



We Can Learn 3 Lessons From Trump's Partial Syria Withdrawal

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"I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars, where our great Military functions as a policing operation to the benefit of people who don't even like the USA," President Trump tweeted Monday morning as news spread of his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria ahead of Turkish military action against Kurdish fighters in the region. "The endless and ridiculous wars," he added in another post, "are ENDING!"

If only that were true. The president is right that he campaigned against prolonging costly and counterproductive U.S. wars in the Middle East, but since taking office he has so far failed to end a single one. He has "no plans at all" to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, and he issued a rare veto to shut down a bipartisan congressional effort to shutter U.S. support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen's civil war. Dramatic announcements about departing from Afghanistan and Syria have dissolved into somewhat smaller but apparently permanent troop presences in both countries.

This week's partial reshuffling inside Syria doesn't change that. It doesn't end American intervention in Syria—U.S. boots will still be on the ground elsewhere in the country—or eliminate the possibility of stumbling into unwanted conflict with other actors in Syria's civil war, including regime forces, Iran, nuclear-armed Russia, and even our NATO ally, Turkey. (Though in a sense this move lessens the chance of war with Turkey, Trump paired it with a tweeted threat, also made Monday, to "totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey" if the country "does anything that I ... consider to be off limits.")

Furthermore, the reported lack of advance warning to the Kurdish forces for whom Trump previously expressed strong support means more bloodshed is likely than we might have seen with a better-planned, full U.S. exit. And the narrowness of this shift—explicitly cast by the White House as getting out of Turkey's way instead of leaving Syria altogether—manages to function more as pulling the rug out from under the Kurds than a meaningful strategy change in service to U.S. interests.

All told, this reshuffling does not amount to "getting out of these ridiculous endless wars;" it is rather a haphazard half-measure that is no substitute for complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria—and beyond. If Trump is serious about liquidating unnecessary, failed, costly overseas missions, he must actually end them.

That is the first lesson here: Trump should finally make good on his many critiques of the foreign policy status quo and actually end a war. Though there are plenty of candidates to consider—see, again, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, to say nothing of smaller interventions in Somalia, Libya, and a host of African states—Syria would be a good place to start. The U.S. military presence there is comparatively small; the futility of their ever-creeping mission is increasingly undeniable; and the risks of their permanence are evident.

As Trump himself said in 2013, "What I am saying is stay out of Syria." U.S. intervention in the Syrian civil war has aggravated an already tragic situation, contributing to humanitarian disaster and doing nothing for American security. The wisdom of intervention was always debatable; with the Islamic State's territorial caliphate eliminated, the wisdom of departure is indisputable.

The second lesson of the partial withdrawal is broader: It is time to fundamentally change Washington's posture toward the Mideast. The last 18 years in the region have seen "the military power of the United States [play] a large part in exacerbating problems rather than contributing to their solution," argues Ret. Col. Andrew Bacevich, a military historian, at *The American Conservative*. Bipartisan attempts "to establish some form of regional Pax Americana [have] failed irretrievably and at enormous cost to the United States and to others. What we have endured is an era of ineffectual American meddling." Beyond ending a single war, Trump should make good on his campaign themes by substantially reorienting U.S. foreign policy away from constant intervention in the Middle East's regional problems.

The third lesson is broader still: This should be the impetus for far more careful interrogation of future U.S. interventions and partnerships before they begin. It "should cause us all to reconsider America's commitments abroad," argues the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble, "and to be more careful about how U.S. policymakers define allies, and what promises they make, or might appear to be making, on behalf of the American people."

This lesson is as applicable in Eastern Europe and East Asia as it is in the greater Middle East. Washington too easily commits our military to situations which have nothing to do with American security and where escalating our involvement would be wildly imprudent. This is dangerous for U.S. troops and costly for U.S. taxpayers, but it also has the reprehensible side effect of suggesting to groups like the Kurds that American help is coming when realistically it is not.

Such empty suggestions can and, in Syria, probably will lead to death and destruction that could have been prevented without confusing signals from Washington. As in so much of recent U.S. foreign policy, the cardinal misstep here is not the reshuffling, clumsy and flawed though it may be, but the failure to fully withdraw already.