

# President Trump Understands What Congress Does Not: Syria Is Not America's War

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Congress wouldn't declare war or even approve presidential troop deployments in Syria. But sanctimonious legislators now are preening for the cameras, demanding that U.S. military force remain entangled in that tragic nation, seemingly forever. They show greater concern for foreign fighters acting in their own interest than for American soldiers, as well as civilians who have suffered from blowback to Washington's succession of Middle Eastern wars.

It needs to be said bluntly: Syria doesn't matter for U.S. security. The Assad family has ruled Syria since 1971. The regime was allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War but never attacked America. After steady losses, the Assads even abandoned war with Israel. Rule by father and son has been brutal — like those of assorted American friends: Mubarak, el-Sisi, the Saudi royal family, Bahrain's al-Khalifas, Iran's Shah Pahlavi, and even Iraq's Saddam Hussein, when he was fighting Tehran.

Syria's implosion in 2011 only added to the humanitarian tragedy. The Obama administration's determination to oust President Bashar al-Assad discouraged both sides from negotiating. Yet Syrians, especially among minority Christians and Alawites, warned, à la Louis XV, "après moi, le déluge." On a visit to Syria last year an Alawite told me that supposedly democratic protesters were chanting "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave." Religious minorities saw the horrors unleashed when the U.S. ousted a secular dictator next door in Iraq and understandably feared a repeat.

The administration's efforts were hopelessly ineffective, incompetent, confused, and contradictory. Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent to train a handful of supposedly moderate insurgents who were promptly killed or captured. The U.S. simultaneously sought to destroy ISIS and its main enemy, the Syrian state. Washington assumed that it could dictate events from thousands of miles away, somehow ousting Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, which all were invited in by Damascus to defend interests far more pressing to them than those claimed by U.S. officials.

Even worse, both the Obama and Trump administrations believed they could pacify the Turks with friendly words while arming the Kurds against the Islamic State. And use an illegal deployment of a couple thousand troops — what legal warrant does America have to invade, occupy, and divide the territory of another sovereign state? — to oust Assad, force democratic reform, push out the Iranians, limit Russia's activities, force Ankara to accept an autonomous state for its mortal enemies, and prevent an Islamic State revival.

Washington's couldn't achieve this ambitious agenda even during the height of Syria's civil war. And the only goal worth much effort is the last one. The others aren't likely achievable, wouldn't

do much for American security even if they were, and aren't worth the cost of more bloody attempts at international social engineering.

Constraining ISIS today is a task for those most directly threatened: Iraq, Jordan, the Gulf States, Syria, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the Kurds. The Islamic State has arrayed itself against *every* other state and group. They allowed the U.S. to do their dirty work when ISIS was at the height of its military strength. Surely they can take over responsibility for their own defense today. After all, it is in their survival interest.

The greatest hue and cry has gone up over the alleged "betrayal" of Syrian Kurds, who battled against the Islamic State. Yet many of those screaming the loudest care nothing about Washington's support for the cruel, corrupt, and irresponsible Saudi regime's murderous war in Yemen. For these Americans the Kurds' plight looks mostly like an excuse to keep the U.S. mired in an endless war in the Middle East that cannot be justified on any other grounds. An unconvincing burst of moral concern is not a good reason to concoct a previously undeclared, undebated, unlegislated defense commitment.

The Kurds long have suffered and are one of the world's largest people groups without their own country. While the Kurds have understandably struggled for self-determination, however, they are not blameless. Kurdistan is more family rule than liberal democracy. The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in Turkey, is radical, brutal, and terrorist. Syria's Kurds have ties to the PKK and many of them look to that group's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, for inspiration. Turkey overstates the dangers posed by links between Turkish and Syrian Kurds, but Washington's lack of responsiveness only has exacerbated Ankara's paranoia.

While there is good reason to sympathize with the Kurds, they fought ISIS to advance their own self-interest, not for America's, or the international community's, benefit. Indeed, they were fighting Islamist radicals before the U.S. inserted combat forces in Syria against ISIS. Had the Islamic State been able to expand its reach, the Kurds' autonomous zone of Rojava would have been a target. ISIS warriors would have treated Kurds, generally moderate in their practice of Sunni Islam, with the same cruelty as Shia and religious minorities. The Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units (a major part of the opposition Syrian Democratic Forces) had little choice but to fight, and they benefited significantly from the aid and other support provided by Washington.

Nothing about this backing suggested the existence of any larger security guarantee. The Kurds might have hoped for more, but they could have no illusions. In the 1970s Washington aided and then abandoned Kurds in their struggle against Iraq when Iran, a more important American ally, shifted toward rapprochement with Saddam Hussein. In 2017 the U.S. stood aside as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey punished Kurdistan for holding an independence referendum. The Washington-backed Baghdad government closed Kurdish airspace and drove Kurdish forces out of territories captured during the fight with ISIS. Kurds would be fools to assume that successive administrations would forever guarantee Rojava's security out of gratitude for long-past services performed, and no one believes they are fools.

Particularly dangerous is the assumption that a security commitment of undetermined reach (good against not only ISIS, but everyone else, including Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Russia?) and undetermined length (must American troops remain in Syria, illegally, for years, decades, or centuries, to protect the Kurds?). To answer such questions is why presidents negotiate treaties.

And Senates ratify them. After at least a modicum of public debate. At least Americans had some idea what they were getting into with NATO. Who knew that jointly fighting the Islamic State would supposedly create a host of other obligations to fight endless wars, if necessary?

Nor is it in America's security interest to assume that a few hundred or thousand Americans can forever stabilize a region filled with incipient conflict. Syria, backed by Iran and Russia, is determined to reestablish authority over its own sovereign territory, including oil fields. Nearby Damascus hopes to eliminate the final insurgent stronghold, ruled by Islamist extremists backed by Turkey. Israel has undertaken an undeclared war against Iranian positions and arms; Tehran may not forever eschew retaliation. Remnants of ISIS seek revival. And Turkey already had seized some Syrian border territory populated by Kurds nearly two years ago and was threatening to expand its control, eliciting Kurdish promises to resist. To believe that this miasma is a stable equilibrium is a fantasy. Several parties have an incentive to probe, push, and confront others.

Withdrawal was the only sensible policy. Of course, it should not have been precipitous and without notice. But the tsunami of bipartisan abuse demonstrated how difficult it is for President Donald Trump to challenge the Washington consensus in favor of perpetual foreign social engineering and war. America's interests seem to be barely mentioned, let alone considered. He might have been convinced that only abrupt, arbitrary action could achieve his ends.

Better would have been to warn the Kurds that Americans would be coming home and encourage them to use the intervening time to make a deal with Syria. The two sides had reached a *modus vivendi* early in the civil war and did not fight each other. They previously had unsuccessful talks about reintegrating Rojava under Damascus but deadlocked over the Kurds' demand for autonomy. Returning Syrian control to the Turkish–Syrian border, however, could meet Ankara's demand for preventing geographic contact with the PKK. That would not be a perfect solution, but the outcome in Syria always was guaranteed to be second best.

Although some Trump critics view the Kurds' rushed deal with Damascus after the Turkish invasion allowing Syrian troops into previously Kurdish-held territories as further evidence of the administration's failure, the accommodation actually offers the best hope of long-term stability — including discouraging the return of ISIS. Assad will not want to lose his newly restored authority.

Of course, some expressed their fear that no one will ever cooperate with Washington again as a result of abandoning the Kurds. This also is nonsense. In fact, Washington has routinely “betrayed” allies — states and peoples alike: Soviet POWs forced back to the Soviet Union. Hungarian revolutionaries left to die under Soviet tanks. Cambodians and South Vietnamese who fought with Americans. The Republic of China (Taiwan), which was ousted from the UN Security Council and UN itself. Iraqis, both Kurds and Shia, who acted on President George H. W. Bush's call for revolt. Soon likely to be added to that list are Afghans. Other nations, like the U.S., obviously distinguish between abandonment of peripheral and existential interests. The former is seen as having little precedential value.

In contrast is Washington's commitment to Turkey, an ally of more than 68 years and fellow member of America's premier military alliance, NATO. Ankara is not a particularly good ally of late and arguably should be expelled from the transatlantic pact for various transgressions. But until then it benefits from America's Article 5 promise to treat an attack on Turkey as an attack

on America. For decades the U.S. has maintained bases, stationed personnel, provided assistance, and cooperated with Turkey through a wide succession of governments. If Washington does not prioritize that relationship, then other nations would have much better cause to wonder at the value of America's promises.

Of the protagonists in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." Fareed Zakaria applied these sentiments to President Trump, but they more accurately apply to the mob of policymakers, analysts, and journalists who have pushed America into endless wars in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Ronald Reagan sent the American military to take sides in the multi-sided Lebanese civil war, with predictably awful results. Military strikes in Afghanistan intended to destroy al-Qaeda and punish the Taliban turned into more than 18 years of failed nation-building: today the U.S. embassy eschews the roads in sending its personnel to the airport, using helicopters instead. The 2003 Iraq invasion was the antithesis of a cakewalk, destabilizing the region, triggering devastating sectarian war, wrecking the indigenous Christian community, giving rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forerunner of ISIS, and resulting in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

Turning the mission in Libya from supposed civilian protection to regime change ensured that Russia never again would approve an American military mission. Other consequences included continuing civil war eight years later, creating opportunities for ISIS, which very publicly slaughtered helpless Egyptian Copts, and spreading weapons and chaos throughout the region. Backing Saudi Arabia in its bloody aggression against Yemen has empowered al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other militants, exposed the weakness of the Saudi royal family, multiplied Yemeni secessionists, and resulted in tens or hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. In Syria Washington sought to overthrow yet another secular dictator while working with Islamist insurgents, including an al-Qaeda affiliate. Syria's Assad remains in power, Russia and Iran are more influential, Turkey is more antagonistic toward America and friendly toward Moscow, hundreds of thousands of people are dead, and U.S. troops seem stuck on another social engineering mission in another endless war.

Or at least did, until President Trump's decision.

The ruling Bourbons "had learned nothing and forgotten nothing," the French statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord famously said. That applies to today's foreign-policy establishment. Amid the Syrian conflict, Obama UN Ambassador Samantha Power complained that ivory-tower warriors like herself were being blamed for their many blunders, especially in Iraq: "I think there is too much of, 'Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought' ... one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons." Why are people complaining?, she wondered. Her policies destroyed a nation, destabilized a region, ravaged multiple religious minority communities, empowered violent Islamist radicals, expanded Iran's influence, and triggered sectarian strife that consumed hundreds of thousands of lives. Heckuva job!

The president handled America's departure from Syria badly. But that makes withdrawal no less necessary. Congressmen unwilling to vote to authorize the military mission there should stop complaining about his determination to end it.

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