

Leaving Syria: Necessary and Long Overdue?

On October 8 Turkey announced that it would send troops to a 20-mile-wide zone in northern Syria which is currently controlled by the Kurds, following the withdrawal of an estimated 50 to 100 U.S. special forces soldiers from the area. The media spin is predictable: President Donald Trump has abandoned America's gallant Kurdish allies to face the prospect of a Turkish invasion alone. In reality Trump is simply pursuing the policy of disengagement from Syria announced last December, which should have been completed by now.

Last August the U.S. and Turkey reached an agreement to carry out joint patrols in a three-mile-wide safe zone south of the Turkish-Syrian border. This was an effective method of separating Turkish and Kurdish forces, both nominal U.S. allies but mutually hostile. The arrangement has now unraveled, however, primarily because the Kurds – who control most of northeastern Syria – rejected Turkish plans to resettle thousands of displaced persons in the area. Many of them are foreign ISIS fighters who were taken prisoner in Syria and their family members.

In a phone conversation on October 6, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told Trump that Turkey would no longer abide by the joint border arrangement and was preparing to send its army into the area. Hours later the White House announced that "Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria" and that U.S. soldiers would be removed from the area of operations.

On Monday the Kurds accused the U.S. of allowing the area to "turn into a war zone" and said that they would "defend northeast Syria at all costs." The Turks responded that

“establishment of a safe zone is essential to contribute to stability and peace of the region, and for Syrians to live in safety.” In reality, the key long-term Turkish objective is to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish entity on the country’s southeastern border. This is considered an existential issue in Turkey, especially since the Syrian Kurds have long cultivated close relations with the far-left [Kurdistan Workers’ Party](#) in Turkey. The PKK is a militant outfit which has been outlawed by Ankara as a terrorist organization.

Back home Trump was accused of letting down the Kurds who had helped defeat ISIS. Nancy Pelosi said the move “poses a dire threat to regional security and stability, and sends a dangerous message to Iran and Russia, as well as our allies, that the United States is no longer a trusted partner.” Mitch McConnell claimed that “a precipitous withdrawal of US forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime, and it would increase the risk that Isis and other terrorist groups regroup.” Lindsey Graham tweeted that “this decision to abandon our Kurdish allies and turn Syria over to Russia, Iran & Turkey will put every radical Islamist on steroids. Shot in the arm to the bad guys. Devastating for the good guys.”

The Administration rejected the accusation, saying that the Turks were not given a green light to start a military offensive and warning that they would be held responsible if ISIS fighters held in Kurdish camps were able to escape as a result Turkey’s military action. Trump himself insisted somewhat eccentrically that if Turkey did anything that he considered to be off limits, he would “totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey.”

The main culprits for the unresolved ISIS resettlement crisis are the governments of those European countries – primarily Germany, France, and Britain – which are unwilling to accept some 20,000 of their radicalized nationals and family members. Both Trump and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces

(SDF) have demanded their repatriation for trial and rehabilitation at home. The issue has serious security implications. An SDF spokesman said on October 7 that it was unclear what would happen to the jihadists: "We repeatedly called for foreign states to take responsibility for their ISIS nationals, but there was no response."

It remains unclear whether Turkey has the ability or the will to take custody of the detainees being held in Kurdish jails and displacement camps. [As many as 74,000 women and children of the now-defunct Caliphate](#) are in the Kurdish-guarded Hawl camp, often described as a hotbed of violence and extremist ideology. The added problem is that Hawl is just outside the parameters of the 20-mile-deep safe zone which the Turks say they want to create.

Not for the first time a foreign-policy decision by Trump, which is demonstrably correct, has been fiercely attacked by the bipartisan establishment. He should stay the course, and reiterate that the mission in Syria had never been about securing a Kurdish statelet, or neutralizing Russian, Turkish, or Iranian influence, or removing the Assad regime. It was initiated by Obama in 2014 to help the Kurds fight the Islamic State.

That mission is accomplished, and inventing other objectives for its continuation come from those people who do not think that withdrawal of *any* U.S. troops, from *any* area of deployment, at *any* moment in time, is a good thing. His detractors also believe that no spot on the planet is *not* vitally important to the U.S. national security. Trump should state openly that no rational U.S. interest would be served by the continued deployment of American soldiers in Syria.

If Trump stays his course on Syria, and if he manages to make some progress on withdrawing from Afghanistan, America may finally free herself from the Middle Eastern quagmires. In

order to cement his support for next year's election, he needs to accuse his critics of advocating an open-ended military commitment devoid of attainable objectives, in a volatile region where all American interventions thus far have been futile or self-defeating.

As I wrote in the February print edition of *Chronicles*, the accusation that Trump is "letting our Kurdish allies down" is notably absurd. The Kurds welcomed American firepower in destroying the Islamic State, but they fought ISIS out of their own desire for survival, not because they love America, and not because they were promised any particular form of self-government – let alone permanent U.S. protection – after the Caliphate was gone:

Since 'Sultan' Erdogan is here to stay for many years to come, it is in the American interest to do what is needed to reboot relations with Ankara, the foremost regional power and a NATO partner. Another objection to Trump's decision, that ISIS will 'make a comeback,' is disingenuous. This cannot happen because all major players in Syria will not allow it, and because the conditions that made its rise possible five years ago no longer prevail.

The assessment still stands. The Syrian operation was never authorized by Congress. Trump should challenge his detractors to seek such authorization in order to do whatever it is that they want to do there. By throwing down this gauntlet, especially now that he faces the impeachment circus, Trump would be supported by his base. The folks who voted for him know the true cost of perpetual wars far better than his detractors.—

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