



Turkey's Invasion of Northeast Syria and the Failure of US Foreign Policy

by Dr. Dara Salam | Jan 28, 2020

The U.S. turning a blind eye to the Turkish military invasion of northeast Syria reveals the failings of the Trump administration's foreign policy in the Middle East and raises questions about its intentions in the region.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, and Russian President Vladimir Putin before a meeting in Istanbul. Jan. 8, 2020 (Presidential Press Service via AP, Pool)

When Turkey launched its military operation into northeast Syria on October 9, 2019 intent on invading and destroying the Kurdish self-led administration in Rojava, also known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, it raised eyebrows among many U.S. allies at the international and regional level regarding what was behind the U.S. withdrawal prior to the Turkish move.

The decision to withdraw came as a result of Trump's phone conversation with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 6, when he announced in an act of brinkmanship

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This practice has become a dangerous reality in world politics, especially with populist politicians, who readily abandon moral values for the sake of their own political and economic gains. Eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant warned against politicians who trample on and twist moral and political values like freedom, autonomy, and human rights according to their interests. Current right-wing populists in today's world politics fit very much into this characterization.

After almost nine years of civil war that created one of the greatest modern human tragedies, the U.S. decision to pull out of Syria and clear the way for the Turkish army to invade those territories is certainly not a smart and calculated foreign policy move.

Turkey's Far-reaching Intentions

Although Trump and his administration claimed that they did not green-light Turkey to launch its military offensive and invade Kurdish territories in northeast Syria, the decision to withdraw U.S. troops has greatly helped Turkey's president Erdogan create the so-called "safe" zone he long desired.

Many doubts were raised regarding Turkey's claim about security concerns over its southern border, since no reported attacks on the Turkish territories were undertaken by Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) — the main force in SDF, which could be used to justify the military incursion.

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Erdogan's real intention and the driving force behind his military invasion has been analyzed since as a political attempt to **engineer** the demographic composition of northeast Syria and Rojava. Erdogan recently confirmed to his state-run TV channel **TRT** that settlements are under construction in the newly captured areas to house one million Syrian refugees.

One of the ramifications of the politics of demographic engineering is engaging in an irrational war against specific peoples and communities. In most cases, this is done through the eradication method, even if not fully, of these



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peoples from their ancestral lands, which constitutes ethnic [cleansing](#).

This violent process led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people from Kurdish, Arab, Christian, and Yazidi communities and to hundreds of deaths. There are various reports that confirm many human rights abuses have been committed by the Turkish army and its Syrian proxy militias that amounted to [war crimes](#).

Turkey's key objective is to guarantee the destruction of the foundations of Kurdish self-rule in northeast Syria. Its claim of resettling the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey is to realize its main objective of preventing the sustainability of the Kurdish autonomy. Turkey has long used the Syrian refugees as a pressure card to silence Europe regarding its military invasion.

What Was Lost?

There are several problematic repercussions to the Trump administration's foreign policy in Syria. It has led to the resuscitation of Islamist extremist groups represented by Turkey-backed Syrian [proxy militias](#). These militias which are funded and trained by Turkey have extremist ideologies that are not very different from Al Qaeda and ISIS creeds.

The gravest damage has been inflicted upon the Kurdish democratic self-rule that had been established in Rojava after the Syrian uprising began in 2011. This democratic project had presented a novel political and social system in the region. It had created a secular and democratic government based on direct democracy, and strong women's participation in the public sphere and decision-making processes. Furthermore, it had generated a framework within which different ethnic and religious groups that constitute the social fabric of Syria could coexist.

The democratic self-rule in Rojava had aspired to achieve social and environmental justice and proffered concrete proposals to solve the political upheaval in Syria. It was based on the devolution of power to regions and municipalities, which can be organized around a federal or confederal framework.

This unique democratic project should have been sustained and reinforced by the U.S. and Europe as a fair and reasonable political arrangement to end

that U.S. forces stationed at the border with Turkey would be withdrawn.

However, it is not clear what Trump got in return. One possible explanation for such a decision is that Trump struck a deal with Erdogan to dissuade him from buying Russia's S-400 missile defense system, and to bring Turkey to purchase the U.S. F-35 fighter jets instead.

Realpolitik and Abandoning Allies

Indeed, the current U.S. administration's foreign policy has been a continuous mess that has led, in many cases, to self-defeat and counterproductive policies.

Some of the policies and decisions of the administration have had severe political consequences. These have included the controversy over Russian interference in the Trump election in 2016, which led to the Mueller investigation and its half-disclosed findings, the storm over the Ukrainian affair, which is at the center of Trump's impeachment trial, the Trump administration's hasty but uncalculated policy decisions regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iranian nuclear deal withdrawal and latest war escalation with Iran, and the withdrawal of troops from Syria. All these have shown to what extent this administration cannot make heads or tails of its foreign policy directions.

However, one of the starkest foreign policy blunders of the Trump administration in 2019 was the decision to abandon its own ally in the fight against ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have suffered massive losses of around 11,000 men and women fighters. In fact, this lack of political and moral commitment to the Kurds has been the hallmark of Western powers' policies in the Middle East throughout history.

The realpolitik of the Trump administration in dealing with other nations, especially in the Middle East, is marked by how Trump's personal and political interests eclipse any moral commitment with these nations. His own political outlook is anchored in a business-oriented world that is driven by competition and profit.

Eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant politicians who trample on and twist moral and political autonomy, and human rights according to their interests

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the bloodshed in Syria.

This unique democratic project should have been sustained and reinforced by the U.S. and Europe as a fair and reasonable political arrangement to end the bloodshed in Syria. However, the U.S. decision not to protect this stable political entity was a reaffirmation of its muddled foreign policy in the Middle East. It shows that it has never lived up to its values of democracy and freedom, but instead has protected and perpetuated authoritarian and repressive regimes in the region.

The Trump administration's lack of a clear political vision in Syria has, undoubtedly, led to the resurgence of extremist groups and emboldened Assad's regime. The U.S. could have used its leverage to give northeast Syria a political mandate and recognize it as a safe, free, and democratic region to be emulated in the future political settlement of Syria. This administration's management of the aftermath of its miscalculated foreign policies has been very patchy and highly erroneous. After defeating ISIS and securing a large territory in Syria, it was politically unwise to destabilize it and leave its population to face a military invasion.

In contrast, Russia's foreign policy in Syria has been much more consistent in its continuing support of Assad's regime. Russia has been successful in bringing Turkey, a NATO member, closer. The liberty that Turkey finds in oscillating between Russia and NATO has been made possible as a result of the Trump administration's foreign policy failure to strategize and offer a road map for the future of Syria.

Trump's only concern in Syria seems to be ironically centered on protecting the oilfields. The U.S. has essentially pursued its imperialistic ambitions of securing oil and turning a blind eye to gross violations of human rights, deaths, and devastation that people have had to suffer as the result of the Turkish army's invasion of northeast Syria.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Dara Salam

Dr. Dara Salam is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS University of London. He has written on Middle East politics and political theory. He has also published in academic journals and different media outlets and has appeared on various media channels. @Dara_Salam

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