



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Donald Trump's "Obama Moments" in Syria and the Gulf

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,225, July 12, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The continuing bombardment of the Syrian province of Idlib by Russia, Iran, and Syrian dictator Bashar Assad has been ignored for far too long by the international community. Attention must be paid – in particular by Donald Trump, who is showing himself worryingly prone to “Obama moments” of hesitation and lack of resolve.

On June 3, 2019, President Donald Trump tweeted: “Hearing word that Russia, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iran, are [‘bombing the hell’ out of Idlib](#) province in Syria, and indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians. The world is watching this butchery. What is the purpose, what will it get you. Stop!”

Fine words, but he has said little else publicly about it since. Nor do we know the content of his conversation with Vladimir Putin at the G-20 summit (though a US cruise missile strike on rebel positions in Idlib on June 30 might have been connected to that conversation).

In May, the authors were able to perform some on-site research at the Turkish-Syrian border. The following reflects what we saw in Idlib.

The beleaguered province has become the last major stronghold for rebel fighters supported by Turkey: about 20,000 Hay’at Tahrir ash-Sham [HTS] militants. Some are also former members of an-Nusra, which was formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda.

But the assault on Idlib by Assad, Russia, and Iran has caused hundreds of fatalities and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, more than half of them women and children. According to [World Vision](#), about 6.7 million Syrians are now refugees, and another 6.2 million are displaced within Syria.

They are driven from place to place, and some are now sleeping in open fields. Others crowd toward the Turkish border, which has been closed to them. Turkey has already taken in [3.6 million Syrian refugees](#) and has no desire for more. Thus, the offensive on Idlib has released the potential for yet another massive migration to Europe.

Particularly horrifying is the report by [UN officials](#) that “a total of 22 hospitals and health clinics have been hit by air strikes or shelling since April 28.”

As reported on May 30 by the [Daily Sabah](#), Krem Kimuk, president of the Turkish Red Crescent, believes civilians have been intentionally targeted by the bombings. “This is an obvious war crime,” he said.

Agreeing with Kimuk is UN Undersecretary General for Human Affairs Mark Lowcock, who on June 25 reiterated fears he had expressed a month earlier that geographical coordinates supplied to Russia and the Assad government by the UN to protect medical centers and hospitals in northwest Syria were being used by both Russia and the Assad regime to “[deliberately destroy those targets.](#)”

Lowcock said there have been numerous pleas to both the Assad government and the Kremlin to “make [the bombing] stop.” But, as he told the UN Security Council, “It has not stopped or even slowed.”

In its May 9, 2019 article “Only Trump Can Save Idlib, but Time is Running Out,” the [Washington Post](#) reported that aid workers often cannot operate because of chemical weapons usage, including white phosphorous bombs.

### **Trump’s first Obama moment**

An “Obama moment” refers to 2013, when the then-president back-pedaled from his plan to punish Assad for crossing Washington’s red line on the use of chemical warfare against insurgents and civilians in Syria.

We applauded Trump’s demonstration in April 2017 that he is not Obama. He launched a well calculated but limited Tomahawk strike on Assad’s airfield to punish him for having engaged in chemical warfare. He also blasted ISIS and dumped a MOAB bomb on Afghanistan. Then he went after “Rocket Man” in North Korea with blistering verbiage.

He thus forcefully demonstrated that he wasn’t afraid to use force and threats when warranted, and he gave our adversaries pause.

But in December 2018, Trump – to the disapproval of many of his supporters – decided on a rapid and complete withdrawal of 2,000 US troops from Syria, most of whom were serving as advisers to Washington’s Kurdish allies struggling against ISIS and Iran.

Disapproval was registered at the highest level through the resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis. The subsequent outcry led to the president's decision to leave 400 token troops in Aleppo.

There is circumstantial evidence that the troop withdrawal decision helped convince Putin, Assad, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that they had carte blanche to launch a decisive battle for Idlib in the coming months.

### **The Russo-Turkish zone deal on Idlib**

On Sept. 18, 2018, Putin met with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who supported the rebels, and brokered a ceasefire at the Russian resort of Sochi. They agreed to establish a [demilitarized zone](#) around Idlib's borders with Turkey to protect Syrian civilians from ongoing warfare. The approximately 12 mile-wide area was to be free of insurgents and heavy weaponry and monitored by both sides.

However, almost 10 months into the truce, the [demilitarized zone has largely failed](#) despite further negotiations. Its two highways for civilian traffic are now at the very center of the Syrian government's military offensive. Russia claims rebel militants are still present in the zone and blames Turkey. The zone's two lanes have thus become highways of death.

On May 17, in the face of a new Idlib offensive, the [Washington Post](#) wrote, "Assad Just Raised the Stakes for Catastrophe in Idlib; Trump is Silent." So too has been the international community.

The Kremlin answered Trump's "What is the purpose, what will it get you. Stop!" tweet with continued support for the Syrian offensive. Moreover, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov disingenuously condemned the rebels for [using Idlib to launch attacks against civilians and military](#) targets, and claimed that "measures are being taken to neutralize these strike positions." He then blamed Turkey for not preventing such attacks.

Why has Trump been so meek in his response – particularly as in 2017 he didn't shrink from a limited attack on the Syrian regime as retribution for Assad's use of chemical weapons on civilians?

### **Another Obama moment for Trump**

Since then have come Iranian attacks on US allied shipping in the Persian Gulf and their shooting down of a US drone. It was expected that Tehran would be punished through military counter-force, but that did not happen. American planes took to the air for a retaliatory strike, but Trump pulled them back – another Obama moment.

Instead he resorted to punishment by non-military economic sanctions and a cyber attack. He claims to have felt that the [deaths of an estimated 150 people](#) if he used

military force were disproportionate to the offense of shooting down an unmanned drone.

This may be true as far as it goes, but is avoiding the use of even minimal direct force the way to keep the US out of war? Iran has only grown more belligerent. And if that's how Trump feels about loss of life, why has he been essentially ignoring Idlib?

A word here about NSA John Bolton, who has sadly acquired a (false) reputation as an imprudent hardliner. Some analysts wonder if Trump is using the old good cop, bad cop strategy. Keeping Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, with their more hawkish reputations, by his side has helped him appear more moderate.

Trump would be wise to keep Bolton and Pompeo close, because they see what he does not. The areas of conflict – Syria, Ukraine, the Persian Gulf, and Venezuela – are linked, and sanctions are not working effectively because ways around them have been found. Russia has eased the sanctions on both the Maduro regime in Venezuela and the mullahs with the help of oil manipulations.

Thanks to the enormous profits reaped by the drug trade in central America, corrupt Venezuela has not yet crumbled. A moribund Hezbollah has revived, and Iran is thumbing its nose at Trump.

Trump's performance as president has been laudable in many areas. He has improved the economy, kept the US far safer than Western Europe through controls on immigration, trimmed bureaucracy, and done what he can with sanctions and other non-military methods available to him. But great presidents also take risks when necessary.

While aiding ISIS or al-Qaeda rebels is unacceptable, Trump should threaten and deliver on punishment when chemical warfare is used. He should also stop referring to Bolton as a hardliner in contrast to himself. He needs Bolton, as well as Pompeo, to keep the military option alive and use it if necessary.

Bolton recently attended a three-way meeting in Israel with Russian and Israeli national security advisers to discuss the Iranian presence in Syria, which Israel is eager to reduce. The Russians, seeking to stabilize Idlib in the future and also reduce US sanctions, may see an opening for achieving such stability via a deal on Iran.

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For further writing by the Valentas on the Syrian conflict, see "[Why Putin Wants Syria](#),' *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2016. Vol. 23.