

In Syria, Trump Makes the Best of the Situation

The Kurds are far from being unified and reliable U.S. allies, and Trump had little choice but to withdraw our few hundred troops.

by Conrad Black



The controversy over President Trump's pullout on the Turkish-Syrian border will settle down quickly. It is another useful debunking of ancient shibboleths and decrepit truisms, like the long-impregnable encrustation of false wisdom that moving the U.S embassy in Israel to Jerusalem would unleash hell upon the whole Middle East. There are about 35 million Kurds, approximately half of them in Turkey, where they make up about a fifth of Turkey's population. A century ago almost all the Kurds had been in the Ottoman Empire, which the Allied powers broke up after World War I, a foolish decision that is

on all fours with the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The result was the creation of four patched-together artificial states that have all now disintegrated: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Syria. They are not alike in other respects, of course. The Czechs and Slovenians (Yugoslavia) have flourished; the Slovaks and Croatians, and more recently the Serbs, have got by adequately well; and the rest of the remnants of Yugoslavia are struggling, but they are all living paradisiacal monuments to the foresight of western statesmen compared to the current fate of the populations of Syria and Iraq.

No American adult needs an update on what a debacle post-Saddam Iraq has become. The Iranians are the principal influence in the 60 percent of the population that is Shiite, precisely the opposite of what was intended when the United States invaded Iraq under President George W. Bush. The dispossessed Sunni 20 percent of Iraqis around Baghdad are being thoroughly misgoverned, even by Saddam's standards, and the Kurds in the north, where most of the oil is, should be building a modern and autonomous Kurdistan that could attract and accommodate mistreated Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Syria – an authentic Kurdish homeland. Instead, the Kurdish government in northern Iraq has been a sinkhole of corruption and misrule, anything but a Mecca for this bellicose, scattered, nomadic people.

The Kurds in northern Syria have undoubtedly been a source of considerable provocation to Turkey, and the Kurds in Turkey have also undoubtedly been a frequently oppressed minority. There is no room for anyone but the parties involved to sort this out. The Turkish part of it is an internal matter for Turkey, and no one will ever know the rights and wrongs of who began or escalated the reciprocal antagonism of the Turkish central government and the Kurdish minority, which is effectively segregated in some parts of Turkey but thoroughly and distinguishedly integrated in others. It is, in any case,

nobody's business but the Turks', including the Kurdish Turks.

The Syrian Kurds sometimes overlap with the PKK, an internationally recognized terrorist organization that is associated with the Syrian and Turkish Communist parties. PKK is not supported by all the Kurds in Syria, but they have substantially infiltrated that body of Kurds that made common cause with the West in destroying ISIS in Syria and Iraq. They were doubtless useful allies in that conflict, but they also destabilized as best they could all the surrounding governments, and the picture being painted by both the Left and the neoconservative Right in Washington of the Trump administration deserting gallant and constant allies is bunk. The Kurds were constantly threatening to release all the ISIS prisoners (and their families) that they were holding, and they always drew the Turks out in hot pursuit of them after border outrages.

The president has been much criticized for seeming to take this move peremptorily, and for departing from talking points in a telephone conversation with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The facts appear to be that the Turkish president announced that PKK outrages at the border required a Turkish response and that he intended to retaliate, whatever the U.S. thought of it, and that he also intended to begin the process of moving a million Syrian refugees back into Syria humanely. As the U.S. forces involved were 400 highly trained specialists, very competent soldiers but scarcely numerous enough to restrain the movement of main units of the Turkish army, President Trump salvaged a good arrangement from the conversation: Erdogan would avoid civilian casualties as much as possible and clear the Kurdish military back 20 miles from the border, with the understanding that if Turkey was negligent about civilians, the United States would apply heavy economic sanctions against Turkey.

The entry of the Turks brought forward the Syrian army, supplied by Russia, and tele-spectators may have the spectacle

of Turkey, which has been the superpower of the region since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, pouring fire on Assad's Syrian army. Assad will not be able to maintain such an exchange for more than a few days, regardless of the volume of Russian assistance he receives. There were very serious limits to what the U.S. could do with 400 servicemen trying to sort out a large guerrilla force on one side and a large professional national army on the other. In the broader context, American sanctions will be much more of a lever on Turkey than 400 soldiers could have been, and U.S. goodwill generally will weigh more heavily on Erdogan than any other factor in these considerations.

Because Europe rebuffed Turkey, the latter turned to the Middle East to focus its foreign policy, where it had been somewhat displaced by the Great Powers' preoccupation with the area during and after World War II, stemming from the strategic value of Arabian oil and the American interest in the success of Israel as a Jewish state. The hostility to the West of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria was more than compensated for by the benevolence of Turkey and Iran. Between 1973 and 1978 there was a golden window, created by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, when Anwar Sadat of Egypt and the Shah of Iran both were friendly with the West. This was the time of the Camp David agreement, hosted by President Carter, who succumbed to the American weakness for promoting democracy in infertile soil, and who bears considerable blame for the fall of the Shah, a strategic disaster for the United States after the Nixon-Kissinger triumph of bringing Egypt into the western camp. George W. Bush was mercilessly attacked by the same democratic bug when he inadvertently promoted Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Brotherhood, a process in which President Barack Obama, Senator Lindsey Graham, and the late Senator John McCain were not blameless.

The promise of the new arrangement is that the U.S. withdraws manpower from an area where its forces were extremely

vulnerable but of insufficient number to be decisive, as candidate Trump promised. This removes all obstacles to good relations with Turkey, the region's premier force and a NATO ally. Erdogan is an unreliable, Islamist ally, but as long as the U.S. isn't protecting Kurdish terrorists, there is no reason that Turkish and American interests could not be reasonably aligned. And Erdogan's grandiose nationalist ambitions could be usefully satisfied by urging him to extend his influence over the Sunni Muslims of Iraq and Syria, leaving an autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq. With Hezbollah thus starved and discouraged in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza, a Palestinian settlement and a stable Lebanon could finally be possible, and a solid coalition of aligned interests between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, with U.S. backing, could expel Iran from its terrorist meddling around the region and relieve the United States of most of the defense burden it has carried in the region for seven decades.

Establishing sustainable local balances of power with comparatively modest contributions to maintain them has been the U.S. foreign-policy goal since shortly after World War II. It has been achieved in Western and Central Europe and is close at hand in the Far East and now, perhaps, in the Middle East as well. It is from this perspective that the president's actions with the Kurds should be seen, not with shamed and breathless hand-wringing every time there is a casualty on the Syrian-Turkish border.

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