



Trump Said Leaving Syria Was About Bringing Our Troops Home. Why Is He Sending Them To Iraq?

Eric Boehem

October 22, 2019

In a Sunday morning tweet that was, at first glance, most notable for how President Donald Trump had misspelled his defense secretary's last name, the president proclaimed that "USA soldiers are not in combat or ceasefire zones. We have secured the Oil. Bringing soldiers home!"

About two hours later, that tweet was deleted and replaced with a new tweet that corrected the secretary's name—Mark Esper, not Mark Esperanto—and also made another, less noticed change. Trump removed the original last three words and replaced them with "ending endless wars!"

A noble goal, to be sure. But that change is noteworthy, since it seemingly reveals how the strategy behind Trump's hasty and haphazard withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria is evolving in real-time, even within the president's own mind. Trump has spent the past two weeks facing down intense criticism from both Republicans and Democrats over his decision—announced on Twitter, naturally—to pull U.S. troops out of northern Syria and to give a green light to a Turkish military assault. In the face of that criticism, Trump has steadfastly argued that there is no compelling reason to have U.S. troops on the ground in Syria and that he withdrew those forces in order to bring them home.

The first part of that argument is true. The second part is absolutely false.

In fact, Esper's Sunday morning press conference—the one that seems to have prompted Trump's tweets—confirmed that U.S. troops *aren't* coming home. Instead, Esper said, the roughly 1,000 U.S. troops that have pulled back from northern Syria in recent weeks will be re-positioned across the border in Iraq to protect oil fields and monitor the situation in Syria. The Associated Press reported that the troops moved out of Syria will be used to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State, amid concerns that Turkey's attack on Kurdistan may have resulted in the release of imprisoned ISIS fighters.

"It's pretty clear that he's not bringing home the troops. He's moving troops back into Iraq. He's moving other troops into Saudi Arabia," Rep. Justin Amash (I-Mich.) said Sunday during an appearance on NBC's *Meet The Press*. The former Republican and frequent Trump critic said he

did not think American troops should have been deployed in Syria to begin with and believes Trump should have brought them home long ago. Still, this isn't that, Amash said.

"When you withdraw troops," observed Amash, "you have to plan in advance how to handle it."

That's been a common criticism of Trump's actions in Syria. Withdrawing from Syria was always going to spark bipartisan outrage from pro-intervention members of Congress and foreign policy advisors, but Trump's fumbling of the Syrian situation has triggered criticism even from policymakers, like Amash, who might have otherwise agreed that withdrawing from the Middle East is the correct goal.

"Withdrawal from foreign entanglements will usually be difficult, and always entails trade-offs," says Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute and author of a forthcoming book about how Trump has harmed American foreign policy.

"Understanding these tradeoffs, and being honest about them, can help mitigate some of the worst effects."

The past two weeks have exposed just how much of Trump's Syria strategy is being made up on the fly. It wasn't until after he'd given the green light to a Turkish invasion of Kurd-held territory that Trump tried to put the brakes on the assault. As the situation unraveled and thousands of Kurds fled their homes, the White House eventually brokered a cease-fire while the provisional Kurdish government sought protection from Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. And then U.S. forces had to bomb their own military facilities in order to stop invading Turkish and nearby Russian troops from seizing supplies and weapons stored there.

At home, Trump's actions have triggered condemnation from both chambers of Congress and from leaders of both parties.

In short, the mishandling of the Syrian withdrawal appears to have created a situation where actually bringing the troops home now seems even more farfetched—whether due to congressional opposition or increased chaos in the Middle East that will prompt calls for greater American involvement.

"By attempting to extricate U.S. forces from Syria, and by doing so in such a ham-fisted manner," says Preble, "Trump has needlessly exposed innocent people to harm, and also might have done the impossible—created a bipartisan coalition open to the idea of a long-term military presence in Syria where one didn't before exist."