Vietnam.”

For the Trump administration to follow Pollack’s advice, it would need to ignore the consequences of the examples he cites. The Russians and Chinese bled the United States in Vietnam, but the benefits to them were few. The United States is now doing at least as well in Vietnam as either Russia or China. “U.S.-Vietnam bilateral trade has grown from $451 million in 1995 to nearly $52 billion in 2016,” notes the State Department on its website. “In 2016, Vietnam was America’s fastest growing export market.” In Afghanistan, the mujahideen proved more failure than success for both Americans and Afghans. Although the Soviets withdrew, the mujahideen’s relentless civil wars reduced Kabul to rubble, brought in the Taliban to impose order, and produced Al Qaeda and its 9/11 attacks. If this is what Washington wants out of Syria, it’s on the right track.

The urge to hit Iran in Syria calls to mind an argument made, and heeded, 16 years ago, that “the option that makes the most sense is for the United States to launch a full-scale invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam, eradicate his weapons of mass destruction, and rebuild Iraq as a prosperous and stable society for the good of the United States, Iraq’s own people and the entire region.” Americans know where that advice led the country. The author? Kenneth Pollack.

By the time the Treaty of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years’ War in 1648, the French, Danes, Swedes, and Ottomans had all joined the fray. When it ended, 8 million people were dead. Syria has lost half a million to date, but the continued squabbling of outside powers threatens to dwarf that number and leave the country—and possibly the region—as devastated as Central Europe in the 17th century.

Charles Glass, ABC News’s chief Middle East correspondent from 1983 to 1993, is the author of Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe (Verso). The Alicia Patterson Foundation provided assistance for his research on Syria.
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