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## SYRIA AND SAUDI ARABIA: TOUGH CHOICES REQUIRED

By Steve Bakke  January 14, 2019



Saudi Arabia - Red; Syria - Light Green

Voters are expected to understand many complex policies that have no easy answers. Too often, overly simplified and biased headlines and soundbites are our only frame of reference. Examining more complete and balanced information would improve the quality of our conclusions. Policy decisions regarding Syria and Saudi Arabia are prime examples of issues having overwhelming complexity.

***Trump announced his intention to fulfill a campaign promise by withdrawing all 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria.*** Initially I characterized it as “Obama-like” and unfortunate, particularly in the context of General Mattis’s exit as Defense Secretary. But examining more information, along with recent developments, prompted my retreat from that opinion.

Here are participants and supporters in the Syrian conflict (from an analysis by Joshua Keating and Chris Kirk in *Slate*): Syrian government, Syrian rebels, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (Syria’s “al-Qaeda”), Kurds, U.S. and allies, Iraq, Iran with Hezbollah, Russia, Saudi Arabia with several other Gulf states, and Turkey. This list is presented mainly to illustrate the complexity of this lingering conflict.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend” doesn’t apply here. 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 the Syrian “YPG” faction which Turkey has classified as “terrorist.” Some U.S. officials agree with that assessment. Bitter enemies are separately fighting the Russia-backed Syrian Assad government. And Russia doesn’t fit “neatly” into any friend/foe analysis.

Initial criticism of Trump claimed he was abandoning the Kurds to potential destruction by the Turks. Two assurances from Advisor John Bolton provide some comfort. He announced that before withdrawal, ISIS would be eliminated and American-allied Kurds would be protected. Of course, Turkish cooperation in shielding their Kurdish enemy from destruction

is doubtful. Nevertheless, the big question now seems to be whether it's wise to remove all military forces from Syria, even if those pre-conditions are met.

I've always avoided transactions that seem too complex to be understood. Perhaps that influenced Trump's "sooner-or-later" decision for Syrian withdrawal. Or, maybe it's because only a small number of troops are involved, and other military personnel will remain in Iraq. Perhaps Trump feels that, long-term, he needs Turkish cooperation more than an unlimited commitment to the Kurds; and that future Turkish/Russian cooperation in the region will help prevent future ISIS-like uprisings.

While some consider Trump's pull-out an impetuous decision, maybe we can find some sense in it.

***The murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi caused quite a stir.*** While there isn't agreement on the precise details, most agree that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was involved. But it seems everybody but our President wants to come down hard on the Saudis. While not currently dominating the news, Secretary of State Pompeo addressed this issue during his recent Mideast visit.

Several things must be considered when choosing our reaction to Khashoggi's murder. Saudi Arabia is actually a stabilizing influence in the region, and an enormous support for the U.S. in Afghanistan and against Iran. And, despite the Saudi's reckless actions in Yemen, with the related tragic humanitarian crisis, withdrawing support hinders Yemen's legitimate government that is fighting to regain their rightful place after being ousted by the radical Islamist Houthi government. Other U.S. Arab allies, such as the UAE and Bahrain, are fighting alongside Saudi Arabia.

Can we isolate Saudi Arabia from the global economy? Probably not, given its prominence in oil exports and coveted cash reserves needed for Mideast investment. And if we rejected, even temporarily, future dealings with Saudi Arabia, Russia would swiftly fill that void.

Unfortunately, this isn't a simple case of choosing the moral alternative. Sometimes an apparent moral course has unintended tragic political and humanitarian consequences.

Competing moral "imperatives," conflicting allegiances, and potentially tragic humanitarian consequences, create a dizzyingly complex puzzle involving the Syrian and Saudi situations. The complexity is far greater than our partisan political leaders would have us believe. No matter how much either party simplifies its proposed solutions, no political actions will move the needle very far, very soon.

What choices would you make?