



PERSPECTIVES

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Clarity Amidst Chaos: The Implications of Trump's Syria Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The American withdrawal from Syria has produced chaotic results – but as with many aspects of President Trump's presidency, it offers an opportunity to view realities with a new clarity. The nature of Turkey under Erdoğan, European weakness, and the unwillingness of America to support indecisive military missions have been revealed. These realities demand new approaches to European defense and to Middle Eastern engagement and disengagement.

One of the many startling attributes of the Trump presidency is the tendency his statements and policy decisions have to produce inadvertent moments of clarity. By cutting through practical and rhetorical niceties, Trump forces the US and the world to confront inconsistent and malfunctioning policies, often creating new ones in the process. The invariable outrage forces situations to be looked at directly, as does the reactive antipathy from Trump's many adversaries. Syria is no exception.

It is a strange, almost Leninist dynamic of "heightening the contradictions." Trump's advocacy of a secure US border created a reaction that clarified the positions of the left wing of the Democratic Party (and most of its presidential candidates) as favoring open borders and fundamentally opposing the core ideas of sovereignty and citizenship. The trade confrontation with China produced a cascade that rudely exposed the degree to which corporations have sold their souls to the Communist Party – most recently the craven kowtowing of the National Basketball Association and its players over Hong Kong. The endless investigations of Trump's alleged corruption, such as Russiagate and now Ukrainegate, have primarily exposed the corruption of the Clinton and Biden families and other rent-seeking Democratic grandees, and demonstrated the degree to which the media-entertainment-technology sector is a unified entity dedicated to the "resistance."

The chaos unleashed by Trump's sudden shift in American policy toward Syria now joins these examples. Neither the wisdom nor the morality of the US withdrawal are the issue, though they will be debated for years to come. But the reactions to the American withdrawal are clarifying in the present moment, and should help guide policy in the future.

Four points may be cited.

For the first time, even after the dubious "coup" that decimated Turkish civil society, the Turkish leadership under Erdoğan and the AKP is being broadly acknowledged as a brutal ethnic religious imperialist regime with revanchist aspirations. NATO membership and electoral results notwithstanding, Erdoğan's is a neo-Ottoman regime that uses everything from air strikes to "little green men"-style paramilitaries to execute its goals of territorial reconquest and crushing of Kurdish national movements.

Indulged and courted by both Obama and Trump, the Erdoğan regime has already befuddled if not unraveled NATO, aligned with the Iranians and Russians, threatened Greece, and used the migrant weapon against Europe in pursuit of both long-term ideological goals and short-term financial blackmail. Islamist in concept and deed, Erdoğan's Turkey almost certainly cannot be enticed or pressured to rejoin the Western fold. Blithe talk about "kicking Turkey out of NATO" remains beside the point. The primary issue is to isolate Erdoğan internationally and within Turkey, and prepare long-term plans against the possibility of an expansionist neo-Ottoman Turkey over the next decades. New US sanctions – long prepared in anticipation of a moment that has now arrived – should be supplemented by support for Turkey's opposition sectors.

Second, as if more proof were needed, European states and the EU as a whole have been shown to be both unwilling and unable to engage with issues that affect them directly. They cannot project meaningful force to protect populations, territory, or anything else, adopt punitive policies of any severity, or even defend themselves against ISIS, except as a domestic security issue. Halting European military exports to Turkey, which is largely self-sufficient militarily, is a small gesture.

Europe's failure of will over Turkey must be coupled with German eagerness to continue trade with Iran and energy dependence on Russia, general European unwillingness to sanction Iran's nuclear abuses, and inability to comprehensively address the migration crisis – except to punish Eastern European states that do have controls. The fabric of the postwar European alliance was challenged long before Turkey's invasion of north Syria. The US is expected to provide leadership and military forces and to respond unquestioningly to European moralizing. A comprehensive rethinking of US defense policy with respect to Europe is therefore long overdue, NATO included.

Third, one of the most clarifying reactions to the Turkish invasion was that much of the US electorate applauded the US withdrawal and resents elite hypocrisy, Turkish brutality, and European weakness. It is an inescapable fact that the experts and media mouthpieces who created the incoherent US Syrian deployment under Obama – and then decried it under Trump – are now defending it.

The lesson is that without clearly stated policies based on US interests rather than emotional appeals to “protection” or vagueness about “capacity-building,” and an explicit, calibrated approach that includes an exit strategy, the US electorate will no longer support open-ended protective, much less nation-building, missions. After three Middle Eastern wars and two failed efforts to reconstruct Muslim states, enough is enough. Experts have failed to assess, design, and execute plans that benefit American security, and regional actors have failed to take advantage of US-provided opportunities to create decent states. Moralizing about American exceptionalism, responsibility, and credibility – derided only yesterday as imperialism and a century ago as *mission civilisatrice* – rings hollow.

US citizens may see the region with greater clarity than the experts. What are some of its features? “Tribes with flags” cannot build nation-states without brutality toward their own populations, minorities, and neighbors. Syrians will now writhe under an old-fashioned and familiar yoke of violent competition among Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, while the Chinese will continue to gain financial control over states, industries, and regions. This is a new Great Game in which the US must participate – selectively.

What then are some elements of a new American approach to the Middle East? The most compelling Western interests are preventing the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, preventing mass migration that will further undermine the cohesion of Western states including the US, protecting energy sources that underpin the global economy, and possibly the protection of the remaining Christian minorities. These are new and old concerns.

New borders are necessary for a de-globalized world. In this scenario, Israel, Greece, and India are frontline states that need to emphasize their own defense. Their defense should also be a Western priority, along with that of the European continent itself. It is unclear how to do this in an era of European moral and policy collapse. Only patient articulation of US interests, and their extrapolation onto like-minded societies that are willing to act in their own defense, will convince the US electorate to contribute. Waving the bloody shirt will not.

But rebuilding a Western defense alliance first means coming to grips with intractable problems: European demographic transformation and rejection of nationalism, Chinese imperialism, African overpopulation, and the seemingly irredeemable nature of many Muslim societies. As in the case of China, the theory has long been that

Western engagement with the Middle East along with rising standards of living would drive secularization and liberalization. That has not uniformly proven the case. Perhaps disengagement is part of the answer. Meanwhile, American allies would be well served by rethinking the nature and tone of their relationships with a hegemon that is fed up, but that respects self-reliance.

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