INTRODUCTION

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WHY DO I CARE?

It almost goes without saying that my interest in this topic is partly a reflection of its timeliness; Turkish President Erdogan, after obtaining the consent of President Trump, began his invasion into the Kurdish YPG controlled region of Syria known as Rojava this past Wednesday. During Sunday’s “Face the Nation,” Secretary of Defense Mark Esper confirmed to Margaret Brennan that roughly
1,000 U.S. troops would be evacuated from northern Syria following Trump’s troop withdrawal announcement. There are also multiple reports of ISIS families and fighters previously captured and held by Kurdish forces starting to escape after Tukey’s bombardments. Also, Lebanese broadcaster al-Mayadeen reported Sunday that the Syrian army would enter Manbij and Kobani in the next 48 hours, based on an agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (the latter, according to Mohammed Shaheen, the deputy chairman of Euphrates region told North-Press).

It seems that what we are seeing transpire in the Middle East is the disintegration of artificially constructed national borders around sectarian lines. The forces being unleashed have thus far remain contained within the Greater Middle East, but Turkey’s involvement creates the further potential for spillover into the Balkans and southern Europe at some indeterminate future date. Additionally, Turkey has been flexing its geopolitical muscles where Greece is concerned in recent years, and it is no longer inconceivable to imagine that its troubled relationship to the EU and its membership in NATO will prove insufficient as deterrents for curbing Turkish military aggression or the expansionary ideas of Erdoğan in the Aegean.

My goal in this conversation is to help listeners develop some context for what has transpired over the past week, the significance of Trump’s decision, and the implications moving forward for our relationship with Turkey, Turkey’s expansive role in the region, Russia’s interests, Iran’s perspective, the fate of ISIS and the Kurds.

SUMMARY & QUESTIONS

Who are the Kurds? — The Kurds are an Indo-European people, mostly Sunni Muslims, native to a mountainous region of Western Asia known as Kurdistan, numbering about 30 million, whose homeland is divided among Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. There are also exclaves of Kurds in central Anatolia and Khorasan.

Kurds have been persecuted in those countries in a variety of ways: stripped of their citizenship, excluded from some professions, barred from giving their children certain names and restricted in speaking their own language. They have pushed for equal rights and autonomy over their affairs.
and periodically rebelled. National authorities have responded at times severely, expelling Kurds from their villages in Syria and attacking them with chemical weapons in Iraq, where they now have an autonomous region in the north that is recognized by the Iraqi constitution.

After World War One and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the victorious Western allies made provision for a Kurdish state in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. However, that promise was nullified three years later, when the Treaty of Lausanne set the boundaries of modern Turkey and made no such provision, leaving Kurds with minority status in their respective countries. This fact has led to numerous genocides and rebellions, along with the current ongoing armed guerrilla conflicts in Turkey, Iran, and Syria / Rojava. Kurds have an autonomous region in Iraq named Kurdistan Region, while Kurdish nationalist movements continue to pursue greater cultural rights, autonomy, and independence throughout Greater Kurdistan.

Q: Why is the US allied with Syrian Kurds?

Q: What are the YPG, PKK, etc., and how do these various organizations relate to the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)?

The Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK is a Kurdish far-left militant and political organization based in Turkey and Iraq. Since 1984 the PKK has been involved in an armed conflict with the Turkish state (with a two-year cease-fire during 2013–2015), with the initial aim of achieving an independent Kurdish state, later changing it to a demand for equal rights and Kurdish autonomy in Turkey. The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by several states and organizations, including Turkey, the United States, Japan, and the European Union.
As the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria, it seeks autonomy for Syria’s Kurds and has shown a willingness to work with any power capable of advancing that goal. The party itself was formed in 2003 as an offshoot of the PKK. The YPG ranks are thought to include tens of thousands of fighters.

Q: When/How/Why did the US become allied with the YPG?

Gradually. The YPG wasn’t part of the Free Syrian Army, the Western-backed coalition that was the main opponent of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime in the early years of the country’s civil war. Some rebels accuse the YPG of collaborating with Assad, who has supported the PKK and whose decision to withdraw forces from several majority-Kurdish areas in northern Syria in mid-2012 allowed the YPG to establish control there. In 2015, when the Syrian Democratic Forces were created under U.S. auspices to fight Islamic State, YPG members formed its backbone. The U.S. began providing material support to the SDF and backing its operations with air power but initially said American weaponry was only for the coalition’s non-YPG elements. That changed in May 2017, when the U.S. declared Kurdish forces were needed to retake Islamic State’s Syrian headquarters of Raqqa.

Who are the Turks? — The Republic of Turkey is a transcontinental country located mainly on the Anatolian peninsula in Western Asia, with a small portion on the Balkan peninsula in Southeast Europe. Approximately 70 to 80 per cent of the country’s citizens identify as Turkish. Kurds are the largest minority; the size of the Kurdish population is a subject of dispute with estimates placing the figure at anywhere from 12 to 25 percent of the population. At various points in its history, the region has been inhabited by diverse civilizations including the Assyrians, Greeks, Thracians, Phrygians, Urartians, and Armenians. The Kurdish–Turkish conflict, an armed conflict between the Republic of Turkey and Kurdish insurgents, has been active since 1984 primarily in the southeast of the country. Various Kurdish groups demand separation from Turkey to create an independent Kurdistan or to have autonomy and greater political and cultural rights for Kurds in Turkey. Turkey is a charter member of the UN, an early member of NATO, the IMF and the World Bank, and a founding member of the OECD, OSCE, BSEC, OIC and G-20. After becoming one of the first
members of the Council of Europe in 1949, Turkey became an associate member of the EEC in 1963, joined the EU Customs Union in 1995 and started accession negotiations with the European Union in 2005 which have been effectively stopped by the EU in 2017 due to "Turkey's path toward autocratic rule". Turkey's economy and diplomatic initiatives led to its recognition as a regional power while its location has given it geopolitical and strategic importance throughout history. Turkey is a secular, unitary, formerly parliamentary republic which adopted a presidential system with a referendum in 2017; the new system came into effect with the presidential election in 2018. Turkey's current administration headed by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the AKP has enacted measures to increase the influence of Islam, and undermine Kemalist policies and freedom of the press.

**Turkey's Plans and Objectives** — President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has vowed to create a “buffer zone” inside Syria by pushing back the Kurdish forces and settling some of the 3.7 million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey. But most of those refugees are ethnic Arabs from other areas and the move could set Turkey up for another confrontation with Assad, whose government has warned that any resettlement needs to be coordinated and only people who originally fled homes in the northeast should return there. Essentially, Turkey wants to dismantle the embryonic proto-state Kurdish forces have established in northern Syria amid years of civil war, saying it could be used by the PKK to launch attacks on Turkish territory. The Turkish government **strongly objected** to the U.S. arming the Syrian Kurds for this same reason.

**Q: Don’t the Turks have a really good reason to be pissed with the US?** (i.e. we were arming and training a terrorist organization and working side-by-side with them to create an autonomous zone that they controlled directly south of their boarder).

**The Fate of ISIS** — The battle against ISIS may arguably be the most successful campaign waged by the United States in the Middle East since...I don’t know when. Certainly, no one seems willing to argue that it has not been a great success, and it was a team effort. Iraqi security forces, Kurdish peshmerga, Syrian opposition fighters and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) all played a part, and sacrificed their lives in the effort. The U.S. military presence in Syria has been an important piece of that effort, and that effort has been sustained without over-committing U.S. resources or Americans directly engaged in day-to-day fighting. According to an article published by Brett McGurk (special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS) in the Washington Post only weeks after resigning in protest to the President’s initial decision to begin a pullout of US forces:

[US forces] are enabling a local force, the SDF, now a diverse group of roughly 60,000 fighters, including Arabs, Kurds and Christians, to reclaim Syrian cities and towns from the Islamic State.
The SDF has suffered thousands of casualties. Until this past week, two Americans had died in combat in Syria. (Four were killed Wednesday in a suicide bombing claimed by the Islamic State — the first of its kind against our forces in Syria — coinciding with uncertainty in Washington about the mission.)

The president’s decision to leave Syria was made without deliberation, consultation with allies or Congress, assessment of risk, or appreciation of facts. Two days after Mike Pompeo’s, call Trump tweeted, “We have defeated ISIS in Syria.” But that was not true, and we have continued to conduct airstrikes against the Islamic State. Days later, he claimed that Saudi Arabia had “now agreed to spend the necessary money needed to help rebuild Syria.” But that wasn’t true, either, as the Saudis later confirmed, Trump also suggested that U.S. military forces could leave Syria within 30 days, which was logistically impossible.

Worse, Trump made this snap decision after a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He bought Erdogan’s proposal that Turkey take on the fight against the Islamic State deep inside Syria. In fact, Turkey can’t operate hundreds of miles from its border in hostile territory without substantial U.S. military support. And many of the Syrian opposition groups backed by Turkey include extremists who have openly declared their intent to fight the Kurds, not the Islamic State.

The strategic consequences of Trump’s decision are already playing out: The more Turkey expands its reach in Syria, the faster our Arab partners in the region move toward Damascus. It’s not a coincidence that Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates reopened embassies there shortly after Trump said we were leaving. These countries, as well as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, believe that engaging Damascus can help dilute Russian, Iranian and Turkish influence in Syria, and they are discounting contrary views from Washington. The SDF, recognizing that it may soon be on its own and surrounded by hostile forces, has accelerated its talks with Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Turkey, a NATO ally, turned to Russia within days of Trump’s decision, dispatching senior officials to Moscow to work out next steps in Syria. Israel, our closest ally in the region, confronted a new reality with America soon absent from the field in Syria. Only Russia and Iran hailed Trump’s
decision. Whatever leverage we may have had with these two adversaries in Syria diminished once Trump said we would leave. These trends will worsen if the president does not reverse course: Our partners will stop listening and make decisions that run contrary to our interests. Our adversaries will play for time, knowing the United States is on its way out. The Islamic State and other extremist groups will fill the void opened by our departure, regenerating their capacity to threaten our friends in Europe — as they did throughout 2016 — and ultimately our own homeland.

A more realistic Syria policy must account for the following hard truths:

First, we are leaving. It may be in six months, four months or less, but Trump has made clear repeatedly that he wants out. The longer this fact is resisted or described as but a difference in tactics, with our strategy unchanged, the worse the risk of an embarrassing exit, attacks against U.S. forces and wholesale abandonment of the SDF with no realistic planning for the aftermath. The focus now must be on protecting our military and getting out safely; asking our small force to do more than that will increase risk as we withdraw.

Second, Assad is staying. This fact is now priced into the thinking of our regional partners, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, which are as hard-line on Iran as anyone in Washington but understand that without us, any chance of upending this mass-murdering dictator, propped up by Iran and Russia, is a pipe dream.

Third, only the SDF provides stability in the areas that once made up the Islamic State in northeast Syria. Its forces cannot be replaced. And with America leaving, it will need a new benefactor, or else risk fracturing and opening a vacuum into which the Islamic State can resurge. To maintain stability, the SDF may have no choice but to reach accommodation with Damascus to come under the umbrella of the Syrian state. This unfortunate outcome may be necessary to avoid a strategic and humanitarian debacle.

Fourth, on Syria, Turkey is not a reliable partner. The Syrian opposition forces it backs are marbled with extremists and number too few to constitute an effective challenge to Assad or a plausible
alternative to the SDF. The areas of Syria that Turkey ostensibly controls, such as Idlib province in the northwest, are increasingly dominated by al-Qaeda. The United States can help Turkey protect its border, but entry of the Turkish military and Turkish-supported opposition fighters into SDF areas of northeast Syria — as is now being discussed — would precipitate chaos and an environment for extremists to thrive.

So, U.S. objectives in Syria should be narrowed to mitigating the risk of an Islamic State resurgence and preventing Iran from fortifying a military presence that threatens Israel. The former is best achieved by ensuring that the SDF remains intact and obtaining ongoing access to airspace through deconfliction with Russia; the latter by supporting Israel in what it has recently acknowledged to be a precise air campaign against Iranian threats in Syria.

**Iranians Vew of Turkish Invasion of Northern Syria?** — From an article by Maysam Behravesh, a *former* Iranian intelligence analyst and policy advisor (2008-2010):

Like most Arab and European governments, Iran has condemned Turkey’s military offensive in northeastern Syria, which started shortly after US President Donald Trump abruptly ordered the withdrawal of American forces stationed along the border following a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, secretary general of the Arab League - a regional organization of 22 Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa - described the incursion as “a blatant violation of Syria’s sovereignty” that “could allow for the revival” of the Islamic State (IS) group, as the league called for a crisis meeting on Saturday to discuss its consequences.

In a similar vein, the European Union has strongly criticized the invasion, with EU high representative for foreign policy Federica Mogherini warning that the invasion risked “protracted instability in northeast Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence” of IS. Some European governments have also threatened sanctions and an arms embargo against Ankara.
Iran, Turkey’s close trading partner and neighbor to the northwest, has joined the chorus, but the stakes for it are fundamentally different - explaining why the Islamic Republic has not moved beyond verbal criticism and refrained, say, from deploying paramilitary forces under its command to defend Syrian sovereignty and Kurdish-held territories.

**Iran's verbal denunciation**

The Iranian foreign ministry expressed “concern” on Thursday over Turkey’s military operation, which had started a day earlier, and demanded “an immediate stop to the attacks and the exit of the Turkish military from Syrian territory”.

Turkey has stated that its offensive seeks to remove the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition of anti-Bashar al-Assad militias from northern Syria.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif had earlier flagged up [a 1998 security pact signed between Turkey and Syria - commonly known as the Adana agreement - as a legal framework for peacefully establishing security on the Turkish-Syrian border.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adana_Agreement)

According to the accord, then-Syrian president Hafez al-Assad pledged to shut down the bases of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) - which Ankara regards a terrorist group - in Syria and expel its leader Abdullah Ocalan from the country.

“The Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria - still valid - can be the better path to achieve security. Iran can help bring together the Syrian Kurds, the Syrian government, and Turkey so that the Syrian army together with Turkey can guard the border,” Zarif tweeted, summing up his suggestions in an interview with Ankara’s state-run news channel TRT World.

As the Turkish invasion of northern Syria, dubbed [Operation Peace Spring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Peace_Spring), entered its third day on Friday, Iranian hard-liners voiced a relatively hardened stance in opposition.

Tehran’s provisional Friday prayers leader Ahmad Khatami highlighted the Saudi plight in Yemen on Friday, warning Ankara not to fall into a similar “trap” and create a “new quagmire” for itself.
“This military action will fail to achieve Turkey's objectives while stoking Kurdish nationalism and probably prompting them to reach a reconciliation with Damascus,” Diako Hosseini, director of the World Studies Programme at Iran’s presidential Centre for Strategic Studies, told MEE. “It might also lead to a long war of attrition and drag Turkey further into the predicament in northern Syria.”

**Blessing in disguise**

This does not, however, mean that Iran sees no silver lining in the development. While officially expressing opposition to Ankara’s explicit violation of Syrian sovereignty, Iranian leadership seems to treat it as a blessing in disguise for a number of reasons.

Despite emphasizing the need for a peaceful resolution of tensions, Tehran might calculate that even if Turkey wins the battle, it would ultimately be easier to expel from the area Ankara-allied Syrian militants - some of whom have close ties with al-Qaeda and its affiliates - than US-backed Kurds who enjoy the political support of Western powers.

Given the likelihood that neither Tehran nor Damascus will accommodate the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in northeast Syria - let alone an independent state - it would serve them well to let Turkey do the dirty work and then take action against it as “liberators” of Syrian lands from foreign “occupiers”. Russia, the most influential ally of Bashar al-Assad, is likely to tag along, as it has joined forces with the Syrian army to drive out militants from Idlib in the northwest despite a “demilitarisation” agreement with Turkey within the Astana peace framework.

Still, such a scenario can be more difficult for Damascus and its Iranian and Russian allies to implement if a triumphant Turkey manages to populate areas currently held by Kurds with millions of Syrian refugees and impose a new demographic order on the ground.

Secondly, the Islamic Republic and the Assad government are deeply wary of the Kurds' progressive model of governance in the Rojava administration in northeast Syria. Based on “democratic confederalism”, it has served as a source of inspiration for other Kurdish minorities in the region to seek autonomy and independence. It was Rojava's gender-egalitarian
and eco-protective governance that galvanised Iraqi Kurds in September 2017 to hold an independence referendum in the face of opposition from the central government in Baghdad, although the latter ultimately thwarted their aspirations with massive Iranian assistance.

Tehran does not want Syrian Kurds to act as a role model for its restive Kurdish population along the border with Iraq. The Iranian army held unannounced military drills near the border with Turkey on Wednesday, the same day Ankara launched its incursion into northeast Syria.

“Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has common cause with Turkey in undermining Kurds and precluding their independence on the one hand, while it is also concerned about the empowerment of Turkey-allied Syrian rebels and how they might weaken the Assad rule,” Saeid Golkar, an IRGC expert at the University of Tennessee and author of Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran, told MEE.

“While Tehran is obviously very happy with the gradual withdrawal of American forces from Syria, IRGC’s policy is dual containment and debilitation of Syrian Kurds and Ankara-backed rebels at the same time.”

The SDF - of which the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) is a core part - appears to have formed close relations with Israel, Iran’s regional arch-foe, over the past years. There have been intelligence reports that a series of Israeli drone and missile strikes against Tehran-allied Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) positions in Iraq were launched from Kurdish-held territories in northeastern Syria.

This provides further motivation for Iran to hold Shia militia forces back and let its Turkish and Kurdish rivals in Syria bleed each other as dry as much as possible.

Given the Erdogan government’s tense ties with Israel, the Iranian leadership can at least rest assured that northeast Syria will not turn into a “launch pad” for Israel to stage attacks against Iranian installations and interests across the region, if Turkey succeeds in expelling Kurdish militias from the area.

All told, a prolonged Turkish invasion is likely to widen differences between Ankara on the one hand and Tehran and Moscow on the other, and may persuade Assad’s two main allies to step in more forcefully.

“Iran and Russia are both averse to showing Turkey a harsh response, but if it does not end its military offensive in Syria soon, they might decide to apply more pressure on Ankara, which...
coupled with growing international pressure, could complicate the situation for Erdogan,” Hosseini concluded.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Worth emphasizing the scale of the disaster Trump has wrought in the week since his call with Erdogan. (1) Revived Isis. (2) Cemented Assad grip on Syria. (3) Handed Russia another geopolitical windfall. (4) Betrayed Kurdish partners. (5) Immeasurably damaged US power and credibility.

Writing a Headline — Q: If you were writing a headline to describe the most important thing that comes out of all of the last week, what would it be?

Have We Made Things Worse As Usual? — [TAKE QUOTE] Q: Despite your warnings, and despite the minimal involvement we have had in terms of troop presence in Syria, have actually made things worse?

Was This Outcome Always Inevitable? — You have suggested that the US could have saved itself and Syria 8 years of fighting by simply siding with Assad to begin with. Q: Does this analysis require one to assume that the current outcome (Trump’s withdrawal – whether done rashly or not – was always an inevitable outcome of US foreign policy because Americans don’t want “endless wars?” Q: In other words, would this have happened irrespective of who was in the White House, that at some point, Turkey would grow impatient with an independent, autonomous Kurdish region on their border?

What Has Been US Policy in Syria? — Dividing Syrians and keeping them poor may ensure short-term US interests; it pleases some of America’s allies; but in the long-term, it will ensure failure and more wars. Only by promoting growth and unity can the United States advance stability, the rule of law, and liberal values. The U.S. should help promote prosperity in the region, rather than working to inhibit it. If this region is going to rebuild, the U.S. must recognize that Iran has won this war—and the U.S. must come to terms with the fact that it was its own policies that were largely responsible for that victory. The moral obligation to the Kurds can be fulfilled by making sure that they strike an advantageous deal with both Turkey and Syria for autonomy and get a healthy share of Syria’s resources. Working for a negotiated solution to Kurdish autonomy, rather than one that alienates the regional powers, isolates Washington, and beggars the Syrian people is in America’s interest. Q: What is current US policy and what should it be? Why do you focus so much on economic rebuilding?

With America’s economy in the dumps, its military badly bruised, its reputation among Muslims in tatters, and its people fatigued by foreign wars, this is no time to intervene in Syria. Washington has no staying power if things go wrong. It wants regime-change on the cheap — to bomb and withdraw. And if things go wrong, will we leave the Syrians in the lurch or get sucked into another complicated quagmire? The administration can ill afford to leave a failed state behind in Syria or to have it unfurl into civil war. — J.L.
U.S. POLICY SHOULD FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

• Retaining Turkey within its orbit rather than losing it to Russian influence
• Fulfilling our responsibility to the Syrian Kurds in a way that ensures their safety and future while also assuaging Turkey’s concerns
• Positioning itself as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia rather than going all-in on one side
• Promoting the recovery and rebuilding of the region, not keeping it broken and poor.

Worst of All Worlds? — Q: Has the US arrived at worst of all possible worlds for itself in Middle East by burning its relationship with the Kurds (a secular ethnic minority), impairing its relationship with NATO ally Turkey by slapping economic sanctions on it, and by empowering Russia & Iran?

Ankara’s Quest to Reconstitute the Ottoman Empire? — Erdogan insists he will continue Turkey’s offensive to take all towns, including Kobani and Qamishli, that populate the border. “We will soon secure the region from Manbij to the border with Iraq,” he said on Tuesday. Q: What is Erdogan’s ambition here and how far do we expect him to go? Q: When does this story go from being about Syria, Russia, and the Kurds, to being about Turkish expansionism?

Breakdown of Global Order — Q: Is this what a breakdown of the rules-based international order
looks like? **Q:** Is this what happens in a post-American Middle East?

**What is the Outcome for Putin’s Russia?** — **Q:** What is the outcome for Putin’s Russia after all of this? **Q:** How much of a hand has he had in shaping the outcome by simply praying on our weaknesses and allowing us to overextend ourselves as empires often do?

**Silver Lining** — **Q:** As a result of the most recent example of gross incompetence in American Foreign Policy, finally compel countries in the Middle East to recognize that they cannot rely on the United States for their well-being, and that they need to take collective ownership over the region’s security, which means engaging directly with one another and building a new, durable framework of alliances?

**Saudi Arabia** — **Q:** Why are we sending more troops to Saudi Arabia? **Q:** Is the president going to push for war with Iran? **Q:** How far does this go before there is a rebellion in the military?

**Iran’s Playbook** — This Iran-obsessed policy may serve Israeli and Saudi short-term interests—it may mollify Washington’s anger at failing to dislodge the Assad government—but it does not serve U.S. interests. **Q:** What has been the US policy towards Iran and what should it be? **Q:** What is Iran’s play in all of this? **Q:** How do they seek to benefit from this?

**Turkey & ISIS** — Turkey has a history of collaboration with Al-Nusra and even ISIS members in its efforts to destroy Kobani and roll back Kurdish forces. **Q:** Are the Turks really a reliable partner in the fight against ISIS?

**Trump Business Interests** — **Q:** What are these rumors of trump’s business interests having a role to play in all of this? **Q:** Is Trump really any different on this front that other presidents and how important is this really, in explaining what’s happening here?
AFTER...AFTER THOUGHTS

It seems to me that what we’ve seen transpire in the Middle East during the past week is a symptom of a much larger trend: the deterioration of the rules-based international order, the fulcrum around which the world has turned for three generations—the entirety of living memory. It is the breakdown of national borders, in many cases borders that have been artificially constructed and maintained by the credible threat of American military power. As America begins its long-anticipated withdrawal from the world stage, others will rise to take her place. It was probably naive to imagine that this could happen in a managed way. Perhaps it was always destined to be messy. As much as Trump's detractors wish to blame him for the mess in Syria, the truth is, he is only an accelerant. He isn't responsible for assembling the reactants.

The forces currently being unleashed in what was once Northern Syria remain contained within the Greater Middle East, but Turkey’s involvement creates the potential for spillover into the Balkans and southern Europe at some indeterminate date in the future. Turkey has been flexing its geopolitical muscles with Greece for years. It is no longer inconceivable to imagine that its membership in NATO will prove to be an insufficient deterrent for curbing Turkish military aggression or the expansionary ambitions of Erdoğan in the Aegean. Erdoğan seems to be staking his political career on the vision of a more assertive and expansionary Turkish foreign policy. Turkey remains strategically indispensable to the US & NATO. If he expands Turkey's current activities in Cypriot waters, it isn't clear who will stop him.

It's a cliché, but all bets do seem to be off. If the nations of the world decide that America can no longer guarantee their security or maintain the integrity of their borders, we may start to see a rapid reorganization of the international order along radically different lines. It's hard to believe, but Russia has played its cards better than any one of the major powers. It has capitalized on (and in some cases stoked) the chaos of political dysfunction both within and across the transatlantic
relationship. It seems to have positioned itself as the new dance partner for any country suddenly in need of an escort. Its economy may be half the size of California's, but this has not stopped Putin from rebranding the Russian Federation as "the new neighborhood muscle," that will have your back when the US doesn't.

America's leaders have exhibited remarkable incompetence in the area of foreign policy, displaying only flickering instances of humility and foresight since being thrust upon the world stage as the new global hegemon and the only standing survivor of the Cold War. For years, we've been asking ourselves what this new world is going to look like, a world without America guaranteeing security for the liberal, democratic order. The events currently transpiring in Syria may be giving us our first real glimpse of what that world will look like. It's chaotic. It's authoritarian. And it's more violent. This is the new backdrop for which the circus that is American politics will play out in 2020. Democratic candidates who have staked their candidacies on demonizing Donald Trump, while avoiding addressing the forces that brought him to office in the first place risk being totally blindsided by even lower voter turnout and a re-election of Donald Trump in 2020. If that happens, American foreign policy will likely go into crisis. It's really unclear at that point what would happen. The proverbial "Deep State" has resisted his candidacy from the beginning, but has not gone so far as to overthrow his popular mandate. Should he be re-elected, what will Washington's elite, its intelligence agencies and wealthy benefactors do? Will they sit by and watch while Trump dismantles what is left of their dysfunctional experiment in American empire? Or, will they impeach him? He certainly hasn't made it difficult with his actions, but they no longer have the credibility to do it without further sacrificing their own legitimacy.

This is truly uncharted waters. I pray that a new consensus emerges in the next twelve months that brings enough of the country together to stop the bleeding, but I'm not sure from what source this unanimity will spring. I am hopeful. We need to try.