

US sells out Kurds, reminding America why it should just stay home

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Despite President Donald Trump's perpetual bluster, in Syria the administration is yielding to the Erdogan regime in Ankara and again selling out America's Kurdish allies.

Yet abandoning those who did so much to help Washington defeat the Islamic State is less embarrassing than failing to recognize the inevitability of such a retreat.

The Obama administration tried to do everything as Syria disintegrated, only to find out how hard it was to do anything well.

Washington wanted to oust Assad, defeat ISIS, back “moderate” insurgents, enlist Sunni Gulf countries against Sunni radicals, cooperate with radical groups, including al-Qaida's local affiliate, limit Iranian influence, strengthen Kurdish forces, pacify Turkey, and manage Russia. The Islamic State is essentially defeated, while the other objectives went unmet.

The demise of ISIS offered the administration an opportunity to declare victory and bring home America's troops. Syria never has mattered much to the U.S. It remains a humanitarian tragedy, but its disposition won't much affect Washington's domination of the Middle East. No reason to squander resources for no good purpose.

However, the administration decided to maintain some 2,000 troops in Syria's north. The president said a “border security force” would prevent any ISIS renewal, but that is unnecessary with Syrian, Turkish, Iranian, Russian and insurgent forces nearby.

Administration officials admitted that they were embarking upon other missions, both quixotic and illegal: occupy a quarter of Syria to force President Bashar al-Assad from power, drive Iranian forces out of the country, and pressure Russia to support American political objectives. Washington's planned vehicle for this ambitious effort was the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG.

In fact, denying this territory to Damascus might inconvenience Assad, but he survived far worse. Iranian transit might be less secure through a nominal Kurdish zone, but the YPG cannot hermetically seal the informal borders. And Moscow's commitment to Assad's survival doesn't depend on his sway over the north.

More important, the YPG is unlikely to battle the Syrian army on America's behalf, since Damascus has respected the relative autonomy of the self-declared Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, or Rojava. No doubt, the Kurds have no love for Iranian forces, but they are unlikely to attempt to forcibly block cooperation between Syria and Iran. And the YPG cooperated militarily with Russia against ISIS.

Thus, the administration plan looked stillborn from its start. And that was before considering Turkey's role.

Apparently the president and his aides imagined Ankara would politely acquiesce to the creation of a well-armed Kurdish state on Turkey's border. Yet the Erdogan government had complained vociferously about U.S. military cooperation with the YPG.

In January Turkey invaded Syria and struck Kurdish forces near Afrin, while threatening to head east to Manbij, where American troops are stationed. Almost immediately Kurdish forces, armed and trained by the U.S., left to battle the army of Turkey, a NATO ally.

American military officials also threatened that U.S. troops would defend themselves, sparking return threats from Erdogan. Former Secretary of State Tillerson scurried to Ankara, preparing the American surrender.

Turkey explained that it “expected from the U.S. that it should absolutely step in” to prevent the shift of YPG fighters to back those Kurds under attack by Turkey. That hardly seems possible, since the Kurdish units are not under American command. Washington could threaten to stop aid for the YPG, but under Turkish pressure U.S. officials had previously indicated that assistance would terminate when ISIS was destroyed.

The administration also agreed to shift the Kurdish forces away from Manbij, near the border, to east of the Euphrates River. But the same question arises: How will the U.S. do so? Why should the Kurds agree?

Despite working with the Kurds against ISIS, the administration has no stomach for a military game of chicken with Turkey. Which means the U.S. almost certainly would abandon the Kurds again if Ankara attacks Manbij. After which they will have little reason to do Washington's bidding.

Indeed, after the Turkish invasion the Kurdish forces approached Damascus, which sent Assad-backed militias to assist in fighting against the Turks. Why would the Kurds then aid Washington, which acceded to Ankara's demands, against Damascus, which took their side?

The U.S. should have gotten out with the Islamic State's collapse rather than start a process certain to so spectacularly and embarrassingly fail. But exit remains the administration's best strategy. This is one war in which the president can finally declare victory and bring home America's combatants.

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