

# Leaked Memo Shows the U.S. Still Does Not Understand Turkey's Syria Operation

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*An 'internal memo' that was intentionally leaked has blasted U.S. President Donald Trump's decision for the U.S. military to withdraw from Syria, or more accurately, relocate from northern Syria to the oilfields in the east, as well as his complacency as Turkey commits "war crimes and ethnic cleansing" against the Kurdish minority.*

The author of the memo, diplomat and former ambassador to Bahrain, William V. Roebuck, took every opportunity to lambast Trump as he faces impeachment 12 months before the next U.S. presidential elections. Roebuck questioned whether the U.S. could have prevented the Turkish military operation in northern Syria by increasing military patrols, sanctions and threats, but conceded that "the answer is probably not," citing Turkey's membership in NATO and its large army against the small American presence in the region. "But we won't know because we didn't try," Roebuck added.

The [New York Times](#) claims that Roebuck's memo was delivered to the State Department's special envoy on Syria, James F. Jeffrey, and to dozens of officials focusing on Syria in the State Department, White House and Pentagon. However, the entirety of the 3,200-word memo failed to mention Ankara's motivation in conducting this operation.

The Syrian perspective is that this is part of a project for a Greater Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu emphasized in [an October interview](#) that Turkey is not interested in territorial expansionism, stating

"Russia is concerned about some sensitive issues, such as territorial integrity and the unity of the country [Syria]. We are also worried. If we look at all the joint statements of Turkey, Russia and Iran, we emphasize it."

Although it may sound conspiratorial, this statement would have done little to alleviate this fear as Turkey has controlled large swathes of northern Syria since 2016 without any process to negotiate the return of these regions to Syrian government administration. In conjunction, Damascus would also remember the 1939 Turkish annexation of its Hatay province, Turkey's invasion of neighboring Cyprus in 1974, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip [Erdoğan invoking an early 20th-century irredentist document](#) that claims northern Syria, northern Iraq, most of Armenia, the entirety of Cyprus, much of Bulgaria and Greece's northern and eastern Aegean islands as under Turkish sovereignty.

Although territorial expansionism may be a motivating factor for many in the Turkish

political and military leadership, it would be a secondary motivating factor. What Roebuck's memo failed to mention is that Turkey's Syria policy today is motivated by security concerns.

In an [academic article titled](#) "Turkey's interests in the Syrian war: from neo-Ottomanism to counterinsurgency," I first made the argument that Turkey's initial interests in Syria was to expand its influence, and perhaps territory. What was not envisioned by the Turkish leadership was the re-emergence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Syria, recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, Syria and the U.S., but not by Russia. The PKK in Syria fight under the banner of the People's Protection Units (YPG), who comprise the majority of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Washington confusingly recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, but has directly funded, armed and supported the YPG in Syria. Ankara makes no distinction between the PKK and the YPG, and this has been a primary source of recent hostilities between Turkey and the U.S. Although Syria once supported the PKK against Turkey, it has recognized the group as a terrorist organization since 1998, initially easing the tense relations between Damascus and Ankara, with Erdoğan even describing his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad as his "brother."

Former Turkish Foreign Minister (2009–2014), Ahmet Davutoglu, adopted a "zero problems with neighbors" policy that saw his country strengthen economic and political ties with the Islamic World by lifting visa restrictions and taking a larger active role in critical Islamic issues like the fallout between the Palestinian Hamas and Fatah groups, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Syria and Israel. However, this new doctrine was taken to the test when the Syrian war began in 2011, with Ankara immediately contradicting the "zero problems with the neighbours" policy by supporting terrorist organizations and getting itself into disputes and hostilities with not only Syria, but also Iraq, Greece, Cyprus and Armenia.

The Arab Spring changed the status quo in the Middle East and provided an opportunity for Turkey to engage in power projections within a new regional order where Ankara would be the center of power. However, what Ankara had not calculated is that by abandoning the "zero problems with neighbors" policy and flooding Syria with tens thousands of terrorists, it was creating the very conditions for the PKK to return to Syria after a more than 20-year hiatus under the guise of protecting Syria's Kurds.

Essentially, the project for a Greater Turkey has become secondary in the case of Syria, with Ankara's current focus on what it calls a counterterrorist operation against the PKK/YPG, after they created the very conditions for them to return to Syria. Although Trump has whole teams dedicated to Syria, it appears that Washington refuses to acknowledge Turkey's security concerns, just as Roebuck's memo demonstrates.

The rise of the YPG brought questions of Kurdish independence or autonomy in northern Syria, which can also find justification for an autonomous or independent Kurdish state in eastern Turkey as the PKK, militarily and politically, has struggled for decades to achieve this. A Kurdish push for independence or autonomy in northern Syria not only threatens Turkey's desire to illegally annex this region, but destabilizes Turkey as the Kurds can make a greater push for independence or autonomy in eastern Anatolia.

As Turkey strengthens its relations with Russia, the question remains whether the country

will formally leave NATO or not. It is unlikely that the U.S. will push for Turkey's expulsion from NATO as it has the second largest military in the alliance and occupies one of the most strategic spots on the planet.

Although the U.S. has turned to Greece as its [Plan B](#) to contain Russia in the Black Sea in any hypothetical war, Washington would know there is a great possibility that the next general election in Turkey could see Erdoğan out of power and replaced by a more Washington-friendly leader. Not only is Erdoğan's [popularity diminishing](#) because of the economic crisis and his unpopular Syria policy, but the highly popular ex-economy minister Ali Babacan and ex-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have both recently left Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) to establish their own respective political parties, which will only further weaken AKP who have lost over 840,000 members in one year alone.

The U.S. would be hoping that by continuing to apply military, diplomatic and economic pressure against Turkey, the tense situation in Turkey will see Erdoğan's popularity diminish, and the return of a pro-U.S. leader. The difficult economic situation, the millions of refugees and the increased terror attacks in Turkey can all be directly attributed to Erdoğan's Syria policy, and the U.S. will continue to use these means to pressure Turkey until it conforms to Washington's desires and reverse its strengthened ties with Russia.

Many within Washington are unsatisfied with Trump's Turkey policy and feel that they are not utilizing their advantages to pressure Erdoğan. Roebuck's memo however appears to be a potential gamechanger as it has critically expressed opposition to Trump's policy at a formal, and now public, level.

Roebuck publicly revealed that Turkey's military operation in northern Syria is "spearheaded by armed Islamist groups on its payroll" who are committing what can "only be described as war crimes and ethnic cleansing." The same jihadist forces utilized by Turkey are no different to the ones the U.S. supported against Assad, who not only ethnically cleansed Kurds, but also Shi'ites, Alawites, Antiochian Greeks, Assyrians and Armenians.

Roebuck also suggested that the U.S. must maintain relations with Turkey. As Turkey is at a crossroads with its political leadership, Washington knows there is a strong possibility that Erdoğan might not be around by the time the next general election is scheduled in 2023, although it appears likely that these elections [will take place years earlier](#). With Roebuck's 'leak,' it is likely that Trump will start receiving stronger domestic political pressure to deal with Turkey in a much tougher way and continue to make every destabilizing effort to remove Erdoğan and have him replaced with a pro-U.S. leader.

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