What do Trump's 'withdrawal' from Syria and the Gulf's rapprochement with Assad have in common?

written by Michael Karadjis | January 20, 2019

In the days since Donald Trump's announcement that the US was to rapidly withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria, an enormous amount of speculation about what this means has taken place. In my initial piece, I expressed a number of views that are not widely shared.

First, I gave more credit to Trump having a valid position, from the point of view of US imperialism, than what was generally conceded. Overwhelmingly Trump's move has been viewed as a pure personal whim, which is allegedly in conflict with what all other US ruling class circles prefer to happen.

Secondly, while almost every analyst claimed this move was a sell-out of the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to the Erdogan regime in Turkey, I stressed that it was just as much, if not more, a green light for the Bashar Assad tyranny to take control of the SDF-controlled regions.

With masses of contradictory information, it has been difficult to make coherent sense of the developments; none of us are seers. In this follow-up piece, I hope to shed more light on what I think is occurring.

Did Trump's move contradict US ruling class interests?

On the first question, it is of course true that Trump acts on whim, and has a tendency to speak jibberish, which might well suggest that his orders came from a place of complete ignorance and be at variance with US ruling class interests. However, the idea that momentous decisions are made entirely by one guy with quasi-dictatorial powers is problematic. I will argue here that, Trump's idiosyncrasies aside, the decision to withdraw, and the consequences thereof, are entirely within the bounds of US ruling class interests, so whether or not it was entirely accidental is not so material.

As Steven Simon, who served on the National Security Council in the Clinton and Obama administrations, puts it succinctly, Trump's "impulsive and uncoordinated move" nevertheless "coincided with strategic imperative, even if the president himself was unaware of it."

Of course, one could argue that a 24-hour withdrawal would indeed be destabilising, but it was naïve

to believe that an order to withdraw would automatically mean that all US forces, weaponry, bases, aircraft and intelligence are gone the next day, whatever a tweet may say. Between Trump's impulsive statements and the realities and complexities of actually withdrawing, there was plenty of wiggle room for Trump's "immediate" withdrawal to turn into a four-month timetable, involving negotiation between Trump and other ruling class figures, such as Senator Lindsay Graham.

Graham got Trump to agree that complete withdrawal should only take place once ISIS is totally defeated in Syria, which has always been Trump's own condition (though Trump is basically correct that the US and SDF have driven it from 99 percent of the country), and that "our Kurdish allies are protected." Similar statements were then made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton.

Meanwhile, the US military is reportedly establishing new military bases just across the Syrian border in Iraq, from where it can continue to bomb the last tiny piece of ISIS remaining. Despite alarmist forecasts that Trump was even selling out to ISIS, "between December 16 and December 29, US-led coalition military forces conducted 469 air and artillery strikes targeting ISIS in Syria." The last major towns occupied by ISIS, Hajin and Kashmah, were captured by the SDF on December 25 and January 2 respectively.

Of course, none of the statements extending the withdrawal said anything whatsoever about pressure on the Assad regime. That has simply never had anything to do with the US presence, one way or another.

'Withdrawal' a green light to Assad, not Erdogan

On the second question, I am now even more convinced of the correctness of my initial view, that the 'green light' is mainly aimed at the Assad regime, and its Russian backers, rather than Erdogan, as I will explain in detail below.

However, some clarification may be in order: how can a US withdrawal favour Assad and Russia if the US presence in Syria was never opposed to them in the first place? Here we need to understand the US relationship with its ground ally, the SDF, which controls northeast Syria since driving out ISIS. The key basis of the US choice of the SDF, rather than Syrian rebels, as its ally against ISIS was that the SDF does not fight the Assad regime; and dropping the fight against Assad was the key demand the US had put on FSA units if they were to be armed against ISIS, a condition the FSA, while actively fighting ISIS itself, refused to accept.

This meant the US and SDF could fight ISIS in the east in a war completely separate to Assad's counterrevolutionary war against the rebellion in western Syria. But while the SDF was not anti-Assad, nor was it pro-Assad; rather, it was interested in building its own project, the 'Rojava revolution', in its own space, separate to both Assad and the rebels. Therefore, the US was maintaining a region outside Assad's direct control; but it is important to understand that this was never the ultimate US aim; the US aim was merely to use the SDF to defeat ISIS. Therefore, the current processes of the US abandoning the SDF to Assad, and the SDF itself trying to negotiate a deal with Assad, are essentially in perfect harmony, but in these "negotiations" it is the regime, not the Rojava project, that will eventually come out on top.

Israel, Gulf states, welcome back the Assad regime

According to a recent article entitled 'We had an opportunity to assassinate Assad, top Israeli official reveals':

"…prolonged conflict in Syria saw Israel often hold negotiations with the regime in Damascus in

order to reach an agreement in Syria. … the (Israeli) Diplomatic-Security Cabinet held extensive discussions on the situation in Syria and 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."

This long-term Israeli position – yes to Assad, no to Iran – was stressed even more strongly last year as the Assad regime reconquered the south from the FSA Southern Front. While Israeli prime minister Netanyahu declared "We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 yearsnot a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights," and Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot stressed that Israel will allow "only" Assad regime forces to occupy the Golan "border", ultra-right defence minister Avigdor Lieberman told the full truth that "Israel prefers to see Syria returning to the situation before the civil war, where the central rule under Assad leadership."

Returning to the 'assassination' article, the senior Israeli official "refused to comment on the decision by some Arab states, such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, 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."

This Israeli strategy of trying to separate Assad and Iran, in collaboration with Assad's major patron, Russia, is now in line with the increasingly assertive position of the Gulf, as seen in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – always a bastion of regional counterrevolution – being the first to re-open its embassy in Damascus on December 27. Actually, the UAE has been pushing for this for over two years but tried not to act unilaterally, till now; 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." The UAE was followed almost immediately by Bahrain, which referred to "brotherly Syria," with similar hints coming out of Kuwait; these moves were preceded by the visit to Damascus by Assad's fellow tyrant, Omar al-Bashir, fittingly the first Arab head of state to visit since 2011, along with the high-level visit to Cairo by Assad's security chief Ali Mamlouk on December 22 (though in any case al-Sisi's brutal Egyptian dictatorship has been pro-Assad ever since the UAE-backed bloody coup in 2013), and Jordan's re-opening of its border with Syria. Meanwhile, these states are pushing to have Syria's membership of the Arab League restored.

Therefore, while Trump's "withdrawal" may have been a mere personal whim, it happens that it is fully aligned with this trend, with the strategy of these states which have been strongly allied with Trump since the onset of his presidency. Not coincidentally, all these states – UAE, Jordan, Egypt and Bahrain – also have close ties with Putin's Russia, and first three welcomed the Russian invasion of Syria in 2015, as did Israel of course.

In retrospect, the well-publicised semi-secret meetings that took place before and since Trump's election, between Trump and Putin personnel and involving the UAE, the UAE-backed Palestinian thug Dahlan, Israeli officials and even Blackwater folk had a clear logic: push back the oversized Iranian influence by moving to bolster the Assad regime's counterrevolutionary "stability" so that it is no longer in need of so much Iranian rabble to do its fighting for it. 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 marginalise the regional influence of Turkey and Iran."

Or, perhaps, this is not so clear after all; because maybe it is the reverse: use the rhetoric of pushing back the Iranian "threat" (really, as if the Iranian contra gangs were ever a threat to anyone but the Syrian people) to justify their main aim anyway, ie, bolstering Assad's victorious counterrevolution, putting the final nails – or what they hope to be final – in the coffin of the Arab Spring, which Assad,

Sisi, the UAE, the Saudis, Netanyahu, Trump, Putin and the Ayatollahs are all united in hating with a passion.

This is even more significant now with Assad's need for "reconstruction" funding, which neither Russia nor Iran will be able to provide enough of, while western countries 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, we're here to provide the funds you need. A recent high-level visit by one of the UAE's largest real estate companies to meet Syrian partners in Damascus underlines this dynamic.

The wild card is the big state behind UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait: Saudi Arabia. Gang-land leader Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) is strongly aligned with his UAE counterpart and the Sisi dictatorship, and cares nothing about either the Syrian or the Palestinian people; these more forward moving states almost certainly have Saudi backing, and there have been hints coming out of Riyadh that it is also willing to accept Assad without Iran, with MBS stating that "Bashar is staying … I believe that Bashar's interests are not to let the Iranians do whatever they want they want to do."

However, Riyadh is more tempered about this due to its special position as religious head of the Sunni world, and the fact that it has more at stake in its regional rivalry with Iran than its underlings do. The UAE for example has a raging economic relationship with Iran, and only uses the 'push Iran aside' rationale to butter up its Saudi allies; and there are no Shia in Egypt for Sisi to care anything about Iranian influence. But there is little doubt that MBS is behind the scenes part of the picture.

"Analysis" that may have been useful about half a century ago

Much binary, mechanical "geopolitics" in recent years imagined the moves by some of the Gulf states to mend ties with Israel as representing a "US-backed axis" as opposed to a "Russian-backed" Iran and Assad etc. Imagine, this even passes for "analysis" in some quarters. Take a breath, dear Manicheans: exactly the same Gulf states and their regional allies that are 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, again in both cases.

This even includes the less expected: Sudan's reactionary 'Islamist' regime that just visited Assad, and that fights for the Saudis in Yemen, has also been moving towards normalisation with Israel; three delegations from the pro-Assad Iraqi regime recently visited Israel; while the strongly pro-Iran and pro-Assad Sultan Qaboos of Omanrecently hosted a state visit from Netanyahu.

It is something of a pity that countless left analysts, alongside much of the mainstream media, continue to write things that suggest they are living about 50 years in the past, even now, 30 years into the post-Cold War world. It is mind-boggling how such "analysis" imagines it can deal with such elephants in the room as the raging Israeli-Russian relationship (especially Putin-Netanyahu), not only over Syria but also Crimea etc; the raging Egypt-Russia relationship (discussion about Russia building a nuclear plant for Egypt); the UAE concluding a declaration of "strategic partnership" with Russia; the growing Saudi ties with Russia, especially over oil politics; and the US-Iranian joint-venture regime in Iraq, a key Assad ally. Really, why should Trump's alliance with Putin seem odd?

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, of course. But even this is essentially a sideshow compared to the principle dynamic, the alliance of counterrevolutionary powers, for counterrevolution, the burial of the Syrian revolution symbolising the burial of the Arab

Spring.

Where does Iran fit in?

One problem with this analysis, however, is that both Turkey and Iran are also counterrevolutionary powers, yet both are seen as enemies by these Saudi-aligned states, and by Israel. Let's take them one at a time.

If Iran is to be pushed aside – regardless of whether one believes this is due to it being a genuine "danger" to these states, or merely as an excuse to bolster Assad – then certainly, it is the fall guy.

However, on the one hand, Iran has overreached anyway; what has caused the heightened rhetoric of Iranian "threat" in Israeli and Saudi discourse is quite simply that a large regional rival, which uses a particular rhetorical flourish, however toothless, that targets these regimes, has become too big for its boots; pushing it back will therefore be their "victory." But it will be impossible for Iran to dominate Syria anyway, let alone afford the costs of reconstruction; it will have to be satisfied with some presence, and some reconstruction contracts, whatever its Russian rival doesn't edge it out of. Iran is much more heavily invested in neighbouring Iraq, yet even there Iran is unable to exercise economic domination.

On the other hand, we have continually heard warnings that Iran will not leave "completely," and so the Gulf states and Israel are kidding themselves by relying on Assad. This however reveals some fundamental misunderstandings. As stated above, Iran is just another counterrevolutionary state; it is a threat to no-one except the Syrian people who it has helped brutalise on behalf of the Assad's genocide regime. Iran's rivals do not need all Iranian forces, companies and influence to leave Syria "completely," as if Iran were some kind of unique virus; "victory" in such "wars" of position is gained via the clipping of wings; victory is symbolic, about prestige, about appearance.

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."

Israel has reacted to Trump's withdrawal threat by announcing it will step up its bombing of Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, tolerated as always by the Russian air defences in Syria. The idea of an "Iranian threat" takes on its most laughable version when it comes to Israel; 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? Extraordinary imagination. Iran doesn't even threaten the illegal Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan (which is often now referred to as "Israel" in much commentary), 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.

A gift to Erdogan?

Meanwhile, states such as the UAE, Egypt and Jordan are far more invested in confronting Turkish influence than in confronting Iran (and the Saudis are equally interested in confronting both). These states view the Sunni-populist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – connected to Qatar, Turkey and Hamas – as their key enemy, rather than Iran. Notably, the intelligence officials at the alleged 'welcome back Assad' meeting "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 an outsider to the Arab world, its only real influence has been gained on sectarian grounds, among the Shia populations of Iraq and Lebanon. The only place Iranian influence was ever a danger was among the Shia majority that rose up against the minority Bahraini monarchy at the onset of the Arab Spring, swiftly crushed by the Saudis. By contrast, by playing the populist card via the Muslim Brotherhood, especially 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 and the Gulf.

For his part, Trump has been strongly associated with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis, while the US alliance with the YPG-SDF in Syria placed it in conflict with their Turkish opponent. The Saudi pledge to provide $100 million to the SDF-ruled, US-occupied zone of northeast Syria several months ago was considered an affront by Turkey.

Yet Trump's sudden announcement of withdrawal has been widely seen as a pro-Turkey move, enabling Erdogan to attack the Kurds. This interpretation is understandable; it was preceded by Turkey's decision to buy US patriot missiles, widely believed to have sealed the deal.

Of course, this does not have to be a contradiction; after all, Putin's Russia has been coddling both Erdogan and MBS-Sisi, and Iran and Israel, at the same time. Larger imperialist powers are quite capable of playing with both or all sides among regional rivals.

Turkey, an outlier from the counterrevolutionary dynamic?

Moreover, despite the rivalry between the Saudi-led and Turkey-led blocs, Putin's coddling of Erdogan highlights the fact that Turkey's own direction regarding Syria is not that different.

It is true that Turkey is still supporting the Syrian opposition's control of much of northwest Syria, and therefore may be seen as an outlier in the regional counterrevolutionary dynamic. And certainly Turkey's pro-rebel position appears positive in comparison to the UAE's role in cynically encouraging the rapid surrender of the FSA Southern Front to Assad. While Turkey's aim there is hardly to encourage revolution, nevertheless it 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.

But Turkey's current main use for many of its weakened and dependent rebel allies is to use them as cannon fodder for its threat to drive the YPG-SDF out of northeastern Syria, as many were earlier used in the plunder and "cleansing" of Afrin. From Putin's point of view, as long as the rebels are held back from any active front against Assad, Turkey is effectively doing much the same as the Gulf; and by setting the rebels and the YPG-SDF against each other – a dynamic which the YPG has also been guilty of feeding – both can be weakened against Assad in the long run.

Indeed, Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's recent oxymoronic statement that Turkey can "work with Assad" if he wins a "democratic election" represents Turkey's own overture to the regime; and in any case, its close ally Qatar is following the same path of accommodation with Assad as its Gulf rivals, while the MB-ruling party in Tunisia is now in discussions with the Sisi regime – ie, the regime that slaughtered thousands of MB supporters in streets and outside mosques – about inviting the Assad regime to the Arab League summitin Tunis in March.

Or a green light to Assad?

But while these moves parallel those from the Saudi-led coalition, this does not reduce their rivalry, and thus would hardly placate Turkey's regional rivals if Trump's move really were primarily a gift to

Erdogan. And here we return to where we started; the idea that Trump's withdrawal is mostly a gift to Erdogan, rather than to Assad, is seriously misplaced. Being a green light to Assad, rather than primarily to Erdogan, puts Trump's move more clearly in line with the new moves from the Gulf and Trump's traditional allies.

Trump's initial withdrawal tweet even suggests this: "Russia, Iran, Syria & others are the local enemy of ISIS. We were doing there (sic) work." In other words, the Assad regime should be allowed into the east to continue supposedly "fighting ISIS." This was soon followed by movement of Assadist forces towards eastern Deir-Ezzor to "fight ISIS," ie confront the SDF. However, the main theatre of interest was in Manbij in the north.

As Trump's announcement was followed by Turkey's threats to enter northern Syria and expel the YPG from the Arab-majority city of Manbij (the only SDF possession to the west of the Euphrates river), the SDF, feeling vulnerable to abandonment by the US, called in the Assad regime to try to thwart Turkish intervention. The regime then sent troops to nearby Arima to block a possible Turkish offensive against SDF-held Manbij.

To this, Erdogan's reaction was most interesting. Basically, Erdogan indicated that he has no real problem with Assad taking over Manbij, as long as it means the YPG are gone! And the regime claimed that the YPG had left Manbij upon their entry into the region, though the YPG itself claims to have left the city in 2016, leaving behind only Arab members of the SDF.

This suggests is that both the Turkish-backed rebels and the SDF were being played; Trump's withdrawal threat merely strengthened Assad's hand in the region vis a vis the SDF, and the great rebel-backer Erdogan is OK with that!

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 into Syria as Raqqa, let alone Deir Ezzor! Turkey would face massive difficulties trying to occupy such a large region, confronting widespread resistance; it is not like isolated Afrin. The focus on this move being a green light to Erdogan only, rather than *above all* to Assad, is therefore misplaced. And this development in Manbij suggests that even in the northern border region where one might expect a withdrawal to favour Erdogan, it looks more like a stunt to browbeat the SDF – never particularly anti-Assad in the first place – into caving in further to Assad.

Possibly some small-scale Turkish operation may still take place in some part of the northeast 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 also happens to be coordinating with both Assad and the SDF. This is because, as with both other Turkish operations in northern Syria, it will be essential to acquire Russian permission to use Syrian air space (assuming, that is, that US forces do actually leave). This will give Russia to ultimate control over the extent of such an operation.

'Protect the Kurds' as they go under to Assad?

The 're-balancing' of Trump's order has made all this clearer, with the arch-hawks, Bolton and Pompeo, both warning Turkey not to attack the SDF and declaring defence of the SDF a red line; Pompeo even spurted out most undiplomatically 'Don't let the Turks slaughter the Kurds', for which both he and Bolton were roundly scolded by Turkey. Meanwhile, the Pentagon will allow the SDF to keep US-supplied weaponry when it withdraws.

Another clue to this general orientation is the discussion over many months, since Trump first raised the issue of withdrawal almost a year ago, of Arab troops from the Gulf replacing US troops in eastern Syria. At that time, the Assad regime reacted with hostility. In the context of the current

Gulf recognition of Assad, however, this idea takes on a new meaning, especially as the discussion allegedly involves pro-Assad Egyptian and Emirati troops alongside Saudi troops. This is even more significant considering these states' hostility to Erdogan's Turkey, giving the notion of US "withdrawal" a whole new dynamic. There is also discussion of an upgraded role for the Saudi/Egyptian-backed Elite Forces in the largely Arab-populated Deir Ezzor province, led by SDF ally Sheikh Ahmed al-Jarba.

Of course, US 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 likely have the capacity for at present – but rather use the atmosphere of the Turkish threat and US withdrawal to "negotiate" with the SDF from a position of strength. With Assad-SDF negotiations likely to be overseen by Russia, which wants Assad to recover control of all of Syria, the flavour of such negotiations is obvious.

And this is also the SDF strategy; and in case anyone might think this was due to having few options at the present juncture, some SDF leaders have sought to clarify that they aim for deal with Assad regardless of US moves. Essentially, the US, 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. SDF spokesperson Jia Kurd explained that the main enemies that a joint Assad-SDF state needed to defeat were Turkey and the remaining rebel-held northwest: "This [agreement with Assad] will give a big push towards ending the occupation and terrorism in Syria" (the PYD leaders of the SDF generally refer to anti-Assad rebels collectively as "terrorists," and rarely list the regime as an enemy).

Of course, at this stage the SDF hopes to maintain some degree of autonomy for its Rojava statelet, and that this policy will save them the fate that they offer to the rebel-held northwest. However, Assad's bargain will be for significantly reduced autonomy now, and then once his state is more secure and 'normalised' 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 surely, this is conspiratorial – why would the US want to hand back Syrian territory to the Assad regime? To ask such a question reveals fundamental misunderstandings about US policy in Syria. Why wouldn't Trump want Assad to reconquer Syrian territory, is a better question; at times, the US has directly helped Assad do so. The mistake was to assume that the US presence in northeast Syria, aiding the SDF, had any purpose other than that endlessly stated by all US leaders – to defeat ISIS. "That's it," as Trump has continually said. While of course the US presence never had anything to do with putting pressure on Assad, and still less helping the rebels, nor was it ever aimed at helping the SDF build its own alternative.

Returning to former Obama advisor Steven Simon, he explains what he believes the US needs to do to enhance its interests at present:

" … persuade the Kurds to get rid of non-Syrian operatives, while shrinking their military capacity, and accept that they are not going to get the same deal that their Iraqi cousins have won from Baghdad. The imminence of an American withdrawal, combined with Mr. Erdogan's suggestions that he could soon invade the Kurdish regions of Syria, will probably convince the Kurds that they have little choice. But 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."

Right now, US leaders fear the loss of US credibility that would result from the US precipitously dumping its SDF allies in the face of any brutal attempt at reconquest, either by Assad or Erdogan, while Assad also wants to avoid direct confrontation until other enemies are defeated; but eventually the SDF's usefulness to both US imperialism and Assad's tyranny will run its course.

The inability of both major rebel and Kurdish leaderships to patch up their differences and 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 counterrevolution.

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