

American Forces Needlessly Caught in Turkish Crossfire

The unnecessary harm has gone on long enough.

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After a [terrorist attack](#) in Istanbul killed six and wounded 81, Turkey retaliated, launching a fierce [air campaign](#) against targets it claimed to be Kurdish militias in northern Iraq and Syria supporting the PKK. Whether Erdogan will stop there remains unclear as he [threatens](#) Turkey's fourth ground incursion into Northern Syria since 2016 – a threat he has made without follow through since [May 2022](#). The U.S. force presence in Northeastern Syria has historically forced Turkey's hand to tread lightly along the border. However, just last week, a Turkish airstrike [landed](#) within 300 meters of American positions, north of Hasakah. Luckily, no American troops were present at the time.

American forces in Syria are currently balancing on a tripwire, caught in a NATO ally's crossfire. No matter how [problematic](#) of an ally Turkey may be, no country should risk conflict with an ally without a strong interest in doing so. Thus, the [most recent](#) near-miss begs the question: what is the U.S. interest in remaining in Syria for an eighth year? Just as in Afghanistan, the U.S. mission in Syria has distorted and morphed over the years from clear and limited to endless and unachievable. To remain is inexcusable.

U.S. forces have been [stationed](#) in Northeast Syria since 2015, training, arming, and supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of militias that includes the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The U.S. first intervened with the stated [objective](#) of eliminating ISIS's territorial caliphate. Partnering with the SDF was always a means to this end, and it was [achieved](#) in 2019. While remnants may lurk in disparate pockets of Syria's deserts, ISIS holds no territory and lacks the [resources or capability](#) to hold or retake territory.

Still, U.S. forces [remain in Syria](#), dismissing their original goal and adopting the new objective of a so-called ["enduring defeat"](#) of ISIS. Of course, the reality is that those arguing

for an “enduring defeat” are arguing for a perpetual U.S. occupation of Northeast Syria under a more palatable pseudonym. The war on terror, by nature, is not a war that could or would plausibly be won by military force alone. For every [ISIS leader](#), there is [another](#) standing behind him.

Further, when defining an “enduring defeat,” advocates for staying in Syria also commit the sin of falsely [conflating U.S. interests](#) with those of its partner forces, mirroring America’s mistakes in its two-decade-long war in Afghanistan. After the United States defeated the Taliban government, it [should have withdrawn](#) from Afghanistan in 2002. Yet, American leaders continued to distort the original objective, staying for 19 years and leaving U.S. troops to fight and die for [nation-building and democratization](#).

Policymakers fuel this misconception by continuing to [mischaracterize](#) the Kurds as U.S. [allies](#). Wartime allies, such as the local partner forces used throughout the U.S. war on terror, are inherently temporary ones: U.S. obligations to them end after the mutual objective is achieved. As with most partnerships, the U.S.-Kurdish joint mission was never borne of benevolence, on either side. Instead, it was based on the existential threat that ISIS posed to SDF territory and the U.S. interest in eliminating ISIS’s capability to launch attacks against the U.S. homeland.

While one can support Kurdish independence movements, empathize with their desire for an autonomous state, or sympathize with the persecution they face at the hands of both the Syrian regime and the Turkish government, one can also admit that they are not U.S. ‘allies’ and their aims are not ours. Whether the United States withdraws tomorrow, in a year, or in a decade, the Kurds’ external threats will not disappear when the United States is no longer around to protect them forever. It may be difficult to stomach, but the United States would be wise to consider what comes after a withdrawal and seek other arbiters for the Kurds’ security.

While unsavory, the Syrian regime, which possesses a strong, [self-proclaimed interest](#) in maintaining Syria’s original borders, would likely provide the Kurds with the necessary protection and deny Turkey from any further incursions. In 2019, after President Trump green-lit Erdogan’s ground incursion, the Kurds were able to strike a [deal](#) with Damascus and halt further Turkish advances. Kurdish autonomy or democratic aspirations may not be achieved through such negotiations; however, the Kurds could likely argue for a status quo ante – regaining what they had before the civil war – as well as maintaining their self-defense capabilities in exchange for the regime’s protection.

One can easily sympathize with the Kurds and condemn Erdogan’s brutal campaign against them. Yet, the consequences of the United States remaining in Syria should not be overlooked or minimized. For an American to die three years after the objective was achieved, caught in the crossfire of a conflict it no longer possesses an interest in, would be indefensible. American servicemen and women should not be put at needless risk due to a policy driven more by inertia than interests.

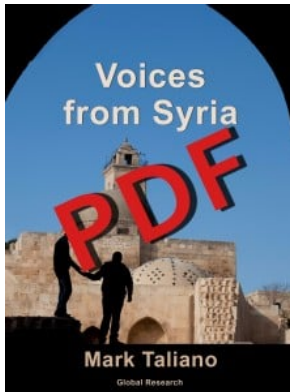
In 2002, President George W. Bush described the history of conflict in Afghanistan as one of “initial success followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure.” Unfortunately, despite thousands of Americans losing their lives in these endless wars in the Middle East, America appears to continue to have learned nothing.

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