

Outgoing Syria Envoy James Jeffrey Reflects on “What Everyone Got Wrong”

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In a long-ranging interview with Al-Monitor, James Jeffrey looks back on his efforts to incorporate fragments of Obama-era initiatives into a cohesive Middle East policy.

In August 2016, former US Ambassador to Iraq and Turkey James Jeffrey [signed a public letter](#) with more than 50 other veteran national security officials warning against the election of then-candidate Donald Trump.

“We are convinced that in the Oval Office, he would be the most reckless President in American history,” read the letter.

Nonetheless, two years later the career diplomat had come out of retirement to help the Trump administration incorporate the fragments of Obama-era initiatives in Syria into a cohesive Middle East policy.

Under the authority of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, administration officials had devised a plan under which the US military’s counter-Islamic State (IS, or ISIS) force would remain in Syria at least until the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad went through with UN-backed elections. On top of their Congressionally-mandated mission of fighting IS, US forces would continue to deny Assad access to Syrian oilfields, which were located in areas controlled by Syrian Kurdish fighters backed by the United States, and to obstruct the Iranian military’s access to the Levant.

Trump didn’t like it. “The president was very uncomfortable with our presence in Syria,” Jeffrey told Al-Monitor in a two-hour interview at his home in Washington last week. “He was very uncomfortable with what he saw as endless wars.”

But in December 2018, the 45th president blew off his top advisers and told Turkey’s leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, that he would withdraw more than 2,000 US military forces from Syria.

The move would inevitably launch a mad dash across a precariously balanced battlefield occupied by four major military players and lead to mass displacement among Syria’s Kurdish population. It also threatened to upend the international coalition’s sweeping gains against IS and set back the US-led pressure campaign against Assad.

“We felt very vulnerable and may have been a little bit punch drunk on fear,” Jeffrey told Al-Monitor last week. “I understand the president’s concerns about Afghanistan,” he said. “But the Syria mission is the gift that keeps on giving.”

Opposition from European allies eventually convinced the president to reverse the order, Jeffrey said. But less than a year later, as Turkish forces built up on the Syrian border in October of 2019, Jeffrey and other officials arranged yet another call between Trump and Erdogan.

When the dust settled, hundreds of people were dead and up to 300,000 others, mostly Syrian Kurds, had fled their homes. Turkey’s military incursion has since been referred to by Kurdish leaders as an “[ethnic cleansing](#).”

Jeffrey was left to pick up the pieces. The methods the diplomat had advocated to assuage Ankara’s aggression failed, drawing heated controversy in marathon congressional hearings.

Jeffrey says the proposals he pushed — dismantling YPG border defenses, allowing Turkey’s military into northeast Syria for joint security patrols, putting Turkish aircraft back on the Air Tasking Order out of Udeid Airbase — were rooted in his understanding of domestic Turkish politics and colonial history. Critics say they paved the way for Turkey’s assault.

Today, Jeffrey speaks of the crisis of Turkey and Syria’s Kurds as if it has largely blown over, but he offers few specifics on prospects for securing the future of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria. He insists the Obama administration’s decision to arm the Syrian Kurdish-led militia fed into a decades-old existential threat to Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

For the career diplomat, Ankara’s hostility toward the SDF was just one troublesome corner of a complex policy structure in which Washington sought to harness the interests of both Turkey and Israel to roll back Iran and deal the Assad regime and Russia an unwinnable hand in Syria’s civil war.

The following interview has been edited for length.

Al-Monitor: Deputy OIR commander UK Maj. Gen. Kevin Copsey last week said we are entering the “twilight” phase of the international coalition’s mission against IS. In July 2018, you were brought in as Special Envoy in part to help fold the D-ISIS mission back into US regional strategy, particularly vis-a-vis Iran and NATO ally Turkey. What progress has been made in that?

Jeffrey: The Syria strategy was a stepchild since the Obama administration.



The Trump administration saw one of the major flaws in the Obama administration: that it treated Iran as a nuclear weapons problem a la North Korea. They saw Iran as a threat to the regional order. So they wanted a Syria policy building on the bits and pieces of the Obama policy. So the Trump administration came up with that policy in 2017.

Secretary Pompeo and I convinced people in the administration of this: If you don't deal with the underlying problem of Iran in Syria, you're not going to deal in an enduring way with IS. We saw this all as one thing.

We then also had the Israeli air campaign. The US only began supporting that when I came on board. I went out there and we saw Prime Minister Netanyahu and others, and they thought that they were not being supported enough by the US military, and not by intelligence. And there was a big battle within the US government, and we won the battle.

The argument [against supporting Israel's campaign] was, again, this obsession with the counterterrorism mission. People didn't want to screw with it, either by worrying about Turkey or diverting resources to allow the Israelis to muck around in Syria, as maybe that will lead to some blowback to our forces. It hasn't.

Basically, first and foremost is denial of the [Assad regime] getting military victory. But because Turkey was so important and we couldn't do this strategy without Turkey, that brought up the problem of the Turkish gripes in northeast Syria. So my job was to coordinate all of that.

So you throw all those together — the anti-chemical weapons mission, our military presence, the Turkish military presence, and the Israeli dominance in the air — and you have a pretty effective military pillar of your military, diplomatic and isolation three pillars.

So that was how we put together an integrated Syria policy that nestled under the overall Iran policy. The result has been relative success because we — with a lot of help from the Turks in particular — have managed to stabilize the situation.

The only change on the ground to the benefit of Assad has been southern Idlib in two and a half years of attacks. They are highly unlikely to continue, given the strength of the Turkish army there and the magnitude of the defeat of the Syrian army by the Turks back in March.

And of course, we've ratcheted up the isolation and sanctions pressure on Assad, we've held the line on no reconstruction assistance, and the country's desperate for it. You see what's happened to the Syrian pound, you see what's happened to the entire economy. So, it's been a very effective strategy.

Al-Monitor: The US has been supporting the Israeli air campaign and enacting sanctions on

both the Assad regime and Iran. Are we any closer to an Iranian withdrawal from Syria?

Jeffrey: Well the Iranians have withdrawn a lot of their people. One reason is they're financially under a great deal of pressure, and Syria is very expensive for them. More and more the Iranians are divesting that back to the Syrians. And they haven't been able to bail the Syrians out, other than some — under adventuresome conditions — shipments of oil supplies, which sometimes make it, sometimes don't. I'll just leave it at that.

Al-Monitor: Can you elaborate on those "adventurous conditions?"

Jeffrey: I've told you as much as I'm going to tell you on that. The Iranian ability to truly establish a southern Lebanon-style threat to Israel by long-range systems has also been blocked by the Israeli strikes, which are enabled, to some degree, by US diplomatic and other support, which I won't go into in more detail, but it is [significant](#).

We have basically blocked Iran's longer-term goals and put its present presence under pressure. Is that enough pressure to get Iran to leave? I don't know. Whether we can actually roll them back, I don't know. But I do know that it is absolutely an essential part of any larger agreement. Whatever level of pain we are inflicting on the Iranians, the Russians, and the Assad regime is not going to go away until Iran leaves.

Al-Monitor: A major objective of the sanctions is to force the Assad regime to change its behavior. Have you seen any signs of change in the regime's calculus as a result? Is there any prospect of US-Russia accommodation on Syria's political process, or is it fair to say the Geneva process has been co-opted?

Jeffrey: Well, we saw the Rami Makhlouf thing, we saw other leaders. We don't know, because you really have to know what's really going on inside a police state, how much impact that's having. But it's having some impact. The collapse of the Lebanese banking system is another big blow. You see it in the spatting between the Russians and Assad in the recent, underreported Damascus refugee fiasco. That was a Russian idea.

We're sure the Russians know there's no military victory. So they have gone to, how can we get a political victory? And the way to do that is to hijack the UN-led political process, by using things like the Assad election in 2021 as a substitute for the UN-mandated elections, [and] using a Russian-led conference on refugees to take that portfolio away from the UN and international community and put a Russia and Assad stamp on it. So, we mobilized the international community to basically boycott it, very successfully.

It goes up and down but the Russians have never embraced a true implementation of 2254. We've made it clear that we would relieve the sanctions and that Assad would eventually be invited back into the Arab League, that the diplomatic isolation would all fall. We laid it out to Putin at Sochi in 2019, by Secretary Pompeo. They know about the offer. They don't really make any changes to it.

Al-Monitor: Has the US explored alternative paths, such as potential engagement with members of the Syrian regime's support base in the Alawi community?

Jeffrey: No, other than the few reported contacts on Austin Tice. And I can't talk any more about that. I see nothing promising. Not everybody would agree with me.

Al-Monitor: Let's move to the subject of Turkey. Secretary of State Pompeo sharply criticized Ankara during the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting. In recent Al-Monitor podcasts, Stephen Cook and Philip Gordon said the US should probably not consider Turkey an ally or a "model partner." How would you recommend the Biden administration engage with Erdogan out of the gate?

Jeffrey: First of all, you have to separate Erdogan from Turkey.

The biggest challenges for Biden will be China, Russia, North Korea, Iranian JCPOA and climate. Those are the five big ones. Number six is Turkey, because Turkey directly impacts two of the first five: Iran and Russia. And it impacts number eight or nine, terrorism.

They're a very important NATO state. The NATO radar that is the core of the entire anti-ballistic missile system defending against Iran is in Turkey. We have tremendous military assets there. We really can't "do" the Middle East, the Caucasus or the Black Sea without Turkey. And Turkey is a natural opponent of Russia and Iran.

Erdogan is a great power thinker. Where he sees vacuums, he moves. The other thing about Erdogan is he's maddeningly arrogant, unpredictable and simply will not accept a win-win solution. But when pressed — and I've negotiated with him — he's a rational actor.

So if Biden sees the world as many of us do now, near-peer competition, Turkey becomes extremely important. Look what [Erdogan] has just done in eight months in Idlib, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia or Russian allies have been the loser in all three.

If we return to Obama's end-of-office mindset that we don't have a geopolitical problem, but we have sets of little problems — that Erdogan's buying S-400s, [IS] cells in the desert and refugees in Lebanon, Iranian 3.25% enriched uranium, and the Khashoggi murder and the never-ending starvation drama in Yemen — all these become *sui generis* problems that we have to throw resources and policies and mobilizing the bureaucracy at, without trying to figure out how do they all fit together.

If the Biden administration goes back to that stupid thinking, then they're going to lose the Middle East. You can forget about Asia.

Al-Monitor: How should the Biden administration approach Erdogan?

Jeffrey: Erdogan will not back down until you show him teeth. That's what we did when we negotiated the cease-fire in October of 2019. We were ready to crush the economy.

That's what Putin did after the Russian plane was shot down. The Russians have now twice sent strong signals to the Turks in Idlib. They chopped the shit out of a Turkish battalion. It didn't work out the way the Russians wanted to.

You have to be willing, when Erdogan goes too far, to really clamp down on him and to make sure he understands this in advance. The Turkish position is never 100% correct. They have some logic and arguments on their side. Given their role as an important ally and bulwark against Iran and Russia, it behooves us to at least listen to their arguments and try to find compromise solutions.

Al-Monitor: You came into the Special Envoy position as a proponent of accelerating the Manbij roadmap model to ease Turkey's concerns about northeast Syria. Is it safe to say

that approach backfired?

Jeffrey: The Turks considered Manbij a failure. There was tremendous pushback from the SDF and from the local military council, and from McGurk's office. Every individual who had PKK connections, there had to be intelligence adjudication both of the Turkish and American sides. Very few people were pushed out.

I basically insisted, and we eventually got a group of about 10 to leave. But that was after about a year, and the Turks thought we weren't serious. That was the model that we tried to apply to the northeast.

The SDF, they're clean kids. I've gotten to know them and their leadership very, very well. They really are phenomenal, by Middle Eastern standards. They're a highly disciplined Marxist offshoot of the PKK. They're also not particularly interested in pursuing the PKK agenda. They're the squishees; they don't have any mountains.

Meanwhile, nobody at the State Department side said hey, what about Turkey? Frankly, our local military and the State Department's defeat-IS people were basically like, that's somebody else's problem.

The Turks along the border were provoked, primarily by us [announcing](#) that we were going to create a new border defense force [in 2018] that would be even larger, and the first place we'd deploy them is along the Turkish border.

This was CENTCOM out of control. This was the classic, 'We're just here to fight terrorists, let the *f—heads* in State Department take care of Turkey, and we can say or do anything we want that pleases us and pleases our little allies, and it doesn't matter.' And this was the bane of our existence until we finally got it under our control, and it didn't come fully under control until — with a few outliers — Pompeo asked me to take over the D-ISIS job.

Al-Monitor: Operation Peace Spring threw a major wrench into the US mission there and has been called an "ethnic cleansing." You've said you have to show Erdogan teeth. But prior to the incursion, you led an effort to have the YPG dismantle its defenses as part of the safe zone. What was the logic behind that?

Jeffrey: It was an expansion of the Manbij roadmap: joint patrols and, in Manbij, the withdrawal of PKK-associated leadership. In the safe zone it was all SDF forces, and heavy weapons and defenses to be withdrawn. We thought, given constant Turkish pressure on the president to do something about this, that that made sense.

When Bolton and I went out [to Ankara] in January 2019, there was a lot of talk about Jeffrey running in with this map. It wasn't Jeffrey's map. The map had been drawn up by our military personnel with the Kurds, and it had been agreed with them.



The Kurds were supposed to dismantle their fortifications but they didn't. That was one of Erdogan's major complaints. Bolton didn't want to have any Turks in there; that was one of the arguments that I'd had with him out in Ankara. We agreed that we wouldn't show the map, but that we would deploy to the Turks the concept of the map.

We finally got an agreement in July and August. It included Turkish patrols down to the M4 highway, so the Turks got their 30 kilometers, and somewhat vaguely, [a] Turkish permanent presence, but we couldn't determine where that would be.

It was a good compromise. It was kind of working, but the Turks were still unhappy with it because they knew the SDF was still controlling the area, and they didn't believe the SDF was dismantling the fortifications. And that's true. We kept on pressing the SDF to do it and we got a lot of excuses.

Al-Monitor: Why did it collapse?

Jeffrey: The president was uncomfortable with our presence in Syria. He was very uncomfortable with what he saw as endless wars. This is something he should not be criticized for. We took down the [IS] caliphate, and then we stayed on. Trump kept asking, "Why do we have troops there?" And we didn't give him the right answer.

If somebody had said, "It's all about the Iranians," it might have worked. But the people whose job it was to tell why the troops are there was DOD. And they just gave the [Congressional] Authorization of Use of Military Force: "We're there to fight terrorists."

The reason that Trump pulled the troops out was I think because he was just tired of us having come up with all these explanations for why we're in there. There was an implicit promise to him, 'Hey boss, nothing's going to go wrong, we're working with the Turks, we're working with the Russians.' And then he gets these disasters.

I didn't brief the president on it. Pompeo did, and made arguments along those lines, focused on Iran. But Trump was uncomfortable about those forces, and he trusted Erdogan. Erdogan would keep making these cases about the PKK, and the president would ask people, and they would have to be honest and 'fess up. Of course, it's more complicated than that. Wars are complicated.

The president was briefed, but he also listens to Erdogan. Erdogan is pretty persuasive.

We at the State Department never provided any troop numbers to the president. That's not our job. We didn't try to deceive him. He kept on publicly saying numbers that were way

below what the actual numbers were, so in talking to the media and talking to Congress, we had to be very careful and dodge around. Furthermore, the numbers were funny. Do you count the allies that didn't want to be identified in there? Do you count the al-Tanf garrison? Do you count the Bradley unit that was going in and out?

We were gun shy because the president had three times given the order to withdraw. It was a constant pressuring and threatening to pull the troops out of Syria. We felt very vulnerable and may have been a little bit punch drunk on fear because it made so much sense to us. I understand his concerns about Afghanistan. But the Syria mission is the gift that keeps on giving. We and the SDF are still the dominant force in [northeast] Syria.

The Kurds were always trying to get us to pretend that we would defend them against the Turkish army. They pressed CJTF, over my objections, to start putting outposts along the Turkish border. I hated the idea; it just provoked the Turks.

I wasn't able to get those stopped, but I was able to stop additional ones [being built]. They made no sense. The US military had no authorization to shoot at the Turks, who could simply drive around them. It was simply a signal to the Turks that we couldn't really be trusted and that we had some plan of a permanent statelet in northeast Syria run by the PKK as a pressure point, just like many Turks erroneously think we have our Greece policy and our Cyprus policy and our Armenia policy all to pressure the Turks. Because that's how the British and French dealt with the Ottoman Empire.

It was played up in Congress and the media as if we had this policy of being a bulwark against the Turks, and then the president changed our policy on the ground in his conversation with Erdogan.

Believe me, I was with the commander in December 2018 when the Turks were about to come in, and we were trying to figure out what the US Army should do. There was no plan. There was no plan to respond to the Turks because they had no order to do that. That was not part of their mission set.

Secretary Pompeo, I and others had consistently made that point to the Turks: Even if we don't stop you [militarily], and that's not our policy, we will act against you politically. But more importantly, the Kurds will just invite in the Russians. The Turks just pooh-poohed this. They pooh-poohed this after the 6th of October incursion.

The president sent a message to Erdogan that if he did not stop within 24 hours, Mazlum would reach out to the Russians and invite them in, and the US would not stop them. I wound up passing that message on, and our Turkish interlocutor was incredulous. They either thought the Russians wouldn't come in or we would stop them, just like we did to Wagner [at the Conoco gas field in Deir ez-Zor].

And the Russians came in. Suddenly it's checkmate. Can I claim the Turkish problem has been resolved? No, I can't. But the Turks now have a presence in the northeast. They have less to fear from the SDF.

Al-Monitor: Did they ever have anything to fear from the SDF?

Jeffrey: Of course. Sure. Look, they almost went to war with Syria in almost 1999 over the presence of [PKK leader Abdallah] Ocalan. The YPG is the PKK. Remember when they went into Raqqa? Remember the poster? That's the problem. Erdogan does not want another

statelet like Qandil in Syria that is protected by the United States or protected by Russia.

The Turks have lost 40,000 people to the PKK. It is an existential threat to Turkey. The Kurdish population of Turkey is split. Half of it is in Kurdish enclaves. The other half is integrated into Turkish society. You're looking at a Bosnia-Rwanda type situation if the PKK could ever truly mobilize the Kurdish population to the degree that the Turkish majority decided that "the only good Kurd is a dead Kurd." That is the existential threat of the PKK to Turkey.

What Erdogan didn't have to fear was the idea that the United States was deliberately doing this as part of some long-term plan to keep Turkey weak.

Al-Monitor: But you never saw any evidence that the SDF funneling weapons or fighters into Turkey?

Jeffrey: Certainly not from the northeast of Syria. That was part of our agreement with them.

Al-Monitor: Do you think the US can still reach consensus with Erdogan on northeast Syria, given his insistence that the PYD/YPG is inextricable from the PKK terror group?

Jeffrey: I don't know. Whenever you talk about northeast Syria, the most important thing is Turkish domestic politics. Erdogan's battle buddy, [Devlet] Bahceli, can be summed up in one sentence: The only thing that matters is the Turkish national agenda, and in that there's no place for Kurds.

That's not the AKP's agenda, of course. Erdogan, who has had much better policies toward Kurds and the PKK than anybody before him, is being hampered by the MHP.

If Erdogan feels that he needs a victory [to] churn up national sentiment, he might do something more. The problem is, he would have to do that in conjunction with the Russians because I don't think he will go south of the M4. He and his people had always maintained that they were not interested in what happens south of the M4. So Kobane, for example. But that would require agreement of the Russians.

The Russians have made it clear — I have it on the highest authority — that the Russians do not want to see an expanded Turkish presence into Syria.

The SDF people keep saying the Russians are telling them the Turks are about to come in. That's a Russian threat. It's made out of whole-cloth to the Russians to push us out and get access to the oilfields. It's a crude Russian pressure tactic. I don't see it as likely.

Al-Monitor: SDF commander Mazlum Abdi has expressed doubt that an agreement with the Assad regime is likely in the near future. What is the status of PYD-KNC talks? How might this end for the SDF?

Jeffrey: Here's Jim Jeffrey's cynical answer to that: The answer to Dave Petraeus' question, 'How does this all end?' — it's an issue of proportionality. We don't have a perfect roadmap. If you want to put limited resources, fine, but it's OK because that's the primary way our competition moves forward.

The various Kurdish groups are going to be a factor in the eventual outcome of the Syrian crisis. Politically and militarily. They hold many of the reins.

Al-Monitor: Could they ever be included in Geneva?

Who knows? We live in a world of Kashmirs and Nagorno-Karabakhs.

The point is, this [preserving the SDF] is our plan B. We have a plan A. Plan A doesn't answer 'how does this all end?' Plan A's whole purpose [is] to ensure that the Russians and Assad and the Iranians don't have a happy answer to how this all ends, and maybe that will someday get them to accept Plan B. Meanwhile, they're tied up in knots. They don't see Syria as a victory.

Al-Monitor: Do you think Mazlum will be able to get the PKK cadres out of northeast Syria?

Jeffrey: We'll see. I think he's doing everything in his power to balance PKK, Turkish, Russian and American interests to maintain first of all the protection of his own people, the Kurdish population of the northeast, [and] secondly, of the areas that he controls, which includes a large number of Arabs. He's doing exactly what I would be doing under these circumstances.

How much pressure on PKK cadre that policy requires or will allow may vary from time to time. It's certainly something that we and the Turks keep raising.

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