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The American Munich

There can no longer be any doubt that Donald J. Trump's decision to pull out of Syria will go down in history as one of the most catastrophic foreign policy failures — morally and strategically — made by any American administration in modern times. Difficult as it may be, let us remove our agonized gaze from the heart-rending images and sounds emerging out of Northern Syria — the public executions, severed limbs and screams of our Kurdish allies and their children — to reflect for a moment upon what just took place, *in the name of the United States*, to one of our closest partners, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Having embraced America's exhortation to its friends in the region to take charge of the actual fighting, during a conflict in which fewer than a dozen U.S. soldiers were killed, the Syrian Kurds bravely and stoically bore the brunt of a successful campaign against ISIS in which they lost some 11,000 men and women and suffered another 23,000 wounded. What has been their reward for this exceptional case study in "burden-sharing"? American troops have been ordered to step aside so that Turkish forces and their Islamist proxies may invade Syria and slaughter our comrades-in-arms. In so doing, the U.S. has effectively suborned the armored assaults, artillery bombardments, air strikes, assassinations and massacres of the very same group — often the very same individual fighters — with whom we fought a war, side by side. This most despicable double-cross *de facto* makes all Americans complicit in *ethnic cleansing*.

First announced on December 19th 2018, only to be reversed temporarily due to international backlash and internal pressure, America's abandonment of a truly remarkable ally has few suitable parallels for its inexplicable treachery. To find a remotely apt analogy for this ongoing tragedy, one should reach back to the often cited — and frequently abused — metaphor for the singular brutality of appeasement: namely, the sacrifice of the Czechs.

In early October 1938, Germany effected the annexation of the most defensible frontier of the most democratic Eastern European state. Months earlier at the still-not-infamous Munich Conference, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain — alternately bluffed and bullied by Adolf Hitler — caved in to the German dictator's territorial demands and, without even consulting the Czechs, ceded the Sudetenland to his acquisitive neighbor. The following year, in March 1939, German forces finished the job and marched into what was left of Czechoslovakia, setting in motion the series of events that would start the Second World War in Europe.

On a sunny October day, some 80 years later, America deserted one of its bravest and most distinguished allies in the Middle East, the Syrian Kurds. Echoing Chamberlain's blithe quip that he had achieved "peace for our time" with his betrayal of the Czechs, President Trump, all but ignoring the central role of the Kurds in our still raging battle against ISIS, proclaimed proudly but with cavalier inaccuracy: "We won. We left. Take a victory, United States." Such delusional thinking raises a rather disturbing question for the current administration to contemplate: will the Donald John Trump of 2019 be viewed as the Arthur Neville Chamberlain of 1939? Historical analogies are inherently imperfect. Yet the President's recent statement — that "Anyone who wants to assist Syria in protecting the Kurds is good with me, whether it is Russia, China, or Napoleon Bonaparte... I hope they all do great, we are 7,000 miles away!" — eerily recalled Chamberlain's airy description of the dispute he had 'mediated' as being little more than "a quarrel in a far away country, between people of whom we know nothing". As Marx put it: History repeats itself, "the first as tragedy, then as farce." In fact, what happened to the Czechs and the Kurds was nothing short of tragic. *A sell out is a sell out*, no matter the era.

Admittedly, a poignant hint had already been dropped that Washington's cynical transactionalism would fail the Kurds. The Iranian-orchestrated assault on our most reliable and enlightened Iraqi allies — once again the Kurds — at Kirkuk in 2017 proved to be the canary in the coalmine. As with the more immediate questioning of America's trustworthiness as an ally, the long-term impact of these ongoing strategic developments doubtless will be calamitous — above all, Fortune favors

the lionhearted, not the faithless. For to remain a superpower means, first and foremost, to honor one's commitments, most particularly to those like the Kurds with whom we not only share *geostrategic interests but indeed fundamental values*.

At a time when the word "treason" is being bandied about quite casually in Washington, D.C., one thing is certainly true: we rarely deal with *traitors* in the manner we are treating the Kurds. And yet, with terrifying irony, it is with treason itself that we are repaying the devotion of those fighting men and women that stand among our truest and most loyal band of brothers and sisters. Having the blood of one's enemies on one's hands is bad enough; it is nevertheless the wages of war. Having the blood of one's *friends and their children* on one's hands, however, invokes a curse of Shakespearean if not biblical dimensions.

In an op-ed piece published in *The Washington Post* on January 3rd of this year, we warned against the moral implications and political consequences of American withdrawal from Syria. It was clear to us then that, if followed through, the President's decision would effectively reward Turkey's autocratic leader, embolden the murderous Assad regime, vindicate Russia's intervention in Syria, and ultimately benefit Iran's hegemonic ambitions. And so it is happening now. In one fell swoop, the U.S. has strengthened our fiercest adversaries in the region and guaranteed a strategic pivot to the East for any allies still wondering whom to rely upon on matters of their very survival. It gets worse. By offering up on a silver platter to Vladimir Putin and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei whatever is left of Northeastern Syria, President Trump has rendered the collaborators of Bashar al-Assad — he of the barrel bombs and chemical weapons — the real strategic beneficiaries of this disgraceful moment.

The President's plunging the Middle East into additional chaos is a policy debacle for all of America's allies. As Syria and Iraq represent key flash points for the coming escalation in an Iranian-Israeli war currently being played out in plain sight, America's betrayal of Rojava marks a key milestone in a regional conflict that may well now be inevitable. To invoke Talleyrand, this "American Munich" moment — an act of extraordinary self-inflicted strategic and ethical impairments — constitutes not only a crime against common decency and a blunder of epic proportions, but also a distressing exercise in self-immolation.

It was only last January in Cairo that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaking on America's role in the region, declared: "We learned that when the U.S. retreats, chaos often follows. When we neglect our friends, resentment builds. And when we partner with enemies, they advance. (...) The age of self-inflicted American shame is over." These words epitomize the powerful and noble sentiments to which we — and assuredly the vast majority of Americans — subscribe. But inaction is a form of action. Together, citizens of this country must narrow the gap between the Secretary's dignified aspirations and the President's transactional choices, while there might still be time to alter the course of this unfolding disgrace. Both blue and red must come together in a united Congress to re-assert the central values of the American republic and save the nation's honor with a veto-proof bill in support of the Syrian Kurds. Whatever it takes, it must be done. For History is watching and nothing less than the fate of this generation's soul is at stake.

Thomas S. Kaplan and Bernard-Henri Lévy are the co-founders of Justice for Kurds.

About JFK

Justice for Kurds (JFK) is a non-profit organization that seeks to educate and raise public awareness for the Kurdish cause, politics, history, culture and societies in America and abroad.

While the tragedy of The American Munich could not be more glaring, there is always hope. To all of those who have expressed support for Justice for Kurds, and have volunteered to support our cause, we thank you. To those who would like to join our roster of Friends of the Kurds, please feel free to contact us.

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It's not too late for Trump to rethink a dangerous betrayal of U.S. allies in Syria

By **Thomas S. Kaplan and Bernard-Henri Lévy**

Thomas S. Kaplan and Bernard-Henri Lévy are the co-founders of Justice for Kurds.

"Our only friends are the mountains." So goes the fatalistic Kurdish proverb, encapsulating the catalogue of duplicity and betrayal by allies that has punctuated and ultimately defined the history of this valiant people. The stateless ethnic group, numbering approximately 30 million, straddles the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. It is the Kurds in Syria who suffered the most recent treachery, when President Trump on Dec. 19 announced the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, where the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, were among America's most faithful and effective partners in the fight against Islamic State terrorists.

Trump initially said the 2,000 U.S. troops would be gone within 30 days but reportedly has agreed to Pentagon requests for a gradual withdrawal over four months. The betrayal thus will occur in slow motion.

Yet, like their brethren in Iraq, the Peshmerga fighters, the Kurds in Syria could be a case study in the effective implementation of America's long-standing exhortation that its friends in the region should do more of the actual fighting while the United States trains and assists them.

As Post columnist David Ignatius noted in a Dec. 23 op-ed, since 2014, the Kurds and their allies have taken control of a remarkable 30 percent of Syria and captured Raqqa, which the Islamic State had claimed as its capital — and over that period suffered 4,000 men and women fighters killed and 10,000 wounded. During that four-year span, the United States lost three soldiers, according to the Pentagon. The Kurdish commander of the SDF, Gen. Mazloum Abdi, told Ignatius that Trump's pullout announcement was "something we never expected."

Among the factions fighting in the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, it can sometimes be difficult to discern who the "good guys" are — except when it comes to the Kurds. Even as they have waged a years-long war against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria, they have governed a population of about 2 million people with a degree of respect for religious freedom, gender equality and minority rights unknown in that part of the world. They are detested by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan because of their association with Kurdish separatists in Turkey. With the United States leaving, Erdogan will almost certainly launch a concerted military campaign against the Kurds in Syria. Trump's reckless move is likely to drive them into the arms of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as they seek to avoid annihilation.

When the annals of this deplorable episode are written, historians will be able to draw a dramatic contrast between the U.S. president and the leader of a steadfast European ally of the United States.

French President Emmanuel Macron, since taking office in 2017, has only strengthened France's support for the Syrian Kurds and the SDF. He has committed additional air and land forces to the U.S.-led coalition, and last March he received SDF leaders in Paris, praising their soldiers' sacrifices in the fight against the Islamic State. After Trump announced his military volte-face in December, Macron moved quickly to assure the SDF that he would not march in lock step as Trump flees.

While visiting French troops in Chad in December, Macron said he "deeply regrets" the U.S. decision. "The SDF is fighting against the terrorism that fomented attacks against Paris and elsewhere ... I call on everyone not to forget what they have done," Macron said, noting that "to be allies is to fight shoulder to shoulder."

Macron's stand recalls the dedicated support for the Kurds from Danielle Mitterrand, the wife of French President François Mitterrand, as they came under assault from Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s. Shortly after a U.S.-led coalition ousted Hussein's troops from Kuwait in 1991, President George H.W. Bush urged Iraqis to overthrow Hussein. Kurds in the north and Shites in the south answered Bush's call. But the expected U.S. assistance never arrived, and a slaughter ensued. Danielle Mitterrand, outraged, helped wage a successful campaign to secure a no-fly zone over northern Iraq to protect the Kurds. She survived a bomb attack on her motorcade as she visited the region in 1992.

To this day, Mitterrand is known as the "mother of the Kurds." Her name graces schools and roads across Kurdistan, the unofficial state where Kurds predominate. There are Kurdish girls named for her. Macron is likely to have his own Kurdish namesakes someday. But Trump? One can still hope that he has a change of heart, that he realizes the Islamic State is far from vanquished, as he claims, and has 14,000 fighters still in Syria, as his own government acknowledged in August. With every hour that goes by, the Kurds' position is materially weakened. It is not too late for Washington to change course, to reaffirm America's honor and to aid America's stalwart allies.

To get involved with Justice for Kurds, please contact us : info@justiceforkurds.org