

## Read the Memo by a U.S. Diplomat Criticizing Trump Policy on Syria and Turkey

“Could we have stopped Turkey from coming in?” William V. Roebuck asked in an internal memo.

Nov. 7, 2019

**Sign Up for On Politics, for Times subscribers only.** A Times reader's guide to the political news in Washington and across the nation. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

In an internal memo, the senior American diplomat in northern Syria criticized the Trump administration for failing to try harder to deter Turkey from invading northern Syria last month.

Below is the complete text of the memo written by William V. Roebuck, as obtained by The New York Times.

**Subject:** Present at the Catastrophe: Standing By as Turks Cleanse Kurds in Northern Syria and De-Stabilize our D-ISIS Platform in the Northeast

Assessment attached.

**Drafter:** wr

**Present at the Catastrophe:** Standing By as Turks Cleanse Kurds in Northern Syria and De-Stabilize our D-ISIS Platform in the Northeast

**Summary:** Turkey's military operation in northern Syria, spearheaded by armed Islamist groups on its payroll, represents an intentioned-laced effort at ethnic cleansing, relying on widespread military conflict targeting part the Kurdish heartland along the border and benefiting from several widely publicized, fear-inducing atrocities these forces committed. Our military forces and diplomats were on the ground in the northeast at the time. The Turkey operation damaged our regional and international credibility and has significantly destabilized northeastern Syria. It also continues to place Kurdish society in northeastern Syria — as a people on ancestral lands — in serious jeopardy. We should insist Turkey bear all the diplomatic and reputational costs for this venture and seek to prevent President Erdogan from flooding this de-populated zone with Syrian Arab refugees in Turkey. Our diplomacy will also need to recognize we — with our local partners — have lost significant leverage and inherited a shrunken, less stable platform to support both our CT efforts and the mission of finding a comprehensive political solution for Syria. End Summary.

### US INTERESTS IMPLICATED IN TURKEY'S ACTIONS

Ever since President Trump's withdrawal announcement, together with the reaction, and the eventual settling on keeping a residual US presence to protect the oil and fight ISIS, there has been no shortage of analysis about the costs and benefits for the U.S. withdrawal. The potential damage to U.S. credibility was much discussed and seemed to help shape where our policy eventually ended up. But so far overlooked in the current context is an additional factor which has great potential for negative impact in damage to U.S. credibility: what can only be described as war crimes and ethnic cleansing. As more news emerges from northeast Syria of Turkish/Turkish supported groups/organizations (TSO) atrocities and expulsion of citizens, the reputational risks to the US and criticism of our decisions will rise. To protect our interests, we need to speak out more forcefully, publicly and privately, to reduce the blame placed on the US and to highlight the Turkish responsibilities for civilian wellbeing. By acting now, we have a chance to minimize the damage for us and hopefully correct some of the impact of Turkey's current policies, as we seek to implement the President's guidance for our presence in northeastern Syria.

### STARTING AT THE BEGINNING

As the lone U.S. diplomat on the ground in northeastern Syria this last few weeks and one of the few in country over the past two years, I have worked closely with the SDF and its affiliated civilian institutions. I met regularly with SDF Commander General Mazloum and his lieutenants, as his forces cooperated with our Special Operations Forces against ISIS, as we took down their so-called Caliphate and administered a whipping that left their leadership dispersed and their ranks on their heels, running for cover or surrendering. I was present near Baghouz for the final days of the fighting and the SDF declaration of victory at Omar fields. I spoke with Mazloum just after the killing of Baghdadi this week, when he described the critical role SDF intelligence and planning played in the operation.

### **MEETING WITH THE COMMANDER**

In our meetings, Mazloum would regularly provide updates on the joint U.S.-SDF pressure they were keeping ISIS under, including large back clearance operations of previously cleared territory and targeted operations to capture ISIS commanders and local leaders in sprawling, strategically located Deir a-Zour province. He described the uneven but relatively sturdy efforts to provide security and local governance in the northeast and recounted his regular outreach to Sunni Arab tribal leaders in Deir a-Zour and Raqqa to maintain their support for the SDF and address their grievances. Strategic in his thinking, optimistic, and strong believer in the importance of the relationship with the United States, Mazloum never failed to impress visiting military officers, senior officials, and regional experts with his pragmatism and pronounced willingness to work with the U.S.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REALITIES IN THE NORTHEAST**

Over the past year and a half, I worked closely with local civil councils in Raqqa, Manbij, and Shedadi, and visited dozens of other local government bodies in smaller, far-flung locales all over the northeast, all of them relatively nascent organizations the SDF and its civilian affiliates set up to assist in the delivery of essential services and help communities take the first steps to recover from damage the war wrought in their areas. Many of these rickety little councils were out in Arab villages and townships barely worthy of being called population centers. But the SDF/SDC had organized security and local governance throughout the northeast and this chunk of Syria representing close to a third of the country's total area, was secure and peaceful for the most part.

These governance structures were flawed in some ways: they were not representative enough in many cases — particularly in Arab areas — and relied too heavily on Kurdish advisors usually affiliated at lower levels with the ruling PYD political party. But there was always the hope — and some limited evidence — these structures could evolve and become more representative, by including Kurds outside the PYD and more empowered, independent Arabs, and ultimately through holding free and fair local elections, when conditions permitted. Given the political models in the region the SDF had to work with, and given the ongoing civil war and fight against ISIS, it wasn't a bad start. Kurds understood clearly they held more territory than their demographic and historic presence would normally suggest, but it was viewed as an important bargaining chip for them — and us.

### **TURKEY'S BORDER CONCERNS**

In all the time I was in the northeast, since January 2018, I heard — and sometimes delivered — points that articulated appreciation about Turkey's legitimate security concerns regarding the border with Syria. And yet that border stayed quiet on the Syrian side the entire time — over 20 months — I have been in Syria, until Turkey violated it with its October Peace Spring military operation. When quietly called on this discrepancy, a senior U.S. official explained to me, "well, it's a perceived threat (because of ideological and other affiliations between the PYD and the PKK) that Turkey feels, so we have to take it seriously." But eventually the talking point became reality. We began speaking as if there really were attacks across the border into Turkey, causing real casualties and damage. But these were chimerical — strongly felt perhaps — but palpable only as fears and concerns, not on the ground.

Meanwhile our SDF partners did everything they told us they would do to fight ISIS, and did it with motivation, impressive command and control, and ability to absorb casualties. They suffered over 10,000 fatalities and some 20,000 wounded. Not imagined casualties but truly dead young men and women and thousands suffering appalling, life-altering injuries.

### **OUR FIGHT WILL BE YOUR FIGHT**

We asked these people to take on this fight. It was our fight, and Europe's, and all of the international community's. And yes, it was Syria's Kurds' fight too. They had fought ISIS to a standstill in Kobane and with our help back in 2014-2015, repulsed them. But we asked them to fight for us, for the international community, to put almost exclusively on their shoulders this burden of taking down what remained of the Caliphate. For their own reasons and calculations, they did so. One could argue that in a transactional sense, we owe them nothing. We looked after our interests and they made their own calculations.

But let's be honest. They are a relatively small, largely local non-state actor. In some ways we, seeking a local partner to fight ISIS with us, may have inadvertently put a target on their back that did not exist before we came on the scene. At that time, while Turkey might have looked upon the PYD and its YPG militia as affiliated PKK organizations, it did not view them as an existential threat, the way Turkey has increasingly viewed them since they partnered with us. In 2015 senior PYD officials like Saleh Muslim and Elham Ahmed visited Turkey, meeting with senior GOT officials. They were not labeled terrorists or subjected to the language of extermination or other harsh rhetoric. But our military partnership with the SDF, never accepted by Turkey, over time seriously riled the Turks and seems to have caused them to see the YPG militia, the backbone of the SDF, together with the PYD political party, as an existential threat. In tandem with internal political developments in Turkey that left Erdogan beholden to a far-right political party with visceral anti-Kurd tendencies, and gave him his own reasons to demonize Syria's Kurds, the dynamic for the current tragedy was set in motion.

### **OPERATION PEACE SPRING: ETHNIC CLEANSING BY ANOTHER NAME**

One day when the diplomatic history is written, people will wonder what happened here and why officials didn't do more to stop it or at least speak out more forcefully to blame Turkey for its behavior: an unprovoked military operation that has killed some 200 civilians, left well over 100,000 people (and counting) newly displaced and homeless because of its military operation targeting Tel Abyad and Ras Ayn, but also Kobane, and Ayn Isa, and dozens of Kurdish villages surrounding each of these towns. Using the threat and intense application of military force, much of it supplied by armed groups — Turkish Supported Organizations, or TSO, some of whom formerly allied with ISIS or al-Qaida — Turkey has emptied or is emptying major Kurdish population centers and Turkish officials — led by President Erdogan speaking at UNGA in September — broadcast their intention to fill these emptied areas with Syrian Arab refugees currently in Turkey. This de-populating of Kurdish areas benefited from several well-publicized, fear-inducing atrocities the TSO committed in the early days of the military operation that accelerated civilian flight.

Let's be clear: this is intentioned-laced ethnic cleansing; it is a war crime, when proven. The US government should be much more forceful in calling Turkey out for this behavior. We should also make much clearer to Turkey, in public and private statements and with the leverage we have at our disposal, that the people run out of their homes must be able to safely return. The TSO gangs must be withdrawn. And as President Trump himself warned in a similar context, we should take steps to re-impose economic sanctions if Turkey attempts to carry out its threat of flooding this area with refugees, outside of any UN-sanctioned process.

This gets to the issue of whether we promised the Kurds we would protect them against Turkey. And it is true we did not utter those words or make that specific commitment. When the attack on Afrin occurred last winter, we told people, based on Washington's guidance to reassure our partners "We can't do anything about Afrin (which Turkey and its jihadi mercenaries attacked last year, dispossessing 170,000 people) because we aren't there; no troops or air power. But we are here in the northeast. We are your close partner. Afrin can't happen here."

### **SPEAKING OUT**

But it has happened. And on a much larger scale, as the US and its forces and its small diplomatic contingent — partners to the SDF — stood by and watched. We know in detail what has been done and continues to be implemented. That presence, our partnership with the SDF, and our close relations with Ankara make it incumbent on us to speak out if we are to place the blame for abuses where it lies and avoid risking damage to US credibility and reputation.

### **THE NEW SITUATION**

The situation is not over. Observers who have seen these TSO in action — read their blood-curdling threats on social media against Kurds, and absorbed the publicly stated intention of Turkish officials to flood the area with Syrian Arab refugees — are warning that worse human rights violations are on the horizon. Beyond any specific war crimes or other abuses these groups might commit, the most wide-scale abuse — the clearing of widespread settled areas of an ethnic group and replacing it with another— partly implemented, partly still in the planning stages, must be placed on Turkey's doorstep. And Turkey is forging ahead with a bold aggressiveness on the ground and in its rhetoric that has left the international community sputtering ineffectually.

## **PROTECTING THE OIL**

We are now staying in the northeast with a residual force, to safeguard oil facilities and continue the fight against ISIS. The decision to stay is a good one, even if the “protection of the oil” rationale plays into toxic Middle Eastern conspiracy theories that will need to be lanced with careful, sustained messaging reinforcing the truism that Syria's oil is Syria's and for the benefit of the Syrian people.

## **THE NORTHEAST: SIDESHOW TO A CATASTROPHE**

Viewing the current situation in a broader context, I do not say there were easy choices here in Syria and that we failed to make them because of ignorance or bad intentions or lack of resolve. U.S. policy makers, Coalition diplomats and their leaders, have done their best to contain the maelstrom that Syria has become. This situation on the northern border is in some ways a sideshow of that larger catastrophe. But it is a catastrophic sideshow and it is to a significant degree of our making.

## **COULD WE HAVE STOPPED TURKEY FROM COMING IN?**

And we are here. Could we actually have prevented Turkey from coming in and wreaking havoc, with tougher bully pulpit diplomacy, blunter threat of sanctions and tactical adjustments of our limited forces, creating more observation posts on the border and beefed up patrols, making it difficult for Turkey attack without risking wounding or killing a U.S. soldier, something Turkey would be loathe to do? As we did successfully last December when Turkey similarly threatened? It's a tough call, and the answer is probably not, given our small footprint, Turkey's NATO get-out-of-jail-free card, its looming proximity on the border, and the powerful, if misdirected, motivation it had to address its real terrorist threat from the PKK faced inside Turkey. But we won't know because we didn't try.

## **A FEW PROPOSALS FOR POLICY**

The President's recent decision to keep some US forces on the ground salvages an important piece of our effort against ISIS and it preserves operating space for the SDF. But the subsequent Russia-Turkey Sochi Agreement muddies any clarity to the situation on the ground; in tandem with Turkey's Peace Spring operation and the SDF's piecemeal deals to bring in Syrian regime and Russian forces in specific locations, the northeast has become a much less stable (and much smaller) platform for our D-ISIS mission. In some ways the SDF is living on borrowed time; what makes that potentially tragic is the sleight-of-hand Turkey has achieved, visiting its military solution not just on the SDF (with its acknowledged YPG backbone and that group's diffuse ideological affiliations with the PKK) but on the innocent Kurdish population that lived in hundreds of villages in this northern area — along with Muslim and Christian Arabs — common people who live, farm, keep shops, and go to school in this border area.

What should we do, to shape our policy, given these complicated, painful realities?

1. Make clear to Turkey, publicly and even more bluntly, privately, that it will bear all the costs for its military operation. That includes the bill for our heavily damaged interests: the undercut fight against ISIS, the wrecking of our partner force, and the significant damage to our credibility as a partner in the region and beyond. In addition, Turkey should absorb the full brunt of international opprobrium for the ethnic cleansing it has perpetrated and demographic change it is yet threatening to do. At every turn we should make clear, Turkey and its leadership will be on their own in trying to justify these actions. And that we and the international community are carefully observing the fate of the remainder of Syrian Kurdish society — still on its lands in northern Syria but in significant jeopardy as Operation Peace Spring shows no sign of winding down.

2. Consider using our remaining time here in northeast Syria — as we fight ISIS — to stabilize the situation for the Kurdish population (and other populations living side-by-side with them) remaining in the north, help the SDF salvage a long-term platform to maintain the fight against ISIS and explore how it seeks to responsibly re-integrate into the Syrian State. That is a process that has already started, in a preliminary, slapdash manner, driven by Turkey's military operation and our inability to find the policy levers to stop Turkey's action. In addition to holding the oil fields, with the SDF, we hold other cards we can play, including the timing of our exit from the northeast and unblocking regional normalization and reconstruction funds at the appropriate time.

3. Acknowledge, and this will be a bitter pill to swallow, that the road to finding a solution in Syria probably leads through Moscow, at least in the first instance, rather than the UN. There may have been other options, more directly connected to UNSCR 2254 — and everyone involved in those efforts deserves credit for doing everything possible to achieve them — but Turkey's Operation Peace Spring has so destabilized the northeast and devalued the leverage we had with our extensive presence and our once dominant SDF partners, that it is doubtful that road is open anymore, in any real sense. We can keep slogging on, and we probably will, letting the constitutional committee dynamics play out (with much less de-legitimizing impact on Assad than we expect) and possibly opening the way for elections in 2021, although probably with marginal impact on Assad's rule.

4. Maintain the relationship with Turkey. Insisting an ally pay all the diplomatic and reputational costs — and even do restitution (in terms of allowing Kurds to return to their villages and homes) for a military operation that directly damaged our interests is not the same as dispensing with a valued bilateral relationship. Turkey sees no problem with pursuing its interests with vigor and even ruthlessness, regardless of the costs to us, even as it values its relationship to the US. This is the way the great game is played. And we need to play it just as aggressively with Turkey, while insisting on its rock-solid place in NATO and our strong bilateral strategic and commercial relationship.

5. Use our Residual Presence to Shape a Responsible Drawdown in Syria. President Trump has been clear and consistent about wanting to get our forces out of Syria. The residual presence to protect the oil and fight ISIS buys us some time. We hold other cards we can play, including the timing of our exit from the northeast and unblocking regional normalization and reconstruction funds at the appropriate time. A responsible drawdown will require an honest appraisal of our shrunken leverage — Operation Peace Spring forced us withdraw from half of the northeast and has seriously weakened our local partner — and a willingness to hold realistic conversations with the parties who exercise influence, including the SDF, Moscow, Ankara, and possibly even Damascus, to outline exactly how the northeast will be reintegrated into the Syrian state. Turkey, despite being the last remaining supporter of the Syrian opposition, is no doubt, already having these same conversations with Moscow and Damascus in order to resolve the Syrian conflict in its favor.