Trump, Syria, and Counter-Revolution

written by Michael Karadjis | July 6, 2019

Much has transpired since Donald Trump's announcement last December that the United States was to withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria. While the "rapid" withdrawal initially suggested by Trump's tweet has not come about, discussion among U.S. rulers ultimately points in that direction for the simple reason that the United States never had any strategic interest in Syria, had been content to subcontract torture in its "war on terror" to Assad's regime, and, with Israel, knew the regime was a reliable border guard able and willing to keep Palestinians or other militants away from the Israeli-occupied Golan line, quiet for 40 years under the Assads.

The United States was only drawn into Syria to fight the Islamic State (ISIS), and so with the latter's defeat, withdrawal from Syria is a matter of time.

The to-ing and fro-ing—from "rapid" withdrawal, to withdrawal four months later,[1] to keeping 200 troops there[2]—is usually interpreted to mean that Trump's move was purely a personal whim, in conflict with overall U.S. ruling-class preferences.

It is of course true that Trump acts on whim and speaks a lot of gibberish,[3] and a total, overnight withdrawal would indeed be destabilizing. But momentous decisions rarely go into full effect just because one guy, who does not have dictatorial powers, tweets something.

Trump's idiosyncrasies aside, U.S. withdrawal from Syria is entirely consistent with ruling-class interests. As Steven Simon, who served on the National Security Council in the Clinton and Obama administrations, put it succinctly, Trump's "impulsive and uncoordinated move" nevertheless "coincided with strategic imperative, even if the president himself was unaware of it."[4]

A decision to withdraw cannot automatically mean that all U.S. forces, weaponry, bases, aircraft, and intelligence are gone the next day. Between Trump's impulses and the complexities of actually withdrawing, there was plenty of wiggle room for Trump and other ruling-class figures to negotiate a position that takes U.S. interests into account.

Senator Lindsay Graham got Trump to agree that complete withdrawal should only take place once two conditions are met. The first was that ISIS is totally defeated in Syria. However, it was precisely Trump who had long insisted that the "only" reason for U.S. involvement in Syria was to crush ISIS. The assertions that he was selling out to ISIS had no basis in reality; in any case Trump was correct that the United States and its allied Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had driven ISIS from 99 percent of the country.

Following Trump's "withdrawal" announcement, "between December 16 and December 29, U.S.-led coalition military forces conducted 469 air and artillery strikes targeting ISIS in Syria."[5] The last major towns occupied by ISIS, Hajin and Kashmah, were captured by the SDF on December 25 and January 2 respectively. Meanwhile, the U.S. military established new bases across the border in Iraq, from where it could continue to bomb the last tiny ISIS positions, withdrawal or otherwise.

Graham's other condition was that "our Kurdish allies are protected."[6] Similar statements were made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton,[7] warning Turkey not to attack the SDF[8] (Pompeo spurting out undiplomatically, "Don't let the Turks slaughter the Kurds"), for which they were scolded by Turkey.[9] Meanwhile, the Pentagon will allow the SDF

to keep U.S.-supplied weaponry.[10]

This insistence by hawkish ruling-class figures casts a different light on the widespread initial assumption that the United States was about to sell out the SDF to Turkish ruler Erdogan. Erdogan had been threatening to move into SDF-controlled northeastern Syria to crush its autonomous Rojava experiment, which Turkey sees as a threat, given its conflict with its own oppressed Kurdish minority. Months later, there is little evidence of this invasion; rather, U.S. withdrawal would likely involve a more gradual process of sell-out of the SDF to the Assad regime, as will be discussed below.

U.S. withdrawal would also expose tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in the Rubkan camp on the Jordanian border to Assadist conquest. The U.S. base at al-Tanf, where it had armed ex-rebel groups to fight ISIS, offered some protection to camp residents, although the United States and Jordan were no better at providing food aid than was the Assad regime. The regime has engaged in its time-honored tactic of starvation siege, an ongoing horror barely considered newsworthy in the West.

Of course, none of the commentary on withdrawal had anything to say about the Assad regime. Assad has simply never had anything to do with the U.S. presence, one way or another.

In fact, Trump's order to withdraw came several days after his special envoy to Syria, Jim Jeffrey, declared that "it's not regime change" the United States is seeking in Syria; "we're not trying to get rid of Assad,"[11] he said in a follow-up to his November 29 address to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria. There Jeffrey stated that the United States was committed to a political process that "will change the nature and the behavior of the Syrian government … [but] *this is not regime change, this is not related to personalities*."[12]

This was hardly the first time the United States declared it was not trying to get rid of Assad; despite the obsession among Assadists and confused leftists with the idea that the United States was engaged in "regime change," this was never U.S. policy; below are several of the more open declarations from the last few years:

In 2016, declaring that the United States was "not seeking so-called regime change as it is known in Syria," Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry added that the United States and Russia see the conflict "fundamentally very similarly."[13]

In March 2017, Trump's UN representative, Nikki Haley, declared that the Trump administration was "no longer" focused on removing Assad "*the way the previous administration was*."[14]

Leaders of the U.S, Israel, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, and Egypt hoping to pay their respects to the Arab Spring, the Kurds, and the Palestinians.

The same month, White House press secretary Sean Spicer noted that "the United States has profound priorities in Syria and Iraq, and we've made it clear that counterterrorism, particularly the defeat of ISIS, is foremost among those priorities. With respect to Assad, there is a political reality that we have to accept."[15]

In July 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson clarified that the only fight in Syria is with ISIS and that Assad's future is Russia's issue,[16] and he called upon "all parties, including the Syrian government and its allies, Syrian opposition forces, and coalition forces carrying out the battle to defeat ISIS, to avoid conflict with one another."[17]

Following the one-off U.S. strike on an empty Assadist air base after Assad's chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster explained that the United States had no concern with the fact that the base was being used to bomb Syrians again the next day because harming Assad's military capacities was not the aim of the strike; and far from "regime change," the United States desired a "change in *the nature of* the Assad regime and its *behavior* in particular."[18]

Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's speech in January 2018 focused on the Geneva process for a "political solution." But now the United States no longer expected Assad to stand down at the beginning of a transition phase, as under early Obama, *or even at its end,* as under late Obama; rather, U.S. policy was now to wait for an eventual "free election" under Assad: "The United States believes that free and transparent elections … will result in the permanent departure of Assad and his family from power. This process will take time, and we urge patience in the departure of Assad and the establishment of new leadership."[19]

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Dispute Within the U.S. Ruling Class

Jeffrey's comments were somewhat surprising, as his arrival in mid-2018 was widely heralded as a "toughening up" of the Trump regime's stance on Assad. In reality, this was only really about Iran

and in accord with the Israeli and Gulf-state view of separating Assad from Iran by relying more on Assad's other key ally, Russia.

Jeffrey's issue with the regime's "behavior" largely concerned the removal of "Iranian-led" forces from Syria, which he assessed threaten "our friends in the region, principally Israel." In contrast, Jeffrey stated that "we seek common ground with Russia in order to resolve the conflict in Syria," asking Russia to "join efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing actions and influence in Syria to remove all Iranian-commanded forces from the country."[20]

The most vociferous anti-Iran voice, National Security Advisor John Bolton, has always opposed removing Assad, believing, like the alt-left and far-right, that this would bring "al-Qaida" to power.[21] Thus, these Pentagon and security-apparatus chiefs opposed rapid withdrawal not because they want to "topple Assad," but to block Iranian influence.

This helps explain the insistence of Bolton and Pompeo on protecting their "Kurdish allies"; such ruthless neoconservatives care no more about Kurds than does Trump. At one level, this insistence was simply a matter of U.S. credibility, which would have taken a blow if those who had been the U.S. ground allies against ISIS for four years were dumped in a whim. But in the broader context, a "Kurds for Iran" deal is widely touted,[22] that is, a deal with Assad ensuring Iranian-led forces are expelled from Syria in exchange for the United States allowing Assad to "reintegrate" northeast Syria.

Trump, by contrast, was jumping ahead (if we assume he was thinking anything); Assad and Erdogan—both now backed by Trump's Russian allies—could gobble up the northeast, based on an understanding that Russia's own rivalry with Iran in Syria[23] will ensure a "wall" against Iranian influence and that a more solidified Assad regime will be in less need of destabilizing Iranian-backed rabble.

Israel and Gulf States Welcome Back Assad

The absence of Assad as a factor in the United States staying or going can be understood more clearly when we look at the stance of key U.S. allies in the region.

According to an article on the Jewish News Syndicate site,

> Prolonged conflict in Syria saw Israel often hold negotiations with the regime in Damascus in order to reach an agreement. … The (Israeli) Diplomatic-Security Cabinet decided that Israel would not allow an Iranian military presence there. Since then, Israel has invested considerable efforts in preventing Iran and Hezbollah from establishing themselves in Syria, while making sure it [Israel] inflicts minimal damage to the Damascus regime.[24]

This long-term Israeli position—yes to Assad, no to Iran—was stressed last year as the regime reconquered the south from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) Southern Front. While Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared, "We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime; for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights,"[25] and Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot stressed that Israel will allow "only" Assad regime forces to occupy the Golan "border,"[26] ultra-right Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman explained that "Israel prefers to see Syria returning to the situation before the civil war, with the central rule under Assad leadership."[27]

This strategy of trying to separate Assad and Iran in collaboration with Russia is in line with the increasingly assertive position of the Gulf, as seen in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—a bastion of regional counter-revolution—being the first to reopen its embassy in Damascus on December 27.[28]

The UAE has been pushing for this for years; last June 8, UAE Foreign Minister Dr. Anwar Gargash declared, "I think it was a mistake to kick Syria out of the Arab League," referring to the Syrian opposition as "al-Qaida-based."[29] The UAE move was closely followed by Bahrain, which referred to "brotherly Syria."[30] This was preceded by the visit to Damascus by Sudanese tyrant Omar al-Bashir, the first Arab head of state to visit since 2011;[31] Jordan's reopening of its border with Syria, where the two countries will now share a "free trade" zone;[32] and the high-level visit to Cairo by Assad's security chief Ali Mamlouk on December 22,[33] though al-Sisi's brutal Egyptian dictatorship has been pro-Assad ever since the UAE-backed coup in 2013.[34] These states are pushing to have Syria's membership of the Arab League restored; on March 20, Egypt's Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, announced that "Egypt doesn't have any conditions for Syria returning to the Arab League," adding that "Cairo and Damascus have strong ties."[35]

Returning to the Jewish News Syndicate article, a senior Israeli official refused to comment on the decision by some Arab states, such as Bahrain and the UAE, to reopen their embassies in Damascus, saying only that the rapprochement between Arab states and Syria was "less dangerous for Israel because these Arab states also want to see Iran out of Syria."

Trump's "withdrawal" tweet was aligned with this strategy of states that have been strongly allied with Trump since the onset of his presidency. These same states—UAE, Jordan, Egypt, and Bahrain—also have close ties with Putin's Russia; the first three welcomed the Russian invasion of Syria in 2015, as did Israel.[36]

In retrospect, the well-publicized, semi-secret meetings that took place before and since Trump's election, between Trump and Putin personnel and involving the UAE, Israeli officials, and former Blackwater folk, had a clear logic: push back the oversized Iranian influence by bolstering the Assad regime's counter-revolutionary "stability" so that it no longer needs so much Iranian rabble to do its fighting. According to David Hearst, writing in *Middle East Eye*, a more recent meeting between intelligence officials of Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia "hatched a plan to welcome Syrian President Bashar al-Assad back into the Arab League to marginalize the regional influence of Turkey and Iran."[37]

Or, perhaps, this is not as clear as it seems; rather, use of the rhetoric of pushing back the Iranian "threat" (as if the Iranian contra gangs were a threat to anyone but the Syrian people) may simply aim to justify their main aim anyway, that of bolstering Assad's victorious counter-revolution, putting what they hope to be the final nails in the coffin of the Arab Spring, which Assad, al-Sisi, the UAE, the Saudis, Netanyahu, Trump, Putin, and the Ayatollahs are united in hating with a passion.

This is more significant now with Assad's need for "reconstruction" funding, which neither Russia nor Iran will be able to provide enough of. Western countries, meanwhile, are (currently) sticking to the line that the Geneva process of political settlement needs to get off the ground first. The move by the Gulf is a signal to Damascus: Push Iran aside somewhat, and we're here to provide the funds. A high-level visit by one of the UAE's largest real estate companies to meet Syrian partners in Damascus underlines this dynamic.[38]

The wild card is the big state behind the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan: Saudi Arabia. Gangland leader Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman cares nothing about either the Syrian or the Palestinian people; it is widely assumed that the more forward-moving states have Saudi backing, with Mohammad bin Salman dropping hints like "Bashar is staying. … I believe that Bashar's interests are not to let the Iranians do whatever they want they want to do."[39]

However, Riyadh is more tempered due to its special position as head of the Sunni world and because it has more at stake in its regional rivalry with Iran than do its underlings. The UAE has a

raging economic relationship with Iran,40 and only uses the "push Iran aside" rationale to butter up its Saudi allies; and there are no Shia in Egypt to cause al-Sisi to care about Iranian influence.

"Analysis" That May Have Been Useful Half a Century Ago

Much binary, mechanical "geopolitics" in recent years imagines the moves by some Gulf states to mend ties with Israel as representing a "U.S.-backed axis" opposed to a "Russian-backed" Iran and Assad. Take a breath, dear Manicheans: The same states carrying out rapprochement with Israel are carrying out rapprochement with Assad. The closest to both Israel and Assad is al-Sisi's Egypt; the race to the finish-line states in both cases include the UAE and Bahrain; the more cautious behind-the-scenes power is Saudi Arabia.

This even includes the less expected: Sudan's "Islamist" regime that was the first to visit Assad was also moving toward normalization with Israel;[41] three delegations from the pro-Assad Iraqi regime visited Israel;[42] while the always strongly pro-Iran and pro-Assad Sultan Qaboos of Oman hosted a state visit from Netanyahu.[43]

Countless left analysts, alongside much of the mainstream media, continue to write as if they are living half a century ago, even 30 years after the end of the Cold War. It is unclear how such "analysis" purports to deal with such elephants in the room as the raging Israeli-Russian relationship (not only over Syria but also Crimea and so on), Putin and Netanyahu having met at least a dozen times since 2015;[44] the raging Egypt-Russia relationship (for instance, their deal to build Egypt's first nuclear plant);[45] the UAE concluding a declaration of "strategic partnership" with Russia;[46] the growing Saudi ties with Russia, especially over oil politics;[47] and the U.S.-Iranian joint-venture regime in Iraq, a key Assad ally.

Forget absurd Cold War fantasies; what we're dealing with here are not even clashes of "rival empires." As always, imperial rivalries do explain some of what is going on. But even this remains a sideshow compared to the principle dynamic, the alliance of counter-revolutionary powers to bury the Syrian revolution, symbolizing the burial of the Arab Spring.

Where Does Iran Fit In?

One problem, however, is that Turkey and Iran are also counter-revolutionary powers, yet both are seen as enemies by these Saudi-aligned states who are making up with Assad, as well as by Trump and Israel. Let's take them one at a time.

Is Iran being made the fall guy because it represents some kind of "revolutionary" threat to imperialist order in the region, due to reverberations going back to 1979? Hardly. The regime's savage repression of working-class struggle is entirely in tandem with the average U.S.-backed dictatorship in the region. Considering it is the United States that is denying its own companies lucrative investment opportunities in Iran, rather than Iran nationalizing or expelling these companies, the idea of Iran as a "revolutionary" threat makes little sense.

The preference of major European countries and companies to be fully engaged in profit-making ventures in Iran is entirely logical imperialist policy. Likewise, the Obama administration's policy of bringing Iran back into the fold via the nuclear treaty and the lifting of sanctions was entirely logical. When Obama explained that "there's incredible talent and resources and sophistication inside of Iran, and it would be a very successful regional power" if it signed the nuclear treaty;[48] when, by contrast, he claimed that "the biggest threats" to the Saudis and Gulf states "may not be coming from Iran invading" but "from dissatisfaction inside their own countries";[49] when Vice President Joseph Biden claimed the "biggest problem" in Syria was U.S. allies like Turkey and Saudi

Arabia,[50] accusing them of pouring "hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons" into the Syrian opposition—all this was logical imperialist policy.

Obama could see that a relatively sophisticated, modernizing capitalist state of 80 million people may be a better bet as an ally in imposing regional "stability" than archaic Gulf monarchies built on sand and oil that could come tottering down. He understood how to separate this reality from toothless anti-American and anti-Zionist rhetoric emanating from Tehran, which he understood to be a product of history and mainly of use for internal Iranian nationalist mobilization and regime validation.

Trump's reversal of these policies partly stems from a narrow alignment with Iran's regional Saudi and Israeli rivals, alongside a revived neoconservative need for a traditional "enemy" target to justify warmongering and militarism, which, similar to Tehran's rhetoric, is also justified by alleged "historical grievance" and largely designed for domestic mobilization. On a larger scale, this reversal may also be related to Trump's view of China as the major U.S. global rival, given Iran's key role in China's mammoth Belt and Road Initiative,[51] stretching across Asia from China to Italy.

Israel reacted to Trump's withdrawal tweet by stepping up attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. This was tolerated as always by the Russian air defenses in Syria; the visit at that time by Russian senators to Israel to discuss the "joint struggle against terrorism" was likely part of this process.[52]

Is this because Iran is a "threat" to Israel? This is one of the most laughable versions of "Iranian threat" discourse; the nuclear-armed First World state has hit hundreds of Iranian-backed targets in Syria (while being careful always to not weaken Assad in the process), while the far weaker Iranian regime has almost never even returned fire, let alone initiated it. Yet Iran "threatens" Israel? Iran doesn't even threaten the illegal Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan, let alone Israel.

Israel hits Iranian targets because the biggest bully on the block doesn't like the affront to its power of a bunch of unruly militias running around its "backyard" shouting empty "death to Israel" slogans, not because these, relatively speaking, street thugs are actually a threat to the regional crime boss. As a threat to the Syrian people, their insolence could be tolerated, but with Assad's military dominance ensured, they are now dispensable trash. Once again, the great Israeli-Iranian enmity is highly symbolic; both use an alleged "existential" threat to bolster their sectarian-based projects at home and project power in the region, *the fierceness of the rhetoric mediated by safe geographic distance*.

In contrast, Saudi geopolitical rivalry with Iran (and both countries' with Turkey) has a more material reality; these medium-sized powers further their quest for sub-imperial regional domination by using sectarian positioning (if not radical sectarian politics, as often assumed), being heads of the two major schools of Islam. The presence of an oppressed Shiite minority in eastern Saudi Arabia, which Iran attempts to influence, is a further reason for tension.

However, as an outsider to the Arab world, Iran's only real influence has been gained via such sectarian positioning among Shia populations within multiconfessional states such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. This tends to lead to sectarian conflict rather than unity against corrupt and repressive rulers. The one and only place Iranian influence was aligned with a potential revolutionary overthrow was among the Shia majority that rose up against the minority monarchy of tiny Bahrain at the onset of the Arab Spring, an uprising swiftly crushed by the Saudis.

Therefore, warnings that Iran will not leave Syria "completely," and that therefore the Gulf states and Israel are deluding themselves by relying on Assad, reveal fundamental misunderstandings. As

another counter-revolutionary state, Iran is a threat to no one except the Syrian people who it has helped brutalize on behalf of Assad. Iran's real and symbolic rivals do not need all Iranian forces, companies, and influence to leave Syria "completely," as if Iran were some unique virus. "Victory" in such "wars" of position is gained via the clipping of wings; victory is symbolic, about prestige, about appearance, about influence. The heightened rhetoric of Iranian "threat" in Israeli and Saudi discourse results from a large regional rival, which uses a particular rhetorical flourish, becoming too big for its boots; pushing it back will be their "victory."

According to David Hearst, the Israeli, Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi intelligence chiefs at the alleged "welcome back Assad" meeting discussed above "did not expect Bashar to break relations with Iran, but they wanted Bashar to use the Iranians rather than be used by them."

Iran has overreached anyway; it cannot completely dominate Syria, let alone afford the costs of reconstruction, so it will have to be satisfied with some presence and some reconstruction contracts that its Russian rival doesn't edge it out of. Iran is much more heavily invested in neighboring Iraq, yet even there it is unable to exercise economic domination.[53]

Turkey, an Outlier from the Counter-revolutionary Dynamic?

Meanwhile, Saudi-allied UAE, Egypt, and Jordan are far more invested in confronting Turkish influence; they view the Sunni-populist Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—connected to Turkey's Erdogan regime, the Qatari Emir, and Hamas—as their key enemy. Their public anti-Iranian stance is mostly for the purpose of maintaining their coalition with Saudi Arabia, which is equally hostile to both Iran and the MB-aligned bloc.

The intelligence officials at the "welcome back Assad" meeting allegedly "considered Turkey, rather than Iran, to be their major military rival in the region. … The Israelis told the meeting that Iran could be contained militarily, but that Turkey had a far greater capability." There is some logic in this. Iran's rhetoric is loud in proportion to its hollowness, as explained above. By contrast, by playing the populist card via the MB throughout the Arab Spring, Turkey and Qatar were engaged in what these other conservative states consider a dangerous game among the Sunni masses of Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf.

However, the aim of Turkey and Qatar in playing populism was merely to saddle the Arab Spring uprisings with their conservative MB leadership, in a "softer" counter-revolutionary endeavor than more traditional forms of direct repression preferred by the Saudi-UAE bloc. One example of the Saudi-UAE bloc's style of repression was the bloody coup they orchestrated in Egypt in 2013 against the Turkish and Qatari backed, MB-led, elected Morsi government.

Moreover, despite the rivalry between, and different tactical approaches of, the Saudi-led and Turkey-led blocs, Putin's coddling of Erdogan highlights the fact that Turkey's own direction regarding Syria is not fundamentally different. Indeed it has taken a sharp turn in the last few years, corresponding to an internal realignment of Erdogan's moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party with its previous opponents on the secular-nationalist right, including the far-right Nationalist Movement Party.

It is true that Turkey is still supporting the Syrian opposition's control of much of northwest Syria. Turkey's aim is hardly to encourage revolution; it simply wants to avert a brutal Assadist conquest that would send hundreds of thousands more Syrian refugees into Turkey, which already accommodates 3.7 million refugees. Nevertheless, at this stage it corresponds to an existential need of the beleaguered opposition.

But Turkey's main interest in its weakened and dependent rebel allies is for use as cannon fodder to help drive the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and SDF out of northeastern Syria, just as many were earlier used in Turkey's plunder and "cleansing" of Kurdish-majority Afrin. From Putin's point of view, Erdogan's support for rebel Idlib can be tolerated as long as Turkey holds the rebels back from any active front against Assad. As Assad takes advantage of the Russian-Turkish negotiated "ceasefire" to pummel the region with massive bombing, which killed 160 civilians and drove 90,000 from their homes just between mid-February and early March,[54] Putin also double-crosses Erdogan by joining the terror—bombing hospitals, bakeries, and civil rescue centers[55]—while Turkey remains pliant. And by setting the rebels and the YPG-SDF against each other—a dynamic which the YPG itself has also fed[56]—both can be weakened against Assad in the long run.

Indeed, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's oxymoronic statement that Turkey can "work with Assad" if he wins a "democratic election" represents Turkey's own overture to the regime;[57] and it was recently confirmed that Assad's security chief, Ali Mamlouk, met Turkish intelligence last December.[58] Meanwhile, Turkey's ally Qatar quietly follows the same path of accommodation with Assad as its Gulf rivals,[59] especially with "reconstruction," though claiming it will not restore diplomatic relations.[60]

'Withdrawal' a Green Light to Erdogan?

Almost every analyst initially claimed that Trump's withdrawal announcement was a sell-out of the SDF to Erdogan, a green light to Turkey to carry out its threatened invasion of northeast Syria. This interpretation is understandable; it was preceded by Turkey's decision to buy U.S. patriot missiles, widely believed to have sealed the deal. While this would contradict Trump's alliance with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis, such double-dealing by a large imperialist power would hardly be remarkable.

However, there are indications that this theory had little reality. Since Trump first raised the issue of withdrawal in early 2018, discussion began to be aired of troops from the Gulf replacing U.S. troops in northeastern Syria;[61] around the time, Saudi Arabia provided $100 million to the SDF-ruled region. In the context of the current Gulf recognition of Assad, this idea takes on a new meaning, especially given alleged discussion of pro-Assad, anti-Turkey Egyptian and Emirati troops taking part.[62]

In any case, there has been no sign of Turkish invasion, talk of which was arguably more about nationalistic mobilization inside Turkey than any real desire for such a dangerous adventure. The SDF holds a vast area of northeast and central-east Syria; it is not as if Turkey was ever likely to invade as far south as Raqqa, let alone Deir ez-Zor! Turkey would confront widespread resistance trying to occupy such a large region; it is not like isolated Afrin.

However, the initial main theater of interest was Manbij in the north, where U.S.-Turkish dealing had been going on for months. Manbij is the only SDF possession west of the Euphrates River, where Turkey had previously drawn a red line against the SDF. The SDF had already agreed that only non-YPG elements of the SDF would remain in this Arab-majority city. Being close to the Turkish border, Erdogan's threats following Trump's announcement did have an air of reality, so the SDF, feeling vulnerable to U.S. abandonment, called in the Assad regime to "protect Syria's border." The regime sent troops to nearby Arima to block a possible Turkish offensive against Manbij.

To this, Erdogan reacted that he had no problem with Assad taking over Manbij, as long as it means the YPG leave,[63] which the regime claimed had occurred upon its entry into Arima[64] (the YPG claims to have already left the city to only Arab members of the SDF in 2016).

This suggests that both the Turkish-backed rebels and the SDF were being played; that Trump's

withdrawal threat merely strengthened Assad's hand in the region vis a vis the SDF; and that even in the northern border region where one might expect a withdrawal to favor Turkey, "withdrawal" had the effect of browbeating the SDF into caving in to Assad.

Some small-scale Turkish operation may still take place close to the border, so that Erdogan's rhetoric does not appear too hollow, but even this could only occur if coordinated with Moscow, which is also coordinating with Assad. This is because, as with other Turkish operations in northern Syria, it will be essential to acquire Russian permission to use Syrian air space (assuming that U.S. forces do actually leave).[65] This will give Russia ultimate control over the extent of such an operation.

... or to Assad?

And here we return to the idea that U.S. withdrawal would be less a green light to Erdogan to attack the SDF than a more gradual process of sell-out of the SDF to the Assad regime.

Trump's initial withdrawal tweet even suggests this: "Russia, Iran, Syria & others are the local enemy of ISIS. We were doing there [sic] work."[66] In other words, the Assad regime should be allowed into the east to continue "fighting ISIS." It was no surprise that Trump's friends in Russia praised Trump's decision.[67] This was soon followed by movement of Assadist forces toward SDF-controlled eastern Deir ez-Zor.[68]

However, some clarification may be in order: How can a U.S. withdrawal favor Assad if the U.S. presence in Syria was never opposed to the regime in the first place? Here we need to understand the U.S. relationship with the SDF. The basis of the U.S. choice of the SDF, rather than Syrian rebels, as its ally against ISIS was that the SDF does not fight the Assad regime (except when attacked); and dropping the fight against Assad was always the key demand the United States had put on FSA units if they were to be armed against ISIS. Other than a few micro-groups, most of the FSA, while actively fighting ISIS themselves, refused to accept such a demand, which would have nullified their entire purpose.

This meant the United States and SDF fought ISIS in the east, in a war almost entirely disconnected from Assad's war against the rebellion, which largely took place in western Syria. But while the SDF did not fight Assad, neither is it pro-Assad; rather, it is interested in building its own project, the "Rojava revolution," in its own space, separate from both Assad and the rebels. Thus, the United States was maintaining a region outside Assad's direct control. However, this was never the ultimate U.S. aim, which was merely to use the SDF to defeat ISIS.

Of course, U.S. calls to protect its Kurdish-led allies, and the continued delivery of arms to the SDF, potentially pose a problem for Assad as well as Erdogan. Currently, however, Assad's strategy is not to openly attack the SDF—a massive operation which the regime does not have the capacity for at present—but rather to use the atmosphere of the Turkish threat and U.S. withdrawal to "negotiate" with the SDF from a position of strength.

Reintegration with the regime is also the SDF strategy (and some SDF leaders even want a deal with Assad regardless of U.S. moves).69 Essentially, the United States, its Gulf allies, and the SDF leadership are on the same wavelength when it comes to the Assad regime, preferring a "soft reintegration" of the northeast into the Assadist state; to the extent the United States gradually abandons the SDF, and the SDF attempts to negotiate a deal with Assad, the two processes are largely in harmony.

Of course, the SDF hopes to maintain some degree of autonomy for its Rojava statelet. However,

Assad is in a militarily powerful position, having largely defeated the rebels; his regime is under no pressure to concede anything. Assad may bargain now, just to stave off Turkey, but even this would involve the reduction of autonomy to such fig-leaf status that the SDF could hardly agree without liquidating its cause. With Assad-SDF negotiations likely to be overseen by Russia,[70] the flavor of such negotiations is obvious.

In any case, once Assad's state is more secure and "normalized," and the opposition in the northwest crushed, he will turn and crush Rojava and any hint of autonomy as well, as he has always promised to.

But why would the United States agree to hand back Syrian territory to the regime? To ask this question reveals basic misunderstandings. Why wouldn't Trump want Assad to reconquer Syrian territory is a better question; at times, the United States has directly helped Assad do so. The mistake was to assume that the U.S. presence in northeast Syria, in aiding the SDF, had any purpose other than that endlessly stated by U.S. leaders—to defeat ISIS. "That's it," as Trump has continually said. The United States had no more interest in helping the SDF build its alternative than it ever had of aiding the rebellion against Assad.

Former Obama advisor Steven Simon explains that the United States needs to persuade the Kurds to "accept that they are not going to get the same deal that their Iraqi cousins have won from Baghdad," while the atmosphere of Turkish threat and U.S. withdrawal "will probably convince the Kurds that they have little choice." Simon adds:

The Syrian regime could provide meaningful incentives, such as integrating the Kurdish forces into Damascus' chain of command. … Then, either directly or through the United Nations, the United States will have to talk to the Assad regime on the premise that a restoration of Syrian state authority in northeast Syria, including the re-entry of Syrian government forces, is required to stabilize that part of the country over the long term. To this end, the United States will have to deal with the Russians as well, so there is a coordinated approach to both the Turks and the Syrian regime.

U.S. leaders currently fear the loss of credibility that would result from precipitously dumping their SDF allies in the face of any brutal reconquest by Assad or Erdogan, while also likely seeing the SDF-controlled northeast as a bargaining chip to get Assad to reduce Iran's presence. Meanwhile, Assad also wants to avoid direct confrontation with the SDF until his other enemies are defeated. But eventually the SDF's usefulness to both U.S. imperialism and Assad's tyranny will run its course.

Rebel-Kurdish Division Fatal

SDF spokesperson Jia Kurd explained that an Assad-SDF agreement "will give a big push toward ending the occupation and terrorism in Syria."[71] One could assume that by "terrorism" the SDF was referring to ISIS, but given that the United States and SDF have driven ISIS from Syria, this designation likely refers to the rebels; the leaders of the SDF from the Democratic Union Party have long referred to anti-Assad rebels collectively as "terrorists" and "jihadists," while rarely listing the regime as an enemy.

Of course, this talk takes place following the participation of many rebel groups in the Turkish-led invasion of Kurdish Afrin early last year, leading to an orgy of killing and looting and the expulsion of some 150,000 Kurds from the region, along with those groups' promise to do the same again if Turkey were to invade the northeast. But then this in turn occurred following the YPG's alliance with the murderous Russian air force in early 2016, as it invaded and captured the Arab-majority Tal Rifaat-Menagh region north of Aleppo from the rebels, likewise expelling tens of thousands of people

and cutting off besieged Aleppo from its hinterland bordering Turkey, sealing the city's fate.

Moreover, if Putin and Assad eventually do give Erdogan the go-ahead to attack the SDF in some part of northeastern Syria—as implied by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's recent referral to the 1998 Syria-Turkey Adana Treaty that allowed for Turkish cross-border raids against "terrorists"[72]—there is likely to be some quid pro quo in the northwest—such as Erdogan agreeing to further Assadist encroachment into southern parts of Greater Idlib. It would be the ultimate irony to watch rebel (or ex-rebel) troops attacking the SDF in the northeast as part of a Turkish operation while Assad and Russia further slice into the last part of rebel Syria in the northwest.

While the differences between Syrian Kurds and rebels were already apparent in 2011, years of genocidal violence by an overwhelmingly militarily dominant regime, backed by massive foreign intervention and otherwise international indifference, has partially made proxies of the main leaderships on both sides. It is very difficult to criticize from afar. Who can blame the rebels for their alliance with Turkey, which almost alone in the world provided some support to the people facing genocide, while accommodating 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the biggest refugee population in the world? Who can blame the SDF for allying with the United States against such a monstrous enemy as ISIS, especially when faced with extinction in Kobane?

However, the resulting hardening of the division between the Arab and Kurdish populations outside Assadist control has been the death-knell of both, leading them into further dependence on, and the threat of abandonment by, foreign interests, to the benefit only of the regime. The inability of the main leaderships on both sides to present a united front against all the enemies of the popular masses has been a decisive card in the hands of Assad and the regional counter-revolution.

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