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Trump, Bolton and the Syrian Confusion

It's a messy, though typical picture. US President Donald Trump wants to pull out forces in Syria. When announced in December, jaws drooped and sharp intakes of breath were registered through the Washington establishment. Members of the military industrial complex were none too pleased. The President had seemingly made his case clear: US blood and treasure will not be further drawn upon to right the conflicts of the Middle East. His national security advisor, John Bolton, prefers a different message: the US will not leave north-eastern Syria till the militants of Islamic State are defeated and the Kurds protected. If this was a message of intended confusion, it has worked. The media vultures are confused as to what carrion to feed upon. The US imperial lobby is finding the whole affair disruptive and disturbing. Washington's allies attempt to read the differences between policy-by-tweet and policy by representation.

Trump's pre-New Year announcement suggested speediness, a rapid removal of US forces supposedly indispensable in Making America Great Again. Once made, US troops were to leave in a matter of weeks – or so went a certain wisdom. "They're all coming back, and they're coming back now," ventured the president. But Bolton suggested otherwise. US personnel, he suggested, would remain in al-Tanf to counter Iranian influence. Timetables could be left to the talking heads.

A change of heart also came from the White House, with Trump asserting that, "We won't be finally pulled out until ISIS is gone." To reporters, he adopted a familiar stance in ever shifting sands: promising to do something meant doing something different. "We are

pulling back in Syria. We're going to be removing our troops. I never said we're doing it that quickly."

On Sunday, Trump delivered another streaky note on Twitter, thereby adding another lace of confusion. "Starting the long overdue pullout from Syria while hitting the little remaining ISIS territorial caliphate hard, and from many directions." Last Thursday, information on the withdrawal of some US military ground equipment from Syria was noted. On Friday, Col. Sean Ryan, spokesman for the US-led coalition in Syria, issued a statement claiming that the coalition had "begun the process of our deliberate withdrawal from Syria" leaving little by way of details. In Trumpland, the scanty detail often prevails over the substantive.

US strategy in the Middle East has tended to revolve around setting up figures for the fall while inflicting the fall of others. The Kurds have tended to find themselves in that role, encouraged and prompted to take up arms against their various oppressors, only to find themselves left to the slaughter in the subsequent geopolitical dramas of the region. The promise by Great Britain and France at the conclusion of World War I that a Kurdish state be chalked out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire never materialised. In the crude machinations of international relations, they have remained, as Joost Hiltermann describes them, the "expendable" ones.

Bolton is keen not to make that same mistake, which is exactly why he risks doing so. The great enemy of the Kurds on this occasion remains a prickly US ally, Turkey. "We don't think the Turks ought to undertake military action that's not fully coordinated with the agreed to by the United States".

Trump, similarly, suggested in a direct call with the Turkish president that the Turkish economy would be devastated "economically if they hit Kurds." In a statement from White House press secretary, Sarah Sanders, "The President expressed the desire to work together to address Turkey's security concerns in northeast Syria while stressing the importance to the United States that Turkey does not mistreat the Kurds and other Syrian Democratic Forces with whom we have fought to defeat ISIS."

Bolton's credibility in pursuing that agenda seemed to crumble in Ankara before a notable snubbing by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on January 8. The national security advisor had to make do with a meeting with Erdoğan's senior advisor, Ibrahim Kalin. Bolton was not one the Turkish leader particularly wanted to see in light of his comments that Turkey not harm members of the Kurdish Syrian militias in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. Such views also fly in the face of Turkey's self-appointed role as

an agent of influence in the region. An absent Washington is simply too good a chance to press home the advantage, and Ankara is bound to capitalise.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did not fare much better in his regional whistle-stops in Egypt Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf states. In Cairo, Pompeo denied that there was any “contradiction whatsoever” about Trump’s position on withdrawal. “I think everyone understands what the United States is doing.” If not everyone, then at the very least, “the senior leaders in their governments”. Very good of them.

The views of American functionaries have not necessarily meant much in the righteous intent of other powers, but Bolton is nonetheless happy to pen his name to this mast. He wishes for the Kurds to hold firm, avoid the temptation of seeking another sponsor who just might do a better job. “I think they know,” suggested Bolton, “who their friends are.” (Bolt is more than nudging here, making sure the Russians or the Assad regime are avoided in any future security arrangements that might supply a shield for the Kurds.)

Daft, can be Bolton, who sees himself as a true appraiser of the international relations system when he is disabled by presumption. The Turks may, in time, hand Washington another bloody lesson of retribution showing that basic, keen hatreds in historical dramas are far more significant than sophisticated notions of self-interest. The presence of US troops in Syria will no doubt be reclassified, withdrawal by which any other name would be as confusing. The Kurds will have to chew over their options with the sort of caution nursed by a history of promise followed by abandonment. Be wary of the expendable ones.