

# The Kurds and the Sticky Wicket of Foreign Entanglements

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A barrage of criticism from outraged congressional leaders and pundits greeted President Trump's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from northern Syria near the border with Turkey. The intensity and breadth of the denunciations increased when Ankara predictably responded to Washington's move by launching a military offensive into Kurdish-controlled territory.

Now, not only is there heavy fighting in Northern Syria, but the Kurds have reportedly struck a deal with Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government for protection, and as of Monday, his forces have moved to the border to bolster the military resistance to Turkey's advancement.

Washington was in an uproar all weekend. According to the prevailing argument, Trump betrayed a noble ally that had fought alongside the United States in the successful campaign against ISIS, and now no one will ever again trust the United States if Washington seeks assistance against a dangerous adversary. The fact that the Kurds have turned to Assad (a stated foe of the U.S. backed by the Russians) only makes Trump's seemingly impulsive move more dangerous.

The implicit message is that the American military presence in Syria should continue indefinitely, lest the Kurds suffer a bloody aftermath at the hands of the Turks and their many other enemies in the region.

Such criticisms are misplaced. In his Farewell Address, George Washington made the vital distinction between temporary alliances, which he acknowledged could sometimes benefit America's security, and permanent alliances, which create undesirable, potentially corrosive obligations. Washington's admonition was blunt, urging his fellow citizens "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." Even his receptivity to temporary alliances was not unconditional. He indicated that America could safely trust temporary alliances only "for extraordinary emergencies."

The ongoing episode with the Syrian Kurds provides an opportunity to re-learn such crucial distinctions. Trump's critics seem to be advocating a permanent security relationship with the Kurds over a situation that does not even remotely constitute an extraordinary emergency for the United States.

Cooperation between U.S. and Kurdish forces against ISIS was never intended to be the basis for a long-term partnership; it was a temporary alliance of convenience struck because the agendas of the two parties briefly coincided. Moreover, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) did not embrace such cooperation out of a sense of altruism. ISIS was a mortal enemy that loathed the Kurds because they're a non-Arabic, ostentatiously secular minority. All this was

anathema to ISIS. The Syrian Kurds had little choice but to fight tenaciously if they wished to avoid ethnic cleansing at best and genocide at worst.

There was also a positive incentive for Syrian Kurdish leaders. Bashar al-Assad's government in Damascus had lost control of northern Syria thanks to the ongoing insurgency against his regime and the emergence of ISIS as an especially dangerous opponent. Given the evaporation of Damascus's power in the north, the Kurds had an unprecedented opportunity to achieve a long-standing goal: the establishment of an autonomous (if not outright independent) Kurdish-ruled region similar to what their brethren in Iraq had attained after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Defeating ISIS was a prerequisite to establishing such an enclave. Since the United States was determined to destroy ISIS, America was a natural ally—one willing to provide generous funding and weaponry.

But there was, and is, no foundation for a long-term security relationship between the United States and the Syrian Kurds. Indeed, backing that faction even in the short term has created serious difficulties for Washington. Kurds constitute the largest ethnic population in the world without an independent homeland. The victorious World War I allies broke their promise to establish such a homeland, and instead divided the Kurds among Turkey (the remnant of the defeated Ottoman Empire), Iran, and the newly minted countries of Iraq and Syria. The Kurds have sought to reverse that outcome throughout the succeeding decades.

Those nations, however, vehemently oppose any moves to advance the Kurdish agenda, believing that it poses a dire threat to their territorial integrity. That attitude became graphically evident in 2017, when leaders of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region moved to achieve full, internationally recognized independence. Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran, which normally agree on next to nothing, cooperated closely to squelch the Kurdish bid.

Turkey especially is nervous and resentful over Washington's collaboration with the Kurds. The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has issued escalating demands that the United States cease its support of the latter. President Trump made a partial concession in late 2017, agreeing to end arms shipments to the SDF, but Erdogan was not satisfied. Trump's decision to have U.S. troops stand aside as Turkish forces conduct their offensive into northern Syria represents a more significant concession. Given Washington's increasingly tense relations with Ankara over a variety of issues (most notably Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles), Trump's move may be an attempt to prevent a complete rupture of ties with a major NATO ally.

In any case, the Trump administration appears to have concluded that the drawbacks to maintaining the de facto alliance with the Syrian Kurds significantly outweighs any benefits. It is a realistic attitude, one that stands in sharp contrast to the growing view among elites that once the United States acquires an ally (or, more often, a security dependent), it can never relinquish that relationship. That lack of flexibility is at the root of the determination to preserve Cold War-era alliances, such as NATO and the bilateral defense treaties with Japan and South Korea, even though vastly altered global conditions have made those obligations unrewarding and increasingly dangerous.

Severing the more informal, less significant, and less entrenched security ties with the Syrian Kurds would be a good place to begin refashioning America's alliance policy. Indeed, President Trump should use the removal of U.S. troops as the first step towards a total withdrawal from

Syria. We must not allow the Syrian venture to become another forever war, similar to the ongoing mission in Afghanistan.

George Washington went so far as to terminate the American alliance with France, which had provided crucial support in America's war for independence. Washington believed that retaining that alliance no longer served the best interests of his people, and he was correct. Any debt that the United States owes the Kurds for their combat role against ISIS is far less than the theoretical obligation that the embryonic American republic owed to France. A key virtue of temporary alliances is that they are temporary. It is time to sever our alliance of convenience with the Syrian Kurds and not let misplaced sentimentality intrude.

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