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Obama's Imperial Mideast Policy Unravels

By Daniel Lazare

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Exclusive: President Obama's Mideast policy is such a confusing mess that he is now supporting Turkey's invasion of northern Syria although it's primary target is not ISIS but another U.S. ally, the Kurds, explains Daniel Lazare.

In the 1930s, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appeased his enemies. Today, U.S. President Barack Obama appeases his friends.

Barack the Appeaser is the key to unlocking the mysteries of U.S. policy in the Middle East and beyond. Confusing to begin with, U.S. actions reached new heights of absurdity last week when the Obama administration abandoned its long-standing Kurdish allies with virtually no notice and announced that it was backing a Turkish thrust into northern Syria instead.

Although the Turks claimed to be targeting ISIS (also known as Islamic State, IS, ISIL, and Daesh), it was plain from the outset that the real aim was to counter an offensive that had carried Kurdish forces some 20 miles west of the Euphrates River and put them in a position to control nearly the entire Syrian-Turkish border.

But there was a problem. Not only had the U.S. approved the same Kurdish offensive, but it had provided arms, money, and air support plus military advice in the form of some 250 US Special Operations forces embedded among members of the Kurdish militia known as the YPG.

Indeed, the Syrian Democratic Forces, a multi-ethnic militia anchored by the YPG, was a real success story, just about the only one Washington has had in the course of its disastrous five-year Syrian intervention. As one analyst put it:

“Since the creation of the SDF last November, the U.S.-backed coalition was able to roll back IS advances in northern Syria at an unprecedented pace. An effective mixture of multi-pronged offensives and U.S. air support led to the capture of key IS strongholds, including the city of Shaddadi in eastern Syria, the strategic Tishrin Dam along the Euphrates, and more recently IS’s former bastion of Manbij, south of the Turkish border.”

But now the U.S. had decided to drop the Syrian Democratic Forces despite their sterling anti-ISIS record and back Turkey even though it didn’t seem very concerned about ISIS at all. Vice President Joe Biden laid down the law during a visit to Ankara on Wednesday.

“We have made it absolutely clear,” he said, that Kurdish forces “must move back across the river. They cannot, will not, and under no circumstances get American support if they do not keep that commitment, period.”

Why the About-Face

What is the reason for such a remarkable about-face? What makes the U.S. think it can get away with cultivating an alliance one moment and dropping it like a hot potato the next? The answer has to do with the phenomenon of liberal appeasement that Obama represents.

Appeasement became a dirty word as a result of the 1938 Munich Crisis when Britain and France decided that allowing Hitler to dismember Czechoslovakia would somehow allay his appetite for more conquests. But in Obama’s hands, it has come to mean something different: an endless attempt to satisfy conflicting demands by a growing number of client states.

The states include not just Turkey but Israel, the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, plus the dozen East European states that have entered NATO since 1999. If America were an old-fashioned empire, it would issue orders and expect such dependents to fall into line. But as a “democratic” empire, it relies on cajoling, bargaining, and other inducements to achieve “voluntary” consent.

But this has grown increasingly difficult as the web of alliances has expanded. Not only have members grown more fractious and divided, but the original *raison d’être* – countering the Soviet Union – has faded from view. The upshot is a ramshackle arrangement whose existence is its sole justification and which the U.S. labors to keep afloat simply because that’s what global hegemons do.

Enter Barack Obama. A man of liberal but otherwise vague beliefs, his goal was to maintain the status quo while somehow rendering it more democratic. This has meant trying to satisfy

everyone and his cousin, Balts and Poles given to flights of paranoia about Russian “expansionism,” rightwing Zionists convinced that the Palestinians are a combination of both Haman and Hitler, plus Middle Eastern oil sheiks busily financing jihad when not idling away at the fleshpots and casinos of Beirut.

Obama’s strategy has been to throw first one group a bone and then another in the hope of somehow keeping them from tearing each other apart. In other words, kick the can down the road until it becomes someone else’s problem.

With just six months left in office, he is close to achieving his goal. But Turkey has thrown him for a loop. Originally one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s biggest boosters, Obama has grown increasingly dismayed as U.S.-Turkish relations have deteriorated.

After all, Erdogan’s brand of Islamic democracy is seemingly everything the U.S. could want, safe, pious, conservative, and pro-capitalist – the Muslim Brotherhood with a human face, so to speak.

So who would have thought that Erdogan would steer Turkey in an increasingly authoritarian direction and would turn a blind eye to the activities of both ISIS and Al Qaeda? The administration made half-hearted efforts to persuade him to cut off aid to such groups, but quickly backed off when he refused.

A Failed Coup

The crowning blow was the July 15 abortive coup d’état, which Erdogan accused the U.S. of supporting. The charge is almost certainly a bum rap. Mild centrist that he is, the last thing Obama wants is more turmoil in the Middle East, which is what a military takeover would have achieved. He was dismayed that Turkey could believe such a thing about the U.S. and, fearful that Turkey would switch allegiance to Russia and Iran, was desperate to heal the breach.

The Kurds supplied the means for Obama to give something to Erdogan, who had provided ISIS with a safe haven and patronized Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate Al Nusra. In a recent interview, Erdogan even denied that Al Nusra was terrorist at all.

Instead, Erdogan has long regarded the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the YPG, its military branch in Syria, as the prime enemy since he sees their goal as establishing a stronghold in northern Syria as a prelude to carving out an autonomous region in southeastern Turkey as well.

Hence, he responded to American efforts to help the PKK-YPG expand its Syrian enclave in roughly the same way that Israel would respond if the U.S. had started shipping arms to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon — with mounting fury.

Given all this, what better way was there for the United States to prove its bona fides to Erdogan than by dropping the Kurds and devoting itself exclusively to Turkish needs? With the Turks in

charge of the second biggest army in NATO, the valiant but lightly armed fighters of the YPG didn't stand a chance.

This is why Biden read the riot act to the YPG in Ankara. But however menacing the tone, his statement was an expression of weakness rather than of strength, an example of a superpower struggling to hold together a fractious empire that is increasingly coming apart at the seams. Thus, it was the Turks who barked out orders and Americans who hastened to obey.

But the new orientation is not likely to work out as smoothly as Obama hopes. Fighting was intensifying as of Sunday as Turkish forces took Jarablus, located some 20 miles south of the Turkish border, then headed toward Manbij, a city that cost the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces more than 260 lives in the months-long battle to wrest it from ISIS control. An outside monitoring group said Turkish artillery and air strikes killed 35 civilians while the Turkish military said that 25 Kurdish militants were killed as well.

The YPG is not likely to take this lying down. If so, then another battle for Manbij could well be underway, one pitting a U.S.-backed force against another that was U.S.-backed until just a few days earlier.

As for ISIS and Al Qaeda, the rag-tag “Free Syrian Army” force that Turkey assembled for the invasion includes Salafists and members of Ahrar al-Sham, an ally of Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front (which recently changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, or Front for the Conquest of Syria).

So the U.S. is now backing pro-Al Qaeda fighters against a group that has shown its mettle in battling such forces. As for ISIS, the Turkish incursion merely provided the group with an opportunity to regroup some 40 miles to the west where it took the border town of Al-Rai from the pro-U.S. FSA. While it lost one border stronghold, it gained another.

Wagging the Dog

Thus, the U.S. may have realized a short-term gain in its rapprochement with Turkey but at a long-term cost. It has jettisoned the one effective anti-ISIS force in its arsenal, it has all but destroyed its credibility, and it is undoubtedly prolonging the bloodshed in Syria as well. The entire maneuver is an expression of U.S. weakness rather than strength.

What holds true for Turkey, moreover, holds true for other allies. The U.S.-Saudi alliance is yet another example of the tail wagging the dog. Over the decades, Washington has spared no effort to appease the increasingly duplicitous and unstable regime in Riyadh.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was not only an attempt to get rid of a long-term U.S. enemy but, at bottom, an effort to divert attention from the Saudi role in the attack on the World Trade Center. Obama continued the cover-up by keeping under wraps the famous '28 pages' – actually a 29-page chapter – on Saudi complicity in the congressional 9/11 report until just a few weeks ago.

If Obama has continued to push for Assad's ouster, moreover, it has been mainly at Saudi behest since the Wahhabists who rule in Riyadh cannot countenance the idea of a Shi'ite remaining in power in neighboring Syria. (President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite, a Shi'ite-related sect.)

And if Obama has backed the Saudis in their brutal air war against Yemen's Houthi rebels, it is for the same reason, i.e. because the Saudis can't tolerate the idea of a Shi'ite government to their south as well.

Obama could tell them, politely but firmly, that naked religious bigotry has no place in modern politics. But that would mean deviating from his policy of abject servility. So the more obstreperous the Saudis grow, the more he tries to appease their every whim.

The same can be said for Israel or for Poland and the Balts, all of whom believe that a never-ending flow of U.S. military aid allows them to behave as provocatively as they wish. The more over-extended the U.S. empire grows, the less it is able to rein its client states in. It is not a recipe for a happy outcome.