After the Syrian Pullback: What Next for U.S. Middle East Policy?

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- Blaise Misztal, Fellow, Hudson Institute
- Mike Doran, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
- Mary Beth Long, Former Assistant Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
- Mark Kimmitt, Former Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs
- Ali Rogin, Moderator, Foreign Affairs Producer, PBS NewsHour

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Hudson Institute, Washington D.C. Headquarters
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TRANSCRIPT

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ALI ROGIN: My name is Ali Rogin. I'm a producer with the PBS NewsHour covering foreign affairs. And as a journalist, I want to say that I'm grateful to the Hudson Institute for convening this panel of thoughtful experts to discuss what is a rapidly developing - as we all know - situation on the Syrian-Turkish border. So without further ado, I'm going to introduce these folks, who you all probably already know. But first, to my left, is the honorable Mary Beth Long, who is the founder of MB Long & Associates, an international legal and advisory firm. From 2007 to '09, Ms. Long served as the first woman confirmed by the Senate as assistant secretary of defense for international affairs. She was also the chair of NATO's High Level Group. She has previously served as the principal deputy secretary of defense in the Middle East. And she was the deputy secretary of defense for counternarcotics. Next, we have Michael Doran, who is a senior fellow here at the Hudson Institute. He specializes in Middle East security issues. And during the administration of President George W. Bush, he served as senior director in the National Security Council.

Left is retired Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt of the U.S. Army, who previously served as the assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs from '08 to '09. And prior to that, he was the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East affairs from 2006 to 2008. And last, but certainly not least, we have Blaise Misztal, who is a fellow here at the Hudson Institute as well. His research program focuses on the Middle East, Europe and strategic competition. Most recently, Blaise served as the executive director of the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, a congressionally mandated project convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace.

So how this is going to work - we're going to be having a conversation for the bulk of this session, and then we are going to open it up to a Q&A. So please start thinking of your questions now. I know that on the program you all received, there was presented very much a binary choice between people on this panel who are here to argue in favor of the policy that the United States is implementing on the Syrian-Turkish border and against. In the brief moments that we all had together before this panel began, I think it's fair to say that nobody sees this as a binary choice between either being in favor or being against. So we're going to get into a little bit of that gray area here today, as well as talk about what the recommendations of these esteemed panelists believe going forward. So if I could just maybe go down the line and start with just getting your general thoughts about what you think of the U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria and all of the precipitating events - Mary Beth.

MARY BETH LONG: (Laughter) How much time do I have?

ROGIN: Right. Let's try to keep it for a few minutes, and then we'll get into all the meat of everything after that.

LONG: Sure. I think the situation in 2019 that evolved over the last decade is fairly predictable, that the president made the decision - as any president would probably who'd be sitting in that White House chair would make - that eventually the U.S. had to withdraw out of northeast Syria. It was not a sustainable position. It certainly wasn't sustainable with the numbers and the assets that were applied. I believe it unfortunate and a mistake to make the decision and implement it the way that it was made, in part because No. 1, we're allowing the slaughter of not only Kurds, but the Syrian defense forces actually are majority Arab these days. And the Kurd membership is almost equaled by the Christian and Yazidi and Turkmen membership. And in fact, many of the tribes that were initially fighting against the Kurds on behalf of the Assad government have,
over time, joined the SDF. So we lost an opportunity there, I think, to stabilize northeast Syria and to allow those peoples to sort themselves out from a position of more stability and perhaps empowerment. Turkey pulled that trigger, I think, prematurely. We positioned ourself unfortunately, in a weakened position by acquiescing to Erdogan's threats and by withdrawing the way that we did, which I think is a mistake. However, I think we were going to end up there eventually.

I do think that the president has taken the position now that he's not withdrawing out of Syria. There's some ambiguity of who is still in position performing what roles, not only not in northeast Syria, but along the eastern border and somewhat, I understand, still in reticent positions a little bit backed off the previous positions up in the northeast where we still may be providing some assistance. And I think that's the right thing. I think it'll be controversial going forward. And there are a lot of implications outside of the tactical maneuverings on northeast Syria that I think are more important. And those are our relationship with Turkey - we could talk about that in detail - our positioning in the Middle East in general and in the world in a larger sense, our relationships and perceived relationships with the Iranian and the Russians in particular, and the stability or the perception of - lack thereof - of U.S. credibility and foreign policy writ large. I think those are the really important issues that are front and center, rather than where is and who is in Manbij (ph) - those kinds of things. But we can get to that later.

ROGIN: (Unintelligible) all of that, yes. Michael?

MICHAEL DORAN: Thanks. I think it's important that we focus on where we would like all this to end, how we want to bring this to a solution. And I think it's important to recognize that we were postured for catastrophic failure in northeastern Syria because we entered into an alliance with the PKK. And we - the YPG, the Kurdish force that we worked with on the ground, is the PKK. This is a terrorist organization on the State Department's terrorism list that seeks to partition Turkey between Kurds and Turks. By aligning with the PKK - or actually, allying with the PKK, we set ourselves on a collision course with Turkey. That was unwise from a humanitarian point of view, and it was extremely unwise from a strategic point of view. The strategic prize in this situation is the orientation - the international orientation of Turkey. The Turks have been telling us for years now that they don't like the fact that we are providing a power umbrella under which the PKK can build an autonomous Kurdish statelet in northeastern Syria. And we have, effectively, time and time again told them to sit down and shut up. And we rebranded the PKK as the SDF. We brought in Arabs and Yazidis and others, as Mary Beth is saying, but the power center of that organization always was the PKK.

And we should recognize that we lied to ourselves. The Obama administration packaged this as something other than PKK. It successfully propagated the American people in that regard, but it didn't successfully propagate the Turks. They're enraged by it. They have been telling us time and time again that this is destroying relations with them, and we chose to ignore it. This is not a question of Erdogan, by the way. The vast majority of Turks support this operation. And that - we have to - if we look at the mess that we have there now, we have to recognize that we played a major role in creating that mess. Getting out of it means we need to reestablish good ties with Ankara, productive ties for stabilizing that part of the world. If we don't have productive ties with the Turks, which means largely working on their terms, not on ours, because we had 1,000 troops there, and they're - we are leaving. Everyone knows we're leaving sooner or later. Turkey is going to be there forever, and the Turks know this as well. So we have to work through them, largely on their terms. We can have our humanitarian concerns, and we can push
them aggressively. We can have differences of opinions, but it has to be within a Turkish framework rather than with some framework that we have made up as a result of where all the different little positions that we ended up with as a result of a lot of temporary tactical decisions that we made without any larger strategic understanding. We’ve started to talk about the Middle East without - our policy in the Middle East without reference to states.

We have to go back to a traditional understanding of how the world works. States are the main actors, and we need to position ourselves accordingly. The strategic prize is Turkey. And the strategic goal, when all of this settles, is that we can contain Iran. If we drive - we are in a position, which makes no strategic sense whatsoever, of ditching a major ally, a NATO ally that sits athwart Europe and Asia in which we - where we have bases, intelligence platforms and ability to stop the Russians through the Bosporus, a Black Sea strategic posture, an ally that worked with us in Bosnia, in Afghanistan, not to mention the Korean War and others. We're going to ditch that state for a splinter group, extremist terrorist organization that doesn't even represent the Kurds. The PKK is not the Kurds. This makes no sense. We now have a bipartisan consensus in Congress to put massive sanctions on Turkey in order to save our relationship with the PKK. How did we get to this position? It makes no sense.

ROGIN: All right. General.

MARK KIMMITT: Well, maybe it would be worthwhile to talk about how we got to this position. I've written extensively on this ever since December 19, but let's go back to the beginning. I think President Obama was right. When ISIS attacked into Iraq in 2014, there was a recognition that you couldn't just go against the nose; you had to go against the tail of ISIS, and that would meant - get in there and defeat the caliphate because until you - as any military person will tell you, if you don't get to the root of the power, you're never going to be successful. So at that time, the mission was, go in under a very, very limited scope, the authority for the use of military force. That allowed us to go in to kill ISIS with American forces and American proxies. You all remember, at that time, lieutenant general - General Lloyd Austin was in charge of CENTCOM, and I sadly remember him in front of Congress saying, we spent $500 million to field four soldiers trying to set up a force with the Arabs there; we couldn't vet them properly; they weren't reliable. They were more concerned about fighting Assad than they were against fighting ISIS. We needed to find an alternative fighting force. That alternative fighting force was this scrappy group called the YPG that was operating outside of Kobani. We - in December 15, we dropped air supplies in. They proved to be good fighters. We decided to work with them. But we understood that there was going to be a problem. The problem was going to be Turkey because this is a PKK-affiliated group, according to Secretary of Defense Ash Carter. So we had to figure out how to finesse this.

We told the Turks, and our policy was that this relationship with the PKK, with the YPG was going to be temporary, it was going to be transactional, and it was going to be tactical. That was the American policy at that time, expressed numerous times. It didn't mean that we were long-term allies of the YPG. It meant that we had a specific purpose for a specific time, and at the end of that, we were going to break apart. There was mutual benefit. The YPG had many, many Kurdish towns in that area that they were trying to defend against ISIS. We wanted to kill ISIS. So what happens? ISIS is defeated by a brilliant job done by both the YPG on the ground and the American support provided there. At that point, the mission was over. But all of a sudden, our good-hearted people on the ground started thinking, we need to - what we would simply call engage in mission creep of a massive amount that I've never seen before. We were in there
under the authority for the use of military force - counter ISIS, and counter ISIS alone. All of a sudden, we started nation-building. We started humanitarian operations. We were going to build a 40,000-man police force so they could be the local police. And there’s no doubt in my mind that that would have been a multiyear operation. And then on top of that, there would be a Syria resolution.

What would America do at that point? We'll take sector northeast in this Bosnia-like operation. Our policymakers on the ground, good-hearted as they may have been, were setting the United States up for a multiyear, if not decade-long operation, in complete violation of their authority for the use of military force. It's that simple. They got ahead of their headlights. They were making promises on the ground to the YPG that - they were writing checks that they couldn't back up. So where do we find ourselves? We find ourselves enthralled and in love with an organization that every time they have a press conference has a map of - has a picture of Ocalan behind it and the map of Rojava alongside of it. So this was untenable. It was unsustainable. And I think, regardless of how this policy fiasco works out...

DORAN: Explain who Ocalan and Rojava are.

KIMMITT: I have no doubt there's nobody in this...

DORAN: There are people out there who don't...

KIMMITT: OK. Ocalan was the head of the PKK responsible for organizing operations that killed at least 40,000 Turks inside of Turkey. Rojava is the three cantons inside of northeast Syria where the YPG's aspiration is to set up an independent country, an independent nation, which is effectively Syria-Kurdistan. So I'm not going to give you my personal views on the current administration, but I would simply say that if anybody was surprised by the December 19 announcement by President Trump, they haven't been watching President Trump. They may have been surprised. They shouldn't have been shocked. The fact is, President Trump, since the day he was on the campaign trail, said we're going to get out of stupid wars in the Middle East. And if you take a look at what's happening here, each individual component may have merit. But when you put that whole thing together, you end up with a disjointed policy that when, our disjointed policymakers on the ground are trying to justify this, you can just imagine what's said inside the Oval Office. Why are we here? What's in the benefit of the United States? Where is the United States' interests here? The United States doesn't have friends; it has interests. How are the interests of the United States being served here? There will be some saying, we're going to keep an eye on Iran; we're going to thwart Russia; we're going to hold off Turkey. I mean, these are all outside of the mandate in the only authority, which would was the authority for the use of military force.

And when you see people in Congress that are now saying, we're abandoning our allies, who three years ago were on record saying, working with the YPG is the dumbest policy I've ever seen, I criticize the United States Congress for not being educated on this situation and not invoking their legislation, which was the authority for the use of military force as a constraining mechanism under which the United States was allowed to put forces inside of Syria for no other purpose than the defeat of the ISIS caliphate. The ISIS caliphate is done. This president has made the decision to pull out now that that ISIS caliphate is defeated. How that's being done is the biggest fiasco that I suspect everybody up here has seen in their government and military career in the past 50 years. But there we are. The - don't confuse the policy fiasco that we're
seeing happen on the ground with mismatched policies, end, (ph) ways and means that got us here. I feel so much better.

: (LAUGHTER)

BLAISE MISZTAL: Very well stated. Good morning to all of you. Thanks for joining us for this important discussion. Ali, thanks for moderating. It's my privilege to be on a panel with three such distinguished individuals that I've learned so much about the Middle East from. And it's my unfortunate plight to have to go after all three of them. So I'll try to find some areas of nuance, maybe, to shed light on other issues that haven't been discussed yet. Overall, I think the point I'd want to make is this situation is not as binary as I think a lot of the debate would suggest it is. And even though, as General Kimmitt said and Mary Beth said, I think it's very predictable that we got to this place, especially after the call between Presidents Trump and Erdogan last December, where the original decision to pull out of Syria was made and we had sort of a 10-month continuing resolution that finally came to its end - but the first point I would make is that it didn't have to be this way. And by that I mean that even though this was set up, as General Kimmitt said, by the decision to work with the YPG in Syria, the outcome of that decision did not have to be a showdown between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. It did not have to be a U.S. policy decision of who to side with.

And the clearest example, I think, that can demonstrate that is looking at the U.S. relationship and then the Turkish relationship with Iraqi Kurds. Over a long period of time, Turkey has voiced the same concerns that it's now voicing about Syrian Kurds about northern Iraq. It was one of the reasons why the Turks were fearful of the outcome of the Gulf War in 1991, why they were concerned about Operation Provide Comfort, where the U.S. provided air cover for northern Iraq that allowed the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region. It was one of the reasons why Turkey decided not to allow the United States to use Turkish territory and Turkish bases for the 2003 invasion of Iraq because of their concerns that it would empower Iraqi Kurds, which were actually - at that point, Iraqi Kurdistan was the center of gravity for PKK operations. In fact, Turkey launched multiple operations into northern Iraq to target the PKK, and yet, by 2012, 2013, one of the closest partners that Turkey had in the Middle East was, in fact, the KRG and the Iraqi Kurds. Why? Because through its relationship with the KRG, the U.S. facilitated the development of political institutions that moved away from the PKK, that embraced responsible governance and made clear to Turkey that there was an economic benefit here and not a military or terrorist threat.

So there is precedent here for the United States working with Kurdish groups and actually facilitating and brokering peace and understanding between Turkey and those Kurdish groups. Unfortunately, that's not what we've done over the last five years or the time that we've worked with the YPG, and that has been an unfortunate waste of those five years that we could have led ourselves to a situation that was not this drastic. I just wanted to make a couple of points to reaffirm General Kimmitt's point that it was the right decision to work with the YPG in 2014. First of all, we have to remember that in 2014, President Erdogan was having regular chats with Abdullah Ocalan. Turkey was in the middle of a peace process with the PKK in which Erdogan was actually reaching out to and working with the PKK, hoping to win Turkish Kurds to support his party and trying to bring that conflict to an end. So at that time, the PKK was not an existential threat to Erdogan or Turkey, but it was seen as a potential partner for peace and a potential political partner. Secondly, General Kimmitt mentioned that we spent $500 million training four guys. That's not quite the whole story. We spent $500 million training 100 Syrian
fighters inside of Turkey, and the moment that they crossed the border from Turkey into Syria, they were captured by al-Nusra, by al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist forces. I don't know how that happens unless there's someone telling them where these fighters are going to be crossing.

So I think we had multiple experiences with Turkey leading up to 2014 during the Syrian conflict where we tried to work with them, and although there were certainly failures on the U.S. side in terms of Syria policy - finding common ground with Turkey on who to support among the Syrian opposition, on which fighters to train and, eventually, on trying to fight ISIS - we repeatedly failed. And so when it came to this decision of how do we target the center of gravity of the Islamic State's caliphate, we were left with no options other than the YPG. And the other point that I wanted to make is, it didn't have to be this way, and the it that we're really talking about right now, the situation that we're encountering right now, is not a situation in which we made a choice between Turkey or the Syrian Kurds. In fact, the choice that we've made has been to abandon and betray both of them because what we've seen is that we've not only left behind our partners in the SDF, but we've now also not won Turkey as a strategic prize but are alienating them through lack of clarity about what we're actually hoping to accomplish, what we're going to allow them to do. And so within a week of greenlighting their military operations, we're now sanctioning them. It's entirely unclear that this is going to help our relationship with Turkey in the short term. And in the long term, I would say that the future of Turkey as a U.S. ally, as a NATO partner - it really depends upon its ability to resolve its conflicts with the Kurds, both internally and externally, and all we've done is prolong and extend and deepen that conflict.

We've put off the possibility of a peace process inside Turkey, I think, for years, if not decades and a generation. And I think all that's doing is actually pushing Turkey further away from the United States, further away from the West, further away from the Democratic institutions and values on which the modern republic of Turkey was founded, and in so doing, we're pushing it closer to Russia, to China and to Iran. So if our objective in all of this has been to try to win Turkey back, if it's been to try to keep Iran from expanding its influence and aggression in the region, all we've managed to do is increase both of those. And so the issue is not really, have we chosen Turkey or Syria? It's how we've done this. And again, General Kimmitt made this point really well. The issue is, was a snap decision made over a tweet based on a single phone call the right way to do this, even if the pulling out was an inevitable choice to be made? Even if we were going to be leaving, is this the right way to have left?

And I think doing so in a way in which there was no impending Turkish operation, as was made clear by the fact that it took them three days to actually mobilize and mount the operation that, suddenly, the United States announced to the world that Turkey was going to be conducting, having done so with no clear plan with the Turks about what their operations were going to be, no red lines as to what the United States was willing to tolerate, and actually, after we had demobilized and militarized the Syrian Kurds to make it harder for them to mount a defense - all of those things have made it an even more treacherous situation. We could've facilitated a deal between the Kurds and Assad if we were really going to leave and we wanted to leave them in control of this territory. So if the choice was about pulling out, if that's what we're debating, there was all manner of things that could have been done to make this much less of a fiasco, as General Kimmitt said. And so the debate is not whether we should have pulled out or not. It's really, should we have done this in this manner? And it's hard to imagine being able to do it in a way that would have made the situation any worse than it is right now.
ROGIN: I thank the panelists for a very robust layout of how we got here. Now I want to turn to what you all think we should do about it, and I invite you to approach that question in whatever way you want to, whether it's vis a vis Turkey, the Kurds, Syria, the Assad regime - however you think you want to approach your recommendations for the United States. And whoever wants to take it, I guess, will start. Yes, Mary Beth.

LONG: I'm going to take it by taking a slight detour over to what some of my colleagues have said the prize and the strategic issue at hand, which is, how does this impact our relationships with Turkey, as this sort of being one of the many facets in which we deal with Erdogan? I have to say I disagree vehemently that the U.S. actions on the northeast border of Syria pushed Turkey into being the Turkey of today. The Turkey of today is no longer the secular Turkey that was the original member of NATO. The Turkey of today has an extremist as its increasingly dictatorial, authoritative leader. He has put his own journalists and his own teachers and other civilians in jail repeatedly. He has facilitated through 2012 - through 2014 the Iranian nuclear and other programs by going around the blockades and the embargoes and sanctions against Iran. He is currently illegally - have gas extraction activities off the coast of Cyprus. He has purchased the S-400 from Syria - oh, excuse me - from Russia, only after which we had to talk him out of purchasing the command and control communication system from the Chinese.

Shall we go on? So he dares to come to our capital and unleashes his thugs against protesters who are across the street and push them around and beat them. This is no good buddy of ours that, somehow, we are responsible for the freeze or the cold air in our relationship. This is a Turkey that is not a good ally, full stop. This is a Turkey that - the Turkish people increasingly, with their ability to vote, are voicing their concern and their opposition to Erdogan. So this is not a regime that we should be facilitating, and we darn sure shouldn't be facilitating the aggressive, extraterritorial aggression of this regime either in Iraq or Syria, full stop. Sorry.

ROGIN: OK. I see. If we can...

LONG: That's one port we're pausing.

ROGIN: OK. I think that's very much enough to get a interesting discussion up here started. Mark, you signaled to me first, so I'm going to let you have the floor first, and then Michael, if you can then add your thoughts.

KIMMITT: Listen. On the issue of Turkey, I certainly understand that there has been an increasingly authoritarian strain to what is happening in Turkey right now, and we have disputes that go well beyond the issue of the S-400s. We had the issue of Pastor Brunson. We had the issue of a belief and a perception that we are harboring a terrorist in the form of... Gulan.

KIMMITT: ...Gulan. Now, so stipulated, this is not a good relationship. The question is, should we, as a nation, be trying to push ourselves for - as a reform effort inside Syria - inside of Turkey? Do we want us to - do we want to get under the tent to try to fix that, or do we want to stay outside the tent and just push Turkey, a historical NATO ally who has, as Mike said, served alongside of us - is it better for us to try to work with Turkey as an ally to try to help in the reform effort, or do we just excoriate, isolate and toss out of NATO the largest ground military in the region? And I just don't think, at this point, it's necessary that we have to lose Turkey no matter
how bad it gets because there was - there will be a future in Turkey. There will be - in Russia, there will be a post-Putin. In Hungary, there will be a post-Orban. And I just want to make sure when those events happen, that we’re on the right side of history there.

LONG: No one's saying that we should abandon Turkey...

DORAN: It's my turn.

LONG: I know - but - I think - are we encouraged to have a dialogue?

ROGIN: I'd like to give Mary Beth an opportunity to just respond given that he was responding to her. And then we'll go to Michael.

DORAN: OK.

LONG: No one's saying that we should isolate Turkey. No one's saying we should kick them out of NATO. No one's saying - we have nuclear weapons in Turkey. But let's not be - let's be honest about what we're dealing with here. This is an extremist, authoritative government that, in fact, is selling the secular democracy and infrastructure of Turkey, down the road, endangering the Turkish people and somehow acquiescing to them sending troops across their own border is not a path to establishing a conducive, productive relationship with this regime.

DORAN: I'm going to make three points - one about this debate, then about what we should do right now and where we want to go - how - what kind of arrangement we can hope for there. With regard to this debate, we need to make a distinction - and it's extremely important - between this issue - and by that, I mean support by the United States of the PKK. We have not been honest with ourselves about what we were doing in northern Syria. Mark put it very well. We were building up a group that had - that was supporting the construction of Rojava. We were building Rojava, an autonomous Kurdish statelet run exclusively by the PKK, which is not a democratic organization. The PKK was expelling from its area Kurds that didn't agree with it. That's what we were doing. Whether we told ourselves we're doing that or not, that's what was the effect of our actions. We need to separate that issue from everything else in the Turkish-American relationship because this question of Kurdish separatism in Turkey is different than any other issue in Turkey. It's absolutely - it's the No. 1 issue in Turkish domestic and foreign policy. And the vast - every self-respecting Turk supports Erdogan on this issue.

If we want to undermine Erdogan, I'll tell you how you don't do it. You don't do it by building up the PKK on his border and then allowing him to present himself as the defender of Turkish interests against the United States. So let's talk about that. Everything that Erdogan has done in the last few years to be difficult to us, including the S-400s, he has done in the context of us building up the sworn enemy of Turkey in the face of numerous, constant Turkish requests that we not do it. Now, is it - there's no guarantee that we can salvage Turkish-U.S. relations. There's no guarantee at all. I cannot - I wish I could argue that if we get - if we move away from our pro-PKK policy that we can return relations to where they used to be. But we - I know for a fact that we will never succeed at that so long as we are - so long as we are seen by the majority of Turks as supporting the PKK. So let's get - let's recognize that we played a role in the deterioration of our relations with Turkey. Whether it's 50% America and 50% Erdogan or 80% Erdogan and 20% America - I don't know. But we played a major role. Let's get - let's move aside the mistake that we made. Let's get past that and then try to do something productive. And then just a couple of sentences about what that means...
ROGIN: Yeah. What is that productive action?

DORAN: So Donald Trump has been forced - Donald Trump has been forced into - by this bipartisan consensus in Congress - to put sanctions on Turkey. Let's use that for a negotiation with Erdogan - possibly get, maybe, get forces stopped, cease-fire in place and then a negotiation with the Turks about an arrangement in northeast Syria that meets their security needs and allows us to - allows us what we need in northern Syria and protects civilian life. And one last sentence just about what Blaise said. I agreed with almost every word that Blaise said about what we would like to see...

MISZTAL: Can I get that in writing, Mike?

(LAUGHTER)

DORAN: You can get the full sentence. You can get the full sentence...

KIMMITT: It's on camera. It's on camera.

LONG: Thank you. That was wonderful.

DORAN: ...About - what we would like to see in northeast Syria is something on the model of the KRG in Iraq. But we never tried to build that. This is the key. We inverted the relationship between ally and proxy. Our ally is Turkey; our proxy was the PKK. Our forces on the ground - the Department of Defense became the representative of the PKK to Turkey. This is - one of the reasons why Erdogan - you know, the people who are arguing against what's - the Turkish intervention - or outraged by it are saying - but we're on the other side. We, America, are on the other side and, therefore, you should feel comfortable with it. It's actually the fact that we are over there that made it so untenable to the Turks because we elevated a little splinter extremist organization of a minority and put it on the same level as our ally and began mediating back and forth and representing to Turkey the positions of the PKK. So while we are using our power umbrella to build Rojava and then representing Rojava's interest to Turkey - us, the greatest power on Earth, and Turkey's greatest ally. That was absolutely untenable to the Turks. There's no possible way they were ever going to going to accept that. And the PKK, the YPG on the ground rejected any notion of power-sharing in their area.

ROGIN: Michael...

DORAN: They hate - last sentence.

ROGIN: OK.

DORAN: They hate Barzani. They hate the KRG. These guys - the YPG - they would rather be in bed with Assad and the Iranians than with the Kurds of Iraq and with Barzani. And that's why we're seeing this quick - this very speedy move where the Americans leave and the Russians and the Syrians move in because they have always been aligned with the Russians and the Iranians.

ROGIN: OK.

DORAN: We borrowed...

ROGIN: I'm going to...
DORAN: ...The Russian and Iranian proxy and that was strategically stupid.

ROGIN: Mary Beth?

LONG: That sounds great. It's...

DORAN: It's true.

(LAUGHTER)

LONG: Statistically speaking, there are - it is not true. There was a survey - having been to the Syrian refugee camps, most of the Syrian defense forces are not even Kurds. They're Arabs. Thank you. And, in fact, that is borne out by the Wilson Center survey of Syrian defense forces that overwhelmingly conclude that the majority of Syrian defense forces are Arab - statistically, overwhelmingly Arab - then the Kurds, right up underneath the Kurds - only by a few percentage points - Christians, with a few Turkmen and Yazidis. At the beginning, I don't disagree with anything that you've said about the YPG. I don't know the YPG. It was a mistake. I don't know whether it was a mistake. But the Syrian defense forces are no longer - and haven't been for a while - equal to the YPG. It is a diverse organization of actually several very large tribes who fought against the Kurds on behalf of Assad until very recently and have now joined the SDF in order to preserve what they believe to be territorial - one-third of Syria - on behalf of this very shaky, very of the moment grouping under the SDF. So the narrative of these guys being the YPF and the PKK is a couple of years old and no longer the case. It's much more complicated now. That's the Turkish narrative that they want us to believe, and it's just not accurate.

DORAN: That's like saying that the counter-ISIS coalition, which has 52 states, is not an American coalition. If you took America out of the counter-ISIS coalition, those other 51 states - or however many are in the counter - would be - how much firepower would they bring on the ground against ISIS? You can ask yourself that question. None. It's an American coalition. The SDF is a PKK coalition. Yes, there are...

LONG: That's your opinion.

DORAN: That's - it's not my...

LONG: Statistically, it's not borne out.

DORAN: It's not the numbers.

LONG: It's...

DORAN: It's not the numbers. It's the...

KIMMITT: The leadership.

DORAN: ...Core. It's the leadership, the political agenda and the core fighting capability.

LONG: Not borne out.

MISZTAL: I can jump in.

ROGIN: Yeah. Let's maybe broaden out the conversation again.

MISZTAL: I don't know if I'm going to do that.
ROGIN: OK.

MISZTAL: But I am going to do something...

(LAUGHTER)

MISZTAL: I am going to do something uncharacteristic and agree with Mike on one point and disagree with General Kimmitt on another. Mike is right that having a mechanism for reconciling, or at least deconflicting between the Turks and the SDF forces on the other side of the border, a way of trying to find ways to accommodate Turkish security concerns, a way to make Turkey feel more secure, some form of mechanism for working with both sides of this would be fantastic. We had that, actually, up until 10 days ago. That's the problem, what Mike is saying. We actually had a mechanism through which we had joint U.S.-Turkish patrols. We had a demilitarization of SDF forces along the border. And we were trying to give Turkey the security guarantees it was looking for. I have not heard an explanation yet of why that was not enough for the Turkish side other than Turkish demand that it gets a 300-mile-long, 20-mile-deep strip of territory that it gets to control within Syria. And I don't know why that is necessary for the repair of U.S.-Turkish relations for us to enable Turkey to have that. Having that strip of territory for Turkey is not about the SDF.

It is about the fact that it has more than 3 million Syrian refugees that is no longer politically tenable for Erdogan to maintain within Turkey and that he needs to be able to send somewhere. Turkey has mismanaged its diplomacy in its attempt to work with Russia and Iran and has fundamentally miscalculated when it came to trying to protect the zone of opposition forces in Idlib and is finding that it can no longer maintain that. So it has on the order of 1 to 2 million refugees from Idlib that are likely going to be trying to cross the Turkish border sometime soon under the Iranian-Syrian-Russian offensive that's going on there. And so what's happening is that Turkey is trying to find a way to accommodate that pressure, which is why it needs this territory. That's why U.S. security guarantees, the mechanisms that were put in place over the last four months to try to accommodate Turkish security concerns, were not enough to make Erdogan happy. So, yes, it would be great if we tried to do everything we could to make sure that Turkey felt secure. That's, in fact, what we were trying to do when all of this fell apart. I'll disagree with General Kimmitt on the fact that I don't see us having been engaged in nation-building exercise. Nation building was 150,000 troops in Afghanistan, 185,000 troops in Iraq. We had 1,000 troops that we were spending $1.25 billion on a year. That's a drop in the bucket in terms of what we spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, what we spend on overseas operations generally. We were not engaged in a massive exercise of trying to build up a state there. What we were engaged in, I think, was twofold. One was continued counter-ISIS operations because we understood that returning stability to these areas was important to making sure that ISIS wasn't able to reemerge because we knew that ISIS was not - was physically defeated or territorially defeated but not ideologically defeated.

That's something that's been borne out in the last 10 days as we've seen the resurgence of ISIS - the activation of sleeper cells and ISIS attacks within territories that it once held. But the fact - the thing that we were not honest with ourselves about is that 1,000 forces were in northern Syria to protect against - excuse me - Iranian expansion into that territory. It was about making sure that Assad and Iran were not able to take control of the major oil-producing areas of Syria, which would help fund the reconstruction and their continued grasp on power. It was to make sure that there was not a land corridor, particularly through the Abu Kamal and Tanf area along
the Iraqi border that was established to allow Iran to continue funneling weapons and fighters and money, both to Assad and to Hezbollah. This is something that John Bolton talked about the need to have forces in Syria until Iran was pushed out. And something that the military was in fact not very willing to be upfront about - that this was part of why we had them there - but something that is now coming out because, as Mary Beth said at the beginning, of all the orders for U.S. troops to pull out, the one garrison that's remaining is about the 150 soldiers that we have stationed at Tanf, which is a critical border crossing between Syria and Iraq, which makes clear that we are concerned about Iranian presence there.

So, yes, we haven't been completely honest about ourselves about what we're doing in Syria, but it's not because we've been engaged in nation building. It's because we've actually been engaged in trying to push back against Iran in ways that we haven't been forthright about. To the question of what we're going to do, very quickly - I think that the current debate about the sanctions that were put in place on Turkey by the administration yesterday - the sanctions are being considered by Congress - at this point are going to be counterproductive. To Mary Beth's point, the fundamental thing that we've lost is credibility in this decision but also clarity for ourselves and for our international partners about what exactly U.S. objectives are. So we need to step back and think about both. What are those objectives - figure out how to articulate those clearly rather than doing that in a tumultuous, hodgepodge manner, and then think about how we get back the credibility to try to further those objectives.

Sanctioning Turkey for something that it appears that we greenlighted them to do does not help us get back our credibility. What we should be doing with Turkey is putting in place the sanctions and penalties that we have left unenforced for too long, putting in place the penalty for Halkbank's role in trying to skirt Iran sanctions with Reza Zarrabi (ph) putting in place the sanctions that are due under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act for Turkey's purchase of the S-400s that have been delayed indefinitely - do the things that are actually required of us to do by law and by the result of Turkey's counterproductive actions, then step back and re-evaluate where we're going next and how we rebuild the credibility to get there.

ROGIN: General Kimmitt?

KIMMITT: Yeah, I take your point about maybe it's small in nation building. But the United States was heavily involved in ensuring that the Manbij governing council was moving along, they were helping with self-governing processes. One of the fundamental issues of a nation-building effort is to ensure that you have security on the ground. We were helping build a 40,000-man police force - OK, small in nation building, but I think that we were moving in that path in any case. But the one point I actually wanted to talk about was I think that we've got to acknowledge that Turkey is not - well, Turkey's not blameless. I think there's a lot of blame to go around, particularly in the case of Europe and, frankly, some of the Middle East countries. Turkey has, since the beginning of the civil war, absorbed a significant amount of refugees. I think it was mentioned that this was a political issue. It's not a political issue. It is a drag on the economy. Turkey has a fairly weak economy in the first place and has gone out of their way to try to host those Syrian refugees to the capacity that it can. So, yes, they wanted a security buffer zone. Yes, they still want a security buffer zone of 30 kilometers. But they also want a place where they can resettle a significant number of those Syrians who have gone into Turkey to relieve that burden.
They've been - they have found absolutely no sympathy on the part of Europe for any assistance in that regard. They see themselves as bearing an inordinate amount of weight for those refugees. I think they're looking to get them back to - if not - for many, that area is their home, but for many, it's at least getting them back into Syria. So that takes the pressure off a very precarious Turkish economy. And as Blaise said, sanctions on their economy right now, in many ways, is only going to make it worse for those Syrian refugees than it's going to make it better.

ROGIN: OK. In the about 10 minutes we have left, before I want to open this up to a Q&A, I want to move the discussion to - we touched on the influence of Iran and what this all means for Iran's presence in the region. But I think there’s potentially more to tap into in that discussion. So I want to start there and also ask you about the other player outside of the region, which appears to be Russia. The SDF worked with the Assad regime in a deal brokered by the Russians to figure out a way going forward, so it certainly seems to me that that might be something we want to discuss as we talk about the regional calculus here. So whoever wants to begin - let's go down the line, OK.

LONG: I'll make it short, too.

DORAN: I'll take your extra time.

LONG: OK (laughter). Jumping back up to strategy, we have a congruence of interests with the Russians right now in Syria that I think we need to emphasize, and that is while this - Russians and the Iraq - excuse me - the Iranians worked very hard together early on getting rid of ISIS and other activities, there now is a fair amount of tension between the two of them, with a little bit of competitiveness. The Russians will tell you behind the scenes with who's going to be responsible for the Syrian military and Syrian (inaudible) forces after this all settles out, which is a number of years in the future. And I think working with Assad with the Russians to minimize the role of Iran in Syria would inure to all of our best interests, particularly in certain physical locations - northeast Syria, and along the Israeli-Jordanian and other borders where we've already stationed troops.

So I think there can be a deal to be made with Assad through the Russians to keep Iran out of those places, to limit Iran to absolutely no involvement in the Syrian military, which I think the Russians would like - absolutely no proxy forces in Iran at all, but to the extent - excuse me - in Syria at all, but to the extent that Syria's becoming Hezbollah-ized, as some people argue, to work with the Russians to minimize that. I think the Russians actually are buying into that. That also helps us with credibility. I think that with Erdogan coming in a couple of weeks - is it weeks?

ROGIN: November 17.

LONG: November 17? Coming for a meeting. We need to stop bickering about how we got here and be very clear about what we want from the Turks and what we're willing to give to the Turks. Turkey had plenty of opportunity not only with what Blaise was talking to but through the Astana and the Geneva processes to make it clear. But they clearly want something from the U.S. I think we should hear them out but set some very, very stringent limitations on what we expect in return and, certainly, the behavior that we had the last time.

ROGIN: Can I just follow up before we move on? What are the sticks and carrots that you believe we should be presenting to Erdogan when he comes?
LONG: I think - the sticks, actually, Blaise talked about where we're actually legally required to institute sanctions and other activities. I think - my understanding is while Turkey is losing its key role with the F-35, that's a very difficult process for those of you who are involved. You just can't move the factory and move the jobs and move. I think there's room there for economic job training and other reasons to work with the Turks, if possible, to keep that program alive. I think Turkey would greatly appreciate it. It's a key program and facility and capability that they want. I think working with the Russians and Assad against Turkey to deal with the buffer on northeast Syria where it will not permit Turkish troops or other presence but allows the return of refugees and displaced persons, both internally and externally, is something that we should strive for and, in some respects, should help Turkey from a refugee standpoint, perhaps not on a political standpoint. I think those are some of the ideas.

ROGIN: Michael.

DORAN: Just a little bit a history here I think is important on the Iran question. One of the reasons why the Obama administration married the PKK in northern Syria...

LONG: That's a good point.

DORAN: ...Was because it was consistent with the Obama policy of reaching an agreement regionally and on the nuclear issue with Iran. We - all of the opposition forces that we tried to use in Syria against ISIS, we made them sign a declaration that they would not carry out any operations against Assad because Assad was the Russian and the Iranian asset and ally. And we were in the process of working on the JCPOA and of aligning across the region with Iran. This is the dirty little secret of the Obama foreign policy. Brett McGurk, who ran the counter-ISIS program, is the guy who aligned us with IRGC assets in Iraq against ISIS...

LONG: Against the Kurds.

DORAN: ...Against ISIS. If you want to understand why there's a growing corridor from Baghdad to Beirut, it's because we just created kill zones for attacking Sunnis while never, ever addressing the rise of the Iranians and their Shiite proxies. That is true all across Iraq, and it's also true in Syria. This is the thing - I think people miss this. The PKK, the YPG, has throughout this entire time that they're supposed to be our proxy, they have kept the Assad government forces in Qamishli in the east. And plane goes - planes go from Damascus to Qamishli. And in Qamishli, there are Assad forces, and there is Hezbollah. And then they used Qamishli to reinforce their position in Deir ez-Zor. Now, if we were serious about having a counter-Iran program, we would've turned to our proxy, the PKK, and we would have said, close down the Assad position in Qamishli. Close down the Assad - and help us close down the Assad position in Deir ez-Zor. We never, ever said that, and if you look at what Brett McGurk wrote a few months ago when he saw that Trump was going to pull out, he said, oh, sadly, what I think we should do is we should broker a deal whereby we take the SDF that we built up, and we should put it up under Assad, right? That was always the plan. That was always the plan. We aligned...

KIMMITT: That's what we just did.

DORAN: We - that's...

LONG: Yeah.

DORAN: Exactly.
LONG: Yeah.

DORAN: Because that was the YPG program which we took on board. We didn't - this - my point to you and all you're saying - we took on without admitting it - our military especially took on the YPG political program in Syria, which benefited, in the end, the Iranians. That was the foundation that was laid. Now, once the Trump administration came in and became hostile to Iran, a lot of officials, well-meaning - very much in the manner that Mark described, well-meaning, good-intentioned - were trying to take that position that we had built up in Syria and then graft a counter-Iran strategy on. But the military - the American military was never on board, and General Votel, commander - former commander of CENTCOM, went before Congress and testified it is not a DOD mission to counter Iran in Syria, all right? It's an American policy to counter Iran, but not in Syria. This morning, I read that our forces are being pulled out of Syria and they're being redeployed elsewhere, including to Iraq, and the government is saying that they can carry out counter-ISIS activities from Iraq into Syria. So we can carry out counter-border operations from Iraq into Syria to counter ISIS, but we can't close down the Syrians in Qamishli. This is, again, strategic total incoherence, but let's understand where it came from. It came from that original alignment with Iran. And last point...

LONG: You're right.

DORAN: The strategic prize in all of this, I repeat, is the international orientation of Turkey and trying to repair the relationship. President Erdogan has signaled us time and time again over the last few years that if you keep doing what you're doing, I have other options. Unfortunately, today a doctrine has taken hold in Ankara that perhaps it's better for the Turks to align with the Russians and Iranians and solve their security problems in Syria in a Russian context. That is what we need to be worried about. If Turkey - and this is not an impossibility. If Turkey were to team up with the Iranians and with the Russians with the intention of throwing the United States out of the Middle East, think how long we would last in the region. Think how difficult our life would become in the region.

Look. Erdogan said to us for years, please don't build up the PKK in Syria. We ignored him. Last week he said, I'm going to drive the Americans out, and he drove us out like that, right? I'm not saying that we would fold all over the region if that happened, but I'm saying Turkey is a very significant country with a very significant - with a very coherent understanding of what its interests are. And if it is actually hostile to the United States, it can do an enormous amount of damage, so before we ever get to that stage, let's make sure that we're not doing anything that, when we look back on it historically, we'll say, you know what? Maybe we shouldn't have done that.

ROGIN: General Kimmitt?

KIMMITT: I'll give Mike a chance take a breath.

DORAN: Oh, no. While you're waiting, I'll talk some more.

KIMMITT: Three points very quickly - first of all, this notion of an Iranian land bridge is absolute nonsense, very simply because the Iranians have been encircling the region for years. They're in Kurdistan. They're in Syria. They're in Lebanon. They're in Yemen. They've got a good relationship with Oman. They're in the eastern provinces. They're in Bahrain. So I don't understand where this whole notion of the land bridge is going on. They've been encircling in
this region for years and years, point one. Point two - let's see. When I came out of Iraq the first time in 2004, one of the great programs we had down at CENTCOM was driving a wedge between Syria or Iran, and that was a fool's errand. Iran has been a patron. Syria has been a proxy for Iran for decades, and I don't think we have any chance of changing that in the near term.

Last point I'd make - we had some good normative policy recommendations going forward - what should be done? The positive - what will happen? My prediction is the same prediction - the same comment on this that a Yugoslav national army officer made to me in 1996 when we were talking about Bosnia, as we had just entered in. He looked to me, and he said, you know, this is going to be a multi-decade operation for you, and I said, OK. And he looked at me and he said, sometimes, you just need to let the fire burn itself out. And I think the U.S. policy going forward, at least under this president - when it comes to this area in northeastern Syria, he is just going to let this fire burn itself out.

ROGIN: Thanks. Blaise?

MISZTAL: Yes, so a couple of points. Part of the challenge of this region is sort of all of the overlapping interests that the United States has in it, which Ali's question alluded to, so I think we need to rack and stack those and rank them and figure out how to address them in order. I think the No. 1 concern that we should have right now is the return of Sunni extremism to the area, and so there's two things that we need to be concerned about there. The first is the 10,000 or so ISIS fighters that are being held or have been being held in SDF-controlled territory and the 100,000 or so refugees that are being held in that same territory of ISIS families and others. Whatever happens next in those territories, we need to make sure that those people are accounted for, at least those that are still left. And I think this is somewhere where the United States could work with its partners, both regionally in NATO and others, to try to come up with a solution of how to move those camps and those fighters into places where we can guarantee that they're not escaping and starting new terror cells.

On the same point, I think we need to be terribly concerned that the same way that Turkey accuses us of using terrorist proxies to fight in Syria, Turkey is using terrorist proxies in the form of the Free Syrian Army, which is at this point an al-Nusra-affiliated force that has been, at least allegedly, carrying out atrocities already in northern Syria, that they're not allowed to grow stronger as a result of these operations. And so one of the things I think we should do is put criteria in place for President Erdogan's visit in November. If he wants to come here in November, then we need to make sure that, for example, FSA forces are no longer allowed to conduct operations in northern Syria, as well as protections are put in place for civilians, particularly in large urban areas. There should be conditions if he wants to have a White House meeting to make sure that he is working with us. But more broadly, I think the point I wanted to make is one that I read in a book about U.S. policy in the Middle East that I admired greatly, which was that the United States has failed when it has seen itself as an honest - its role in the Middle East as being an honest broker and trying to accommodate the demands of multiple different sides and figure out who's right and who's wrong and how to figure out sort of where the historical conflicts are and how to resolve them. Instead, we should be more single-minded in pursuing our interests and working with the forces that are actually going to further them, rather than giving into the demands of people and countries that lay claims to us giving them what they justly deserve. And so in this I think we need to think longer term about how we make sure that Iranian influence, whether it is over land or over air or financially, doesn't expand.
I don't see how we've accomplished that by basically saying, we haven't abandoned the Kurds; we've made sure that they're well protected by our good friends Assad and Soleimani. So we need to think now about how we can try to rebuild some of our credibility and our ability to push back against Iran. It's likely to be that northern Syria isn't going to be the place to do that because we have given up our influence there, our ability to affect things on the ground. That means that theaters like Iraq, Yemen, the Persian Gulf are going to grow a lot more important. It means that we're probably going to be a lot more reliant on partners like Israel, that has already been conducting what it calls the war between wars. Turkey's trying to make sure that Iran doesn't embed itself too deeply into Syria. But I think at this point we're more reliant than we were ever before on partners to try to do - help us in the Middle East, and we just need to be clear-eyed about who those partners are.

DORAN: Please - what is that book, and where can you buy it?

(LAUGHTER)

MISZTAL: It was written by a once clear-eyed analyst of the Middle East by the name of Mike Doran. "Ike's Gamble" - I highly recommend it.

DORAN: Available on Amazon.

(LAUGHTER)

ROGIN: OK. I think that's a great place to pause the conversation we've been having and open this up to questions. I know the gentleman right here - you raised your hand. We'll start there, and then we'll move on. We'll try to get as many as we can. I see some hands going up. Really quick - I just want to lay some ground rules. Please say your name and your affiliation. Please limit your question to a question and not a comment. Sir? There's a microphone coming.

BASSAM SAKER: My name is Bassam Saker. I am a Syrian Democratic Council representative here in Washington, D.C. I expect that you will talk about what next after the decisions happen from Mr. Trump. And even I expect that you will talk a little about what's happening in north of Syria because there's many civilians was killed. Many civilians feed, and nobody talked about that - absolutely. And the main issue - that's why I want to talk - you concentrating about the PKK. PKK, it is issue inside Turkey. It is not connected with northeast Syria. I'm not Kurdish. I'm not Kurdish. I will never accept PKK to be inside Syria. That's why I'm wondering why you are talking like that. And my question is now - my question is - it is, what's your opinion about what's happening in the north end of Syria by killing the civilians and the occupation? And one more issue that the area from - concentrate from invasion from Turkey, it is between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, which is the majority Arab. They are not Kurdish. These people who fled, they are Arab, not Kurdish, again. And the first family was killed by airstrike. It was Christian Syriac.

ROGIN: I think that's a great place to pause the question and turn it over and get some answers.

SAKER: Thank you.

ROGIN: The civilian cost - maybe start there.

LONG: The civilian - actually, for those of you who haven't been following this, over - the area that we've been talking about is about a third of the territory of Syria. It's a very large territory.
And there are literally somewhere between a third and half of the total population of Syria is either internally or externally displaced. There are millions that are in Lebanon, in Turkey, in other places, some of whom - Jordan, yes - some of whom affiliate or self-describe themselves as pro-Syrian defense forces. And in my personal experience, they are from all walks of life - Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen, tribes that have followed their tribal leaders - so very much a tribal geographic fight. And these people are being slaughtered. And as refugees, they are living under, internally and externally, absolutely horrific circumstances. And it bothers me tremendously that we have not had the coverage here of the plight of these - substantially women and children who are literally dying of malnutrition. Winter is coming; many of them will freeze to death. They are not even giving potable water. And in Lebanon, actually, they turned off the water and made them move because they were worried about the sewage seeping into the water tables and impacting their crop growth.

You're exactly right, sir. We have not paid sufficient attention. And there are some indications that the YPG, the - Turkey's proxies and others, certainly remnants of ISIS, al-Nusra and others - are basically using civilians, and women and children in particular, as both shields and as political victims for their fight. And that has got to stop. Regardless of what the U.S. does, that has got to stop. One final point - the refugees in Turkey - it's not because Erdogan, out of the goodness of his heart, is saving the rest of Europe from the influx of immigrants. That was a political blackmail tool that he used against Germany and others and still uses in order to get their acquiescence on political and other matters. It's not because Erdogan is being burdened and has accepted this because he's such a great guy.

ROGIN: General Kimmitt?

KIMMITT: Yeah. I think the latest calculation is that the GDP of Turkey has been reduced by about 0.25% by the humanitarian assistance they've given to the Syrians. Whether it's for political purposes - whatever - there is still money being paid to house the Syrians inside of Turkey. But this is going to sound heretical, and I would expect a few books to be thrown at me. But I believe that all sides are complicit in what's happening in northern Syria right now. I believe they're complicit because it was clear that this was going to happen at some point. Erdogan had been massing his forces along the border for the last year. He's been saying, I'm going to go, I'm going to go, I'm going to go. So there's no doubt about that.

The fact that the YPG has decided to fight inside that area rather than withdraw to the 30 kilometer - out of the 30-kilometer buffer zone so that the Turks could come in in a noncombat role, but just occupy - the fact that the YPG has decided to fight there makes them complicit in the carnage that we're seeing there. And I believe the United States is complicit, too, because they could have worked this out between both sides. That look - if in fact the Turks are going to come in, you're going to come in as peacekeepers. You're going to be living with these people for years and years. If you come in guns blazing, all you're going to do is turn off the very population that you're trying to get onto your side. So my view would be - the YPG had the opportunity to reduce the carnage substantially by pulling behind the 30-kilometer line. The Turks could have reduced the carnage substantially by coming in as peacekeepers and not as war fighters. And the United States could have done its job by brokering that agreement between those two sides before the Turks came in.

ROGIN: Michael?
DORAN: Thank you for your question because I realized in the last few days, in talking about this issue, that when you talk about it at the strategic level, it often sounds as if you - as if one doesn't have concern about the loss of life on the ground and the civilians. But that's in the forefront of my mind. My point is that if we don't get the structural issues correct, there will be no framework for - there will be no successful framework for a humanitarian policy. And simply putting the humanitarian question first and talking about it without reference to the strategic framework is a disaster. I agree with what Mark just said. There's a lot of blame to go around here. And so I think going forward we have to figure out what are the structural fundamentals that can create a framework in which we can look after the humanitarian concerns.

With respect to the corridor or the pocket between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, yes, it's not Kurdish, and that's exactly why Erdogan went in there because it breaks up the east and the west of Rojava because the Turkish plan - you know this, I'm sure, as well as I do - the goal of the Turkish policy is to make sure that there is no rise of a PKK statelet. And also, he was under pressure from the Americans that there be no occupation of, you know, Kurdish cities and so on, and so he chose that area. I think we should - I think we should work to accommodate his security concerns in that area with a clear understanding that those security concerns are that there will be no Rojava.

ROGIN: Blaise, if you don't mind, I'm just going to go...

MISZTAL: Please.

ROGIN: ...Get some more questions. And in the 10 minutes, we have left - I apologize - I'm going to collect a couple questions here. So I'm going to move to the back because I've seen your hands up quite a bit. Ma'am, over here. And sir, if you could just give us your questions briefly. And so we'll incorporate both of them as we end this discussion.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This question is for Mr. Misztal and Miss Long and anybody who wants to answer. You brought up the Halkbank case and also the CAATSA sanctions for the purchase of the S-400. Why do you think that the U.S. hasn't imposed these sanctions and especially given the reporting that we know now about maybe Giuliani pressing for favorable outcomes for Turkey?

ROGIN: Thank you.

KIMMITT: Do we have to bring impeachment in? Let's make this an impeachment-free zone.

ROGIN: I don't think it is. I think that's just a strictly policy question. And sir, here. Let's get your question, and then we'll incorporate both of them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question has to do with subjects raised by General Kimmitt a long time ago, which was where this all started, which he described as the decision to take on ISIS and subsequently to carry that campaign into Syria. So my question is, well, in view of where we've wound up, was that wise? And if we were going to fight ISIS in Syria, who are we going to fight it with, except for SDF and YPG forces? We certainly weren't going to fight it with Turkish forces since Turkey was actively abetting ISIS in Syria. We know that. And I'm not a particular fan of the policy that President Obama followed. But he - Turkey was confronted with that in the spring of 2014 and thereafter and asked to desist.
ROGIN: Let's turn to some answers. And I know we're not getting to some questions. If I can be so bold as to suggest perhaps some of the panelists will have a few minutes after this to chat with folks individually. I apologize, we have to move on. So the first question was about the Halkbank and CAATSA sanctions issues, whoever wants to take that, and then who else could we have partnered with to fight ISIS?

LONG: I'll do a quick one. Everybody here agrees - oh, sorry, Blaise.

MISZTAL: Please.

LONG: You're the Hudson Institute...

MISZTAL: No, please.

LONG: I'll go really quickly. All of us are - agree that our relationship with Turkey is really fundamental, not only to our presence in that part of the world, but it is a very important NATO ally. I think the reason why those two sanctioned activities were pursued is the president and the Congress really have been trying to work with Turkey particularly from a mil-to-mil standpoint not to sever the tie between the Turks and the U.S. military - the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs in particular. You know, the - ending the F-35 program and acquiescing to the 300, which has been paused (ph) that really is a game changer. And by dragging it out, by hopefully working through Turk's concerns, to give them the capabilities that they need, to have NATO reinforce those desired capabilities is something I know - and NATO's out for the summer - is something I know that this administration and other administrations have wanted to do. I think it's purely a realistic acceptance that we have to work with Turkey, mil-to-mil's critical, on the S-300 - that's a step beyond the river and anything we can do to delay it is important.

ROGIN: Anybody want to entertain the second part of that question, which is why haven't some of these sanctions been implemented yet?

MISZTAL: I mean, I'll just echo what Mary Beth said of which at least when it comes to the CAATSA sanctions, my understanding has been that there have been ongoing negotiations between the United States and Turkey on how to resolve the S-400 standoff, including the possibility that Turkey wouldn't unbox the S-400 or wouldn't fully implement it. And I think even after the initial delivery was taken, there was hope that there would be some ability to find a way out of this, which is why the legally mandated CAATSA sanctions haven't been applied yet. As for the Halkbank penalty, I think that is a lot harder to understand, particularly for an administration that has made maximum pressure on Iran, making sure that sanctions are fully implemented and no one is skirting sanctions on Iran, one of its main policy objectives. That becomes a lot harder to understand.

ROGIN: Who wants to dive into the second question of this? Who else could we have partnered with? General Kimmitt.

KIMMITT: Well, first of all, there - over at DOD, they're always searching for a better partner. But candidly, I'm not disputing that the YPG was not the right solution. I think it was absolutely the right solution with the conditions that have been set out of temporary, tactical and transactional. This was not meant to be a long-term alliance. This is not going to be the northeastern Syria NATO. There is a reason that the YPG wanted to fight with us. They wanted our assistance in protecting their villages. There was a reason we wanted to fight with them. But we also knew that the conditions that were put on because there had to be the day after the
fight, after the caliphate was destroyed, that those weapons couldn't stay in their hands and pose a threat to Turkey. Our support was not going to be continuing. So I actually think it was a very interest-focused alignment that we made with the YPG that worked out very well for the United States. It worked out very well for the YPG. And had it been followed to its fruition, it would have been a good deal for Turkey, as well.

ROGIN: I want to turn quickly - we have a few minutes. I see Sinam Mohamad here, who is the U.S. representative for the Syrian Democratic Council, which is the political arm of the SDF. We have about four minutes left, so ma'am, if I could ask you to ask your question quickly, and let's get some responses in.

SINAM MOHAMAD: Thank you so much. First of all, I would like your just one comment. Mr. Doran, he's sub - sum up all the Syrian issue in PKK, which I don't see it is - I mean, fair. The Syrian issue, it is not only with the PKK. What's going on in north of Syria, it also related to PKK. It's the Syrian people - Arabs, Kurds. In this region, we have 5 million people living there. They are not all PKK. The SDF - 65% they are not Kurds. They are Arabs. And do you think that these Arabs are - I mean, accepting to be a puppet in the Kurds' hands? Do you think that the Syrian people will be a puppet - to accept to be a puppet in the Kurdish hand? I don't think so. All we - because the system, which we are building there, it's to democratize Syria.

One question just I want to ask, now let us see that it's - OK, whatever - I mean, you discuss it is - OK, through - so who is the alternative here? Do you think the FSA who came to the region and killing the civilian after arresting them as it happened to Hevrin Khalaf, the secretary of the Future of Syria party? She is not a military. She's a political. They arrest her. And they killed her when she was alive. So this is the alternative? The radical people who come to Afrin - I'm from Afrin. And these people in Afrin, they committed crimes there. They are committing the same crimes in this region again. So we would like to have the - who will be replace these people? If you say - OK. Let us say like that. Who will be there? Who will be the alternative? We want to see this region...

ROGIN: Miss Mohamad, I'm very sorry. I...

MOHAMAD: And I mean, this ability there....

ROGIN: I don't want to cut you off. We have two minutes left...

MOHAMAD: Thank you so much. Thank you.

ROGIN: ...So I want to get some response.

MOHAMAD: So I would like just to ask this question. Thank you so much.

LONG: Quickly, I don't know the answer to that. My fear is, and we haven't really touched upon this, is ISIS and other radicals and other extremists with a diverse agenda and those will prey upon the discord of the Syrian people. And we will all lose in that scenario.

KIMMITT: On the other hand, if it all works out and we can get Syria writ large to some sort of post-civil war resolution, it's clearly the plan. And I believe everybody in your council would agree that you're looking for a federated region somewhat self-governing the way that Kurdistan is in northern Iraq. So there is a blueprint for that. There is a model for that. Unfortunately, right now, we've got to get to Syria in a post-civil war political resolution before anyone can move forward with that.
ROGIN: All right. Michael Doran, you want to have the last words real quick in the 30 seconds we have left?

DORAN: No, I just - I just wanted to say that I do, of course, recognize that the average person on the ground is being crushed by these larger forces and has no voice in what’s happening. But I think that we have to realize - I know that you’re not the PKK, but the No. 1 concern of the Turks is the PKK. And if we don’t address that to their satisfaction, then this is what we’re going to get. I think that this was inevitable on the basis of how we approached all of this. The question now is, how do we get out of it? And I think it has to be through U.S. and Turkish relations.

ROGIN: Blaise, real quick.

MISZTAL: I mean, I find this logic a little backwards. I mean, it wasn't inevitable because we are staving it off. We were working through a peace process with the Turks. We were keeping a war at bay with 150 soldiers posted on the border that were doing joint patrols with the Turks. To say that it was inevitable and was going to happen regardless of whether we withdrew our troops or not means accepting that Turkey was going to attack U.S. positions...

DORAN: We never addressed...

MISZTAL: ...Regardless of fact that we're a NATO ally.

DORAN: We never addressed it as a political issue. We address it in mil-to-mil. The Department of Defense shoved everybody else out of the way and addressed it as line here, line there and didn't address the Turkish concerns about the political project that was going on behind the lines, right? You, yourself said it.

MISZTAL: Yes.

DORAN: And what we want is the KRG model with power-sharing, right? DOD did not want power-sharing because it liked the little island that it had created for counterterrorism, without reference to the larger structure in the region. That is stupid. And this is what we get.

ROGIN: OK, putting on my TV producer hat, that is when you don't cut to commercial.

(LAUGHTER)

ROGIN: Thank you all to our fantastic panelists. I think they deserve a round of applause.

(APPLAUSE)

ROGIN: I think this discussion has been very, very robust today. Thanks to all of you for joining us and to everybody who’s watching from afar. Have a great day.

LONG: Thank you, Ali.

ROGIN: Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)