

Donald Trump Gives Turkey the Green Light to Invade Northern Syria

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On October 6th, President Trump signaled that the 150 American troops on the Turkey-Syria border would be removed¹ and Turkey would be allowed to “move forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria.”

According to John Mearsheimer, historic arguments in support of American involvement in the Middle East have been to allow oil to flow freely and prevent any one country from controlling this critical resource. However, Syria has no oil and no aspirations to dominate the Gulf. One could infer from this argument that Mearsheimer and other realists make that we have no significant interest in Syria and should indeed withdraw our troops.²

However, others argue a threat does exist, one which must be managed in order to protect the United States and its allies. This threat is a resurgent ISIS, and the military investment we are currently making is not large.

We have recently seen the rise of non-state actors on the world stage. The Islamic State has claimed over 70 terrorist attacks worldwide, with ten percent of these (7) in the United States and at least 70 US citizens or residents killed as a result of these attacks.³ The safety of American citizens should be one of the main goals of the U.S. government; it is hard to imagine a higher priority interest.

Our national interests are at stake if the resurgence of the Islamic State comes to fruition. If a country’s citizens are in danger, the goal of terrorists is achieved: to incite terror. But this does not mean we should commit ourselves militarily or physically. We should use our diplomatic leverage and our ability to convene. We should promote discussions between Turkey and Syria (both the rebels and the government) with all groups (Turkey, Syria, the United States, and various non-terrorist, non-state actors) assisting in selecting an unbiased arbiter. The Good Friday Agreement between Northern Ireland and the UK could serve as a rough model. This agreement mostly ended the violence in Northern Ireland through facilitated discussion among the affected groups.⁴ If a similar strategy, tailored to this specific situation, were pursued, then violence might be forestalled.

¹At the time this article was published, there were 1,000 American troops total in Syria. The figure “150” refers to the number of American troops stationed near the Turkey-Syria border.

² Mearsheimer, John. 2014. “America Unhinged.” *The National Interest* (129): 9-30. <https://nationalinterest.org/files/digital-edition/1388435556/129%20Digital%20Edition.pdf>.

³ In chronological order, the attacks related to the Islamic State that have been conducted on American soil are: 2014 Queens Hatchet Attack, 2015 Curtis Culwell Center Attack, 2015 San Bernadino Attack, 2016 Orlando Nightclub Shooting, 2016 Ohio State University Attack, 2017 New York City Truck Attack, and 2017 New York City Attempted Bombing.

⁴ There is a good article on the Council on Foreign Relations website titled “The Northern Ireland Peace Process.” This piece describes the history of the conflict between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, the governmental structure of Northern Island, and how demilitarization of paramilitary groups was pursued as a result of the Good Friday Agreement.

The goals of the facilitated negotiations would be two-fold. First, the talks should aim to minimize, if not eliminate, casualties among Turkish, American, Syrian, and Kurdish (TASK) populations, civilian or military. In theory, these discussions will help alleviate regional tensions, creating regional security. Second, the negotiations would be built upon a condition of cooperation among the militaries and agreements of nonaggression between the members of TASK with a common goal of totally defeating ISIS. America would devote no more than a few key advisors (including experts in the fields of financial intelligence, cybersecurity and social media, and Special Forces) to the planning of operations against ISIS. While the U.S. and the Kurds have previously worked together towards a common goal of combatting ISIS, we should not create future commitments based on past cooperation. A prime example of this is the cooperation between the USSR and the U.S. to combat Nazi Germany in WWII. After WWII ended, the cooperation between these countries did not continue based on the previous working relationship of these countries.

This method would also allow us to lend critical assistance, which only the U.S. can do effectively, but does not commit our forces physically. If the United States approaches the problem in this manner, it will allow us to disengage more in the region in the long-term and allocate more resources to other domestic or priority overseas interests.

In short, the United States should adopt a hands-off military approach to the Turkey-Syria dispute and facilitate discussions between the stakeholders in this conflict, discussions which include plans for counter-terrorism measures.

Bibliography

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