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Democracy Dies in Darkness



Obama's Syria policy was bad. Trump's is worse.

By **Max Boot**

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President Trump's Syria policy has stopped making sense.

Trump issued a statement on Oct. 6 greenlighting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's invasion of northern Syria — and then denied having done so. He expressed indifference about the Turkish offensive and then demanded a cease-fire. He sent Erdogan a blustery, insulting letter (“Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!”) and then gave Erdogan the deal of the century by blessing his invasion of Syria. The president tweeted that he was bringing troops “home from the ridiculous & costly Endless Wars,” but then sent more troops to Saudi Arabia and is relocating U.S. troops from Syria to Iraq — which is hardly “home.” According to the New York Times, Trump is even contemplating keeping a few troops in eastern Syria after all.

The incoherence of Trump's approach is evident in a quote he attributed to Defense Secretary "Mark Esperanto": "We have secured the Oil. Bringing soldiers home!" There is no evidence that Defense Secretary Mark *Esper* ever said anything so oxymoronic: How can you secure oil if you're bringing troops home? And what is the point of securing Syrian oil fields if you've abandoned the allies who can benefit from them? All we know for sure is that Trump has behaved dishonorably — as evident from the humiliating scenes of Kurds, who once welcomed U.S. troops as liberators, pelting them with tomatoes and rocks as they withdraw.

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Having failed miserably in Syria, Trump has retreated to his safe space of claiming that President Barack Obama was far worse. He has tweeted at least eight attacks against Obama's Syria policy, such as this one: "[Speaker Nancy] Pelosi is now leading a delegation of 9, including Corrupt Adam Schiff, to Jordan to check out Syria. She should find out why Obama drew The Red Line In the Sand, & then did NOTHING, losing Syria & all respect. I did something, 58 missiles. One million died under Obama's mistake!"

As usual, Trump doesn't know what he is talking about. His attempts to deflect blame will fool no one, even though there is plenty of reason to be critical of Obama's policy in Syria.

After the uprising against Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad broke out in 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then-CIA Director David Petraeus, Sen. John McCain, and many others argued for training and arming Syrian rebels, as well as creating safe zones and no-fly zones to protect civilians. Obama rejected that advice. Instead he laid out a “red line” on chemical weapons use but failed to enforce it. This was a strategic disaster, but it’s quite a stretch to blame Obama for all the deaths in the Syrian civil war. (Those deaths, by the way, amount to 400,000 people — not 1 million, as Trump claimed.)

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Moreover, Trump has no standing to criticize Obama’s “red line” failure since he supported inaction. On Aug. 29, 2013, Trump tweeted: “What will we get for bombing Syria besides more debt and a possible long term conflict?” Trump now brags about his cruise-missile attacks on Syria in 2017 and 2018, but his own State Department admits that Assad has continued to use chlorine gas this year. These gas attacks are only a small part of the atrocities being carried out by the Assad regime, supported by Iran and Russia, and with no opposition from Trump. Now, by withdrawing from northern Syria, Trump is allowing this genocidal regime to expand its control over the most peaceful and pro-Western part of the country.

For all of Obama's failures in Syria, he finally hit upon a successful policy when in 2015 he sent U.S. air power and advisers to help the Kurds in their battle against the Islamic State. This allowed the United States to destroy the Islamic State's "caliphate" without risking U.S. troops in ground combat. Trump inherited this successful policy but has now destroyed it just as U.S. intelligence officials have been warning that the Islamic State is attempting a comeback.

At least Obama had legitimate (if, in my view, overblown) reasons to avoid greater involvement in Syria: He feared being drawn into another Iraq-like quagmire. But it's difficult to see any legitimate justification for Trump's decision to bug out. If Erdogan told him that Turkey would attack whether U.S. troops were in the way or not, he was bluffing — and Trump, a credulous con man, fell for it. There is no way Erdogan would attack U.S. troops because he knows they would be slaughtered by American air power — just as Russian mercenaries were in Syria.

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By abandoning the Kurds, Trump is allowing ethnic cleansing, risking a revival of the Islamic State and sending a signal that the United States will not fight for freedom, stand by our allies or deter cross-border aggression. Trump may still consider himself “to be in the hospitality business,” as acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney said on Sunday, but he is now in the foreign policy business — and he is making a bigger mess than Obama ever did. At least you could understand Obama’s approach, whether you liked it or not. Trump’s foreign policy is not only indefensible; it’s also incomprehensible.

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