

The Price of Selling Out the Kurds

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For many of those watching in the Middle East, the administration's decision to stand by as the Kurds were forced to retreat has sent a message far more powerful than its tough words on Iran.

I often take part in what's known as "track II diplomacy" -- brainstorming discussions with former officials and academics that explore options for breaking major international impasses or ending conflicts. In one that just concluded, two of my longtime acquaintances from the Middle East greeted me with, "Well, once again America's word is no good. How could you abandon the Kurds?"

My Middle Eastern colleagues were calling attention to what has recently taken place in northern Iraq. There, the Iraqi military, with the clear involvement of Iranians and the Shia militias, pushed Kurdish forces out of Kirkuk, including the oil fields, and back to the positions they held prior to ISIS having taken Mosul in 2014. Crossing points to Syria have also been taken from the Kurds.

My argument to the group -- that the Kurdish leader, Masoud Barzani, strategically blundered in holding an ill-advised referendum on independence and was responsible for what had happened -- fell on deaf ears. In the eyes of my Arab colleagues, even if the Trump administration tried and failed to dissuade Barzani from taking this step, the U.S. could not afford to allow the Kurds to be defeated in such a manner, particularly with the Iranians playing a direct role in the reestablishment of the central government's position in Kirkuk.

For them, the Kurds were an American partner -- one we had protected since 1991 with the creation of a "no-fly" zone shortly after the end of the Gulf War. One we rushed to support in the fight with ISIS when the Iraqi military had simply collapsed in 2014 and only the peshmerga was prepared to resist it.

Now we stood on the sidelines. My friends noted the contrast with the Russians, who had stood by the Assad regime,

and secured it. Small wonder, I was told, that for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia, the king had just visited Moscow. No doubt, they said, he had gone "to hedge his bets and to take account of the new Russian role in the region."

Everyone in the region now knew that if their security was threatened, Moscow was the place to look for help. Even the Israelis get this. "Look," I was told, "how many times Netanyahu has gone to Moscow."

Over two days of discussion, I repeatedly heard about the gap between American rhetoric and actions in the region. One of the participants even said, "At least Obama told us he was not going to do anything."

We need not accept these arguments. But we cannot ignore or dismiss this growing perception in the region.

President Trump's words are certainly tough, threatening to pull out of the nuclear deal and declaring that we will counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. CIA Director Mike Pompeo echoed his boss' words, citing "the threats from Iran...and the Shia militias, including what we see in northern Iraq...We need to push back against QF (the Quds Force), the IRGC (Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps) more broadly, and the Iranian regime itself."

But our actions belie that posture. Speaking recently, national security adviser H.R. McMaster said that 80% of the forces fighting for Syrian President Bashar Assad are sponsored by Iran. Yet Defense Secretary James Mattis, while acknowledging the Iranian threat and role in Syria, said that we have "an anti-ISIS strategy in Syria, not an anti-Iranian strategy."

In reality, at a time when the Iranians are creating facts on the ground in Iraq and Syria, we remain riveted on defeating ISIS. The Iranians are preparing for the day after -- and we are not.

The lesson: Rhetorical hostility toward Iran must be guided by intelligent policy. If we want the Europeans to join us in addressing the vulnerabilities of the Iranian nuclear deal, they have to see a clear diplomatic plan -- one that doesn't just make threats but that recognizes their concerns about not renegotiating the deal.

Similarly, if we want the Saudis, Emirates and others to work with us in the region and help carry the burden of filling the vacuum after the defeat of ISIS, they must see we are taking steps to, at a minimum, contain the Iranians in Syria and in the region. If the Russians could transform the balance of power in Syria with just a fraction of the air power we have in the region, is it impossible for us to convey that we won't tolerate the further spread of Iranian and Shia militia presence there?

Standing by as the Kurds were forced to retreat has sent a message far more powerful than the administration's words on Iran. After two days of hearing Middle Easterners lament the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the Trump administration policies, I left feeling that it is time for the administration either to scale back what it claims it will do or actually begin to marry actions to our words.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute . ❖

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