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Foreign policy 'realists' cheer Trump's Syria withdrawal: 'Not only appropriate, but overdue'

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The execution has been messy, the bipartisan opposition has been sharp and U.S. adversaries are now scrambling to exploit President Trump's Syria withdrawal.

But some U.S. foreign policy "realists" are cheering on Mr. Trump's course change in the Middle East, saying that despite its clumsy implementation, the move cuts through contradictions at the heart of the American policy and puts the onus on regional powers to resolve Syria's 8-year-old civil war and prevent an Islamic State resurgence there.

"Trump has managed to move in the right direction in the worst possible way," said Stephen M. Walt, a Harvard scholar. He argues that the hard-to-swallow reality behind the withdrawal is that Syrian President Bashar Assad's brutal regime has won the civil war.

"The dirty secret is that allowing Bashar Assad to regain all control over Syria is going to solve a number of vexing problems," Mr. Walt said. "Saying that is a horrible thing because Assad is a war criminal and should be on trial for atrocities."

That Syrian Kurdish officials, who last week were allied with Washington, were so quickly willing to switch to cooperation with Mr. Assad proves their point, the realists say.

"We live in a world that is not perfect," said Mr. Walt, adding that Damascus — for better or worse — is in the best position to tamp down, not exacerbate, tension with Syrian Kurds and Turkish forces who have invaded Kurdish-controlled areas in northeastern Syria.

Libertarian-minded foreign policy analysts largely agreed.

"Trump's execution ... was extraordinarily clumsy," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute. "However, his objective — reducing the risk exposure of those troops and taking the initial step toward ending Washington's Syria military mission — is not only appropriate, but overdue.

"Trump's critics offer nothing more than a compendium of policy cliches that would keep America mired in a murky, multisided conflict for decades," Mr. Carpenter told The Washington Times. "We already have a forever war in Afghanistan. The American people don't need another one in Syria."

These analysts say the U.S. — under any president — was never going to deliver the one thing sought by Kurdish allies in the region who did the bulk of the ground fighting to defeat the ISIS caliphate: an independent Kurdish state that could potentially claim major pieces of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations “underestimated the extent to which NATO ally Turkey would go to protect its own interests, how Russia and Iran would rally behind [Mr. Assad], and that the Assad regime’s pernicious form of governance was the central driver of conflict in Syria — of which the Islamic State is a symptom,” Melissa Dalton, who served on the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group and now directs the Cooperative Defense Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote in an analysis Thursday.

Ms. Dalton acknowledged that the abrupt American withdrawal this week was “morally reprehensible and contrary to U.S. values.”

“Ending the ‘forever wars’ in places like Syria has political resonance, but it must be done responsibly,” she argued.

Political appeal

A big question now is whether U.S. lawmakers — other than outliers such as libertarian Sen. Rand Paul, Kentucky Republican — are ready to embrace such thinking. Indications so far are that the answer is no.

Both parties have lined up behind such foreign policy traditionalists as Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Mitt Romney of Utah and Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Their message? The American pullout has allowed Turkey to commit atrocities against Syrian Kurds who helped defeat ISIS, opened the way for an expanded Iranian footprint near Israel and handed Russia immense new influence over the region.

Reflecting a broad consensus on Capitol Hill and among foreign policy analysts, Mr. Graham has called the Syria pullout “the most screwed-up decision” in his 25 years in Congress. Mr. Romney said “Iran’s power position has significantly increased with Turkey wiping out our friends the Kurds” and that “Assad is becoming stronger and Iran is smiling ear to ear.”

But some still argue that the mainstream policy arguments miss the point. Unrealistic goals and promises that can’t be kept make for bad policy, they say.

“American foreign policy [there] has been an overreaching mess for a long time,” said Damon Linker, a foreign policy columnist for *The Week* magazine.

“The operation in Syria was a success, achieving its goal under President Trump. Yet now we’re told that we need to maintain a military presence indefinitely to keep the [Islamic State] caliphate from returning. Or to protect the Kurds. Or to guard imprisoned ISIS fighters. Or to serve as a counterweight to Iran and Russia. Or to try and undermine the government of Assad. Or all of the above,” Mr. Linker wrote in a column published Tuesday.

“The reason almost doesn’t matter, as long as we never leave,” he wrote. “This is unacceptable. We can’t allow Trump’s moronic way of governing ... to discredit the attempt to change course. Fashioning a saner and more sustainable foreign policy depends on it.”

Overstated fears

Mr. Walt argued that all the issues being raised by the foreign policy establishment would be resolved if Washington can accept the prospect of Assad government rule over Syria.

“Once Damascus takes control over all of Syria, Turkey’s fears about Kurdish autonomy will go down [and] ISIS will become Assad’s problem,” he said. “And [Assad] is going to be ruthless in dealing with ISIS.”

Fears that Russia or Iran will rush to fill the power vacuum caused by the U.S. pullout are also overstated, he said.

“The more secure Assad becomes, the less he’s going to need Russian or Iranian support,” Mr. Walt said. “I don’t think he wants a large Russian or Iranian presence in his country on a permanent basis, so eventually Russian and Iranian influence will go down.”

The Harvard scholar did criticize at length the sloppy rollout of Mr. Trump’s withdrawal. He noted the Pentagon’s acknowledgment that U.S. fighter jets had to bomb a weapons bunker this week at a former American base in Syria just before foreign forces arrived.

“When the U.S. Air Force is bombing our own ammunition supplies because we pulled out so quickly, that tells you this was not planned in any systematic or disciplined way,” said Mr. Walt, who expressed distaste of Mr. Trump’s attempts to tout the withdrawal as somehow consistent with his 2016 campaign promise to end American involvement in “forever wars.”

The roughly 1,000 U.S. troops were pulled out of Syria even as the Pentagon announced the deployment of some 3,000 troops and advanced missiles to Saudi Arabia last weekend.

“That’s evidence that Trump is not, in fact, getting us out of the Middle East; he’s moving things around,” said Mr. Walt. “It’s also an admission that the [maximum] pressure campaign against Iran is a complete failure, since all it has done is raise the risk of war in the Persian Gulf.”

Mr. Carpenter agreed.

The president “must apply a realist foreign policy more consistently,” the Cato analyst said. “Even as he boasts about ending America’s unwise entanglements in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, he chooses to deepen the entanglement in Saudi Arabia by sending more troops.

“That move fully deserves condemnation.”