



## On Syria Donald Trump Finally Acts Like President Trump

Doug Bandow

January 2, 2019

President Donald Trump said he is bringing home America's troops from Syria. The cacophonous, even hysterical criticism of the president's decision within the Beltway may be the best evidence of his wisdom.

Syria is not America's war. Washington's security interests there always were minimal. The humanitarian tragedy is overwhelming, but beyond America's ability to fix.

The president's critics complain that the Islamic State is not yet eradicated from the earth. However, ISIS's long list of enemies—Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Gulf States, Iran, Russia—should be able to handle the aftermath. America should not do everything for everyone forever.

Washington's bipartisan War Party came up with a gaggle of bizarrely ambitious alternative objectives to justify America's military presence. But Congress has not authorized military action in Syria, even against the Islamic State.

The authorization for the utilization of military force passed after 9/11 was directed against al-Qaeda, not new groups which did not then exist and did not participate in the attacks. That AUMF cannot be stretched to cover Syria, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Of course, Congress had no reason to authorize use of force in Syria, which never attacked America, even when allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As a superpower, America has interests all over the world, but virtually none are worth war.

Russia's involvement in Syria doesn't matter. Washington is allied with Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Gulf States, and close to Iraq. It is obvious who is winning the Russo-American contest.

The Tehran regime is malicious, but probably less so than Washington's Saudi partner. Despite the administration's bizarre fixation on Iran, the latter does not threaten America, which is multiple degrees more powerful. Israel also is well able to defend itself.

Moreover, plenty of other nations have reason to help constrain Tehran, whose influence, most felt in divided and war-ravaged states, remains modest. But they will not to act if the U.S. does their dirty work.

Iran's relationship with Syria may not be to America's liking, but is long-standing and exists at the invitation of Syria's legitimate government. Both Damascus and Tehran have far more at stake in maintaining their relationship than does the U.S. in disrupting their ties.

A few charming souls complain that Washington's withdrawal would leave the Kurds vulnerable to Turkey, which views them as a serious threat to its territorial integrity. The U.S. never promised Syria's Kurds military protection, which would have to run forever.

Indeed, Washington already made that strategic choice when it did not protect Kurdistan from retaliation by Iraq, Iran, and Turkey after the latter held an independence referendum. Washington also failed to even attempt to block decades of brutal military operations against Kurds in Turkey proper and the assault on Afrin and surrounding territory in Syria earlier this year. The Pentagon cannot justify a permanent garrison illegally occupying Syria in the midst of a civil war to protect an unofficial militia from attack by both the legally legitimate government and a neighboring NATO ally.

Hope also burns eternal in some hearts that by effectively dismantling the country—illegally occupying roughly 30 percent of Syria's territory along with much of its oil resources—Washington can pressure Assad to step down. However, he is more secure today than at any other point since the civil war erupted, which I witnessed when I visited in August. Having survived the worst of the civil war, why would Assad quit now?

Then there is the oft-repeated concern for stability. America's small presence cannot stabilize the country or region. Genuine stability requires addressing Damascus.

Anyway, the Mideast matters far less these days. It would diminish in importance still further if Washington did not make that dismal assembly of nations central to American foreign and military policy.

Republicans compared President Trump's decision to the Iraqi pull-out, ignoring the fact that Obama hewed to George W. Bush's agenda and timetable. Indeed, the troops could not stay without a Status of Forces Agreement, which Bush was unable to negotiate because Iraqi support was lacking. Had they stayed, U.S. troops would have been targeted by Shia extremists as well as Sunni insurgents and terrorists.

Washington's overall objective should be to bring peace to America, not micro-manage other nations' conflicts. Washington policymakers come up with long lists of objectives which are not worth the cost, in this case essentially permanent war. Withdrawal from Syria is long overdue. Once the president finishes with Syria, he should turn to Yemen and Afghanistan.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*