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## U.S. Syria Policy: A Matter of Opinion

By Steve Bakke  November 5, 2019



*This map of Syria doesn't reflect its constantly changing political geography, but it is a helpful reference.*

The Syrian situation is active and dangerous. Many pundits are evaluating the situation, with almost an equal number of opinions. And they all seem to be absolutely sure that their preferred strategy for the U.S. is the right one. These politicians and strategists are mostly working with the same facts, so how can they all be so sure? As comic strip pundit Charlie

Brown said, "I'm always sure about things that are a matter of opinion." In other words, complex problems usually don't have obvious, commonly agreed solutions.

This situation is complicated. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" doesn't apply in Syria. For example, the U.S. and our enemy ISIS are both opposing Assad's Syrian government. And our NATO ally Turkey is a bitter enemy of the Kurds whom we support. Complicating this analysis, the Kurdish coalition we are supporting includes some Syrian Kurdish factions which Turkey has classified as "terrorist." And so on.

It's hard to argue that Turkey doesn't have some legitimate security concerns that led to their planning an incursion into northeast Syria. They wanted to create a buffer zone for security and for relocating Syrian refugees. Trump decided not to block Turkey's initial incursion, and while this seriously threatened the Kurds, I think he believed Turkey would end up face-to-face with the Russians. And perhaps he felt our presence right there meant we were doing work for the Russians. Anyway, that Turkey/Russia encounter brought about a fragile ceasefire, with Russia and the Turks apparently both patrolling the disputed territory to maintain a semblance of stability. That could be progress.

But why did Trump choose this strategy? Perhaps he believes that, long-term, we need Turkish cooperation more than we're obligated to an unlimited commitment to the Kurds, and that future Turkish/Russian cooperation in the region will help prevent future ISIS uprisings. Our unofficial commitment to the Kurds is to help fight ISIS, not engage in their long-standing war with Turkey, our legal NATO ally. And we have 5,000 U.S. troops at our bases in Turkey. The implications of a U.S./Turkey military conflict would send shockwaves through NATO we don't even want to imagine. All of these are very practical considerations.

While we should take comfort that Trump's strategy may have avoided being indefinitely entrenched militarily in Syria, we must not forget that Obama's abandoning of Iraq led to the formation of ISIS in the first place, and we must maintain the valuable intelligence network which comes from continuing support for and from the Kurds. Hopefully Trump continues to be aware of that.

Most recently, U.S. forces, fortunately with cooperation from Russia, the Kurds, and Turkey, killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi during a night raid in the northwest Syrian province of Idlib. Continuing his gradual reversal of pulling all U.S. troops from Syria, the President wisely decided to keep troops in Syria to secure the eastern oil fields, along with the Kurds. We also maintain control of al-Tanf airbase. All of that means we can still provide limited military support and participate in important intelligence gathering.

Bush has been said to have talked the language of appeasement, but Obama made it policy when he refused to support the pro-democracy protesters in Iran. While the details are constantly changing, we're still watching Trump change the nature of our engagement in the area and in Syria.

The small number of troops we've had in Syria was somewhat symbolic, and we can accomplish the same thing by operating from elsewhere in Syria and the region. And

remember, the Kurds, and Russia also want ISIS controlled – hopefully Turkey will cooperate. Maybe this will encourage them all to cooperate with us in a more mutually beneficial effort. At least this gives that outcome a chance.

I've long felt that a Turkish/Russian agreement to establish a semblance of order in the region is a reasonable, if not perfect solution. Maybe the compromises and agreements to date would not have occurred if Trump had made a more aggressive decision to stay and fight in Syria.

Any recommendation of a solution in Syria depends on one's perspective, requires creation of tactical priorities, and unfortunately becomes a "matter of opinion." Competing moral imperatives, conflicting allegiances, and humanitarian considerations, create a dizzyingly complex puzzle – far more complex than wanna-be experts, would have us believe. Thus far, we've successfully walked a tightrope between two allies, Turkey and the Kurds, who are themselves dedicated enemies. A balance of power in the region is desirable, and maybe we're seeing the beginnings of it.

Only time will tell.