

## Is Trump About to Repeat Obama's Worst Mistake?

by [Malcolm Lowe](#)

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- Should American personnel be removed from Syria, President Erdogan will be able to use his tanks and airplanes to revive the Turkish genocidal tradition by expelling the Syrian Kurds from their towns and villages along the entire border with Turkey. These are the same Kurds -- remember Kobani? -- who drove out ISIS from its Syrian "caliphate" and enabled other Syrians to regain their freedom and return to their own homes.
  - In early February, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman begged Turkey to cease its assault on Afrin, claiming -- truly enough -- that "the continuation of Turkey's military operation will facilitate the return of instability and terrorism to Syria." Indeed, deprived of American protection, the Kurds will hardly find anyone else willing to rescue them apart from Iran. If that happens, the Kurds will reward Iranians with same loyalty and devotion that they showed hitherto to Americans. Understandably, since they will owe their lives and homes to Iran, not to the United States.
  - Even if the implications of the massacre in Afrin were not so clearly evident, President Trump should remember the worst mistake of Obama's presidency in the area. This was Obama's precipitous and petulant decision to withdraw residual American military forces from Iraq. So, Mr. Trump, we beg and urge you not to copy Obama, who made his big mistake and reversed it, but to reverse your mistake before you make it.

The terrified dire warnings that greeted Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States have proved to be mostly exaggerated or imaginary. In some cases, like his decision to terminate absurd diplomatic antics about the location of Israel's capital, he has put an end to nonsense perpetrated by politicians throughout the world, including all recent American presidents. Very sadly, extremely sadly, he now seems inclined to repeat the worst mistake of his predecessor, President Obama.

The rumor is spreading that Trump is about to end all American involvement in Syria and bring American military personnel back home. The result, within months or even weeks, will be the expulsion from their homes of the Syrian Kurds, who have been the most faithful allies and

most sincere admirers of the United States. Such a betrayal will indelibly and permanently mar the reputation of Donald Trump, giving satisfaction to all those who claimed that this successful businessman has zero competence in politics.

The result of an American withdrawal should be blindingly obvious from recent events. Turkey has just driven 200,000 Syrian Kurds from their homes in Afrin and has announced its intention to proceed from there to Manbij. Only the presence of American military personnel in Manbij has so far deterred Turkish President Erdogan from continuing his crazy persecution of Kurds. Should American personnel be removed from Syria, Erdogan will be able to use his tanks and warplanes to revive the Turkish genocidal tradition by expelling the Syrian Kurds from their towns and villages along the entire border with Turkey. These are the same Kurds -- remember Kobani? -- who drove out ISIS from its Syrian "caliphate" and enabled other Syrians to regain their freedom and return to their own homes.



Pictured: The city center of Kobani, Syria on June 20, 2015, shortly after the Kurdish YPG militia wrested control of the city from ISIS. (Photo by Ahmet Sik/Getty Images)

It is shameful that neither the United States nor most other countries did anything to prevent or even protest against the atrocity committed in Afrin. The main exception, surprisingly, was the Iranian regime -- despite its problems in its own Kurdish areas. In early February, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman [begged Turkey](#) to cease its assault on Afrin, claiming -- truly enough -- that "the continuation of Turkey's military operation will facilitate the return of instability and terrorism to

Syria." Indeed, deprived of American protection, the Kurds will hardly find anyone else willing to rescue them apart from Iran. If that happens, the Kurds will reward Iranians with same loyalty and devotion that they showed hitherto to Americans. Understandably, since they will owe their lives and homes to Iran, not to the United States.

Trump's looming decision is motivated, the rumors say, by his belief that the United States should not be in the business of "nation building." But that is not what is involved here. We are not talking of the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in rebuilding the destroyed cities and infrastructure of Syria. We are talking of the retention of a few thousand American military ground personnel and an air force umbrella to exclude Turkish tanks and warplanes.

Even if the implications of the massacre in Afrin were not so clearly evident, President Trump should remember the worst mistake of Obama's presidency in the area. This was Obama's precipitous and petulant decision to withdraw residual American military forces from Iraq. The Iraqi government begged America to retain a military presence in Iraq in order to continue its role of advising and accompanying the reformed Iraqi army. The only issue was how American personnel should be prosecuted for civil offenses committed off duty. A compromise on this issue was surely possible, but Obama lost patience and withdrew.

Obama's justification was that -- all along -- the war in Afghanistan was a "good war" but the war in Iraq was a "bad war," since the former but not the latter had UN approval. It was an absurd comparison from the viewpoint of American interests. Iraq sits in a key position in the Middle East, has vast oilfields and modern industry and a well-educated population. Afghanistan is populated by majority illiterate tribes who are engaged in perpetual petty warfare; its only product of note is opium poppies.

As a result of Obama's mistake, ISIS was able to capture a vast area of northern Iraq with -- initially -- hundreds rather than thousands of militiamen. It happened because the Iraqi army officers in Mosul, bereft of their American advisors, panicked and fled, rendering their leaderless servicemen helpless victims of the smaller but well-led ISIS force.

The consequences of this preventable catastrophe were immense: the massacre of Yazidis and the persecution of Christians, the wanton destruction of historic churches and ancient antiquities, the theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars from the bank in Mosul, the many

casualties and the vast destruction in Mosul and other towns that accompanied the long and slow eviction of ISIS.

Fortunately, Obama was not so dogmatic in his ideology as not to recognize the need for American re-engagement in Iraq and for engagement in the Syrian arena. In both countries, the Kurds -- who had rescued the Yazidis from extinction and given refuge to Christians -- played a crucial role.

So, Mr. Trump, we beg and urge you not to copy Obama, who made his big mistake and reversed it, but to reverse your mistake before you make it.

Please listen to those like Senator Lindsey Graham, who has just given you a [similar message](#): "When it comes to Syria, do not read the Obama playbook... It'd be the single worst decision the president could make."

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