

Trump has handed his enemies their biggest strategic win

The US president's indifference is massively emboldening Iran and extremist groups such as ISIS

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We've seen this show before. It doesn't end well. In fact, it doesn't really end at all.

If US President Donald Trump hopes his decision to move US troops almost entirely out of Syria and allow Turkey to attack pro-US Kurdish forces will extricate the US from Syria, he is going to be disappointed.

In 2011, then president Barack Obama withdrew US troops from western Iraq, following the military surge that crushed Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM). By 2014, the terrorist group had morphed into ISIS and created the "caliphate" that forced the US intervention Mr Trump is now vowing to end.

The US president, a former reality TV producer and star, does not think in policy terms. He is fixated on reality as refracted through television news and seems to care only about how his supporters will react to the news cycle.

But when the dust settles, Washington is going to have to deal with the real world on a policy basis.

While decrying "endless wars", Mr Trump has repeatedly identified two imperative US interests in the region: combating Iran's expanding hegemony and defeating terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda and ISIS.

What he doesn't seem to grasp is that the US presence in Syria – amounting to about 1,000 troops – is crucial to both of those agendas.

Turkey kept threatening to attack Washington's Kurdish allies but would never have done so without Mr Trump's acquiescence. It was bluffing but Mr Trump again proved an easy mark. Betrayed by the US, the Kurds have reluctantly struck a deal with the Assad regime in return for protection. Yesterday,



A Turkish military vehicle on the outskirts of Tal Abyad on the border with Turkey.

Syrian troops were moving towards the Turkish border in what could become a bloodbath for civilians, especially those opposed to the regime.

Now that a massive Turkish attack against the Kurds is under way and the Syrian regime is on a collision course with Turkish-backed troops, the worst actors in the Middle East will directly and immediately benefit, starting with ISIS.

Tens of thousands of captured terrorists and their relatives are being guarded by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who were the foot soldiers in the US-led campaign to crush ISIS's so-called caliphate.

These dangerous extremists are already escaping and conducting terrorist attacks, primarily against their Kurdish former captors. As Turkey's attack expands, the SDF cannot defend themselves and their vil-

lages while continuing to guard these prisoners.

On Saturday, a senior SDF commander said the coalition forces would be redeploying troops to defend against the Turkish attack and could no longer prioritise guarding ISIS prisoners. That was followed on Sunday by at least 750 ISIS sympathisers escaping a camp in north-east Syria. Many more of the tens of thousands of ISIS prisoners and their families currently being held are likely to escape, be released in desperation or be summarily executed.

Moreover, the sectarian, ethnic and communal violence being unleashed by Turkey in northern Syria will destabilise the area for many years to come. It has already led to a resurgence of violence by ISIS, which could not have asked for a better scenario to revive its fortunes. As Mr Trump withdrew US

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forced to abandon efforts to pull all American troops out of Syria completely. For now, the position of the US administration is that all troops will be withdrawn, except for those in Al Tanf.

Mr Trump's indifference, or even hostility, to the US mission in Syria is massively emboldening Iran in its strategically crucial quest to create a secure military corridor linking Iran to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea via the Iraqi-Syrian border.

While the world's attention has been understandably focused on the Turkish threats and subsequent invasion in Syria's north, Iran has been intensifying its grip on strategic areas to the south, near key border crossings that it already controls on the Iraqi side.

It is constructing two new major military facilities in Mayadin and Abukamal. The

goal is to control the existing road networks from Abukamal to the T2 oil pumping facility in Deir Ezzor near Mayadin, on to the T4 station and airbase in Tiyas, east of Homs, and then south to the Lebanese border and the Hezbollah-dominated Bekaa Valley.

Iran's considerable and highly alarming progress in securing its control over these strategically vital routes was signalled by the re-opening, after more than five years, of the crossing between Al Qaim in Iraq and Abukamal in Syria. Pro-Iran Iraqi militias are now dominant on both sides.

The Al Tanf crossing and highway is even more important and only the US forces stationed there currently prevent Iran from doing the same there.

Mr Trump does not seem to grasp that removing the modest contingent of US forces from Syria would create ideal conditions for the resurgence of ISIS and for Iran to quietly consolidate its "land bridge" to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Both scenarios are already happening.

By facilitating this attack on pro-US Kurdish-led forces, who lost up to 11,000 fighters in the battle against ISIS, and worse, by withdrawing US forces from Syria entirely, the American president is handing his two stated enemies the biggest strategic wins they have had in many years.

If the past is prologue, then the consequences of this fiasco are easily predictable.

The big winners will be ISIS and Iran. US forces might even have to return to the areas they are now leaving.

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CIVILIAN'S TRIBUNE

The proud son of India

Indian-American Abhijit Banerjee, his wife Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer have jointly won the Economics Nobel for the year 2019 for their "experimental approach to alleviating global poverty."

He is the eighth Indian-born person to win a Nobel.

Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee is the Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US.

Born in Kolkata, Dr Banerjee's parents were also economics professors. After his post-graduation from JNU, he obtained his PhD in economics from Harvard University. He specialised in developmental economics.



In 2003, he founded the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), along with Esther Duflo and Sendhil Mullainathan, and he remains one of the lab's directors. J-PAL has carried out 568 field experiments, or Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), in 10 years in several countries, including India. This includes pollution control audit in Gujarat, MNREGA experiments, and a series of partnerships with the government of Tamil Nadu.

He also served on the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Dr Banerjee is the co-author of the award-winning Poor Economics. The

book, which was co-authored by his wife and fellow Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo, delves deep into the lives of the world's poorest and argues that poverty eradication begins with understanding the daily decisions facing the poor.

Dr Banerjee was one of the economists consulted for formulating NYAY or Nyuntam Aay Yojana, a flagship scheme promised by Congress in its 2019 election manifesto that ambitiously aimed to provide basic income to the poorest 20 per cent of India's population.

Dr Banerjee also won the inaugural Infosys Prize in 2009 for economics.

K R Chandrasekharan