

Statesman

Opinion

Opinion: Abandoning friends does not make us safer

By J. Paul Pope

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After ordering the small contingent of remaining U.S. forces out of Syria, President Donald Trump explained that he was honoring a campaign pledge to stop our “endless wars.” The decision raises many questions, but the more immediate result is that withdrawing support from the hard-fighting Kurds increases the danger to Americans from the Islamic State group (ISIS) and increases the likelihood that future threats from this region will again require a larger American commitment.

Neither Trump nor the wider national security community can decide when America’s wars end because, as all soldiers know, “the enemy gets a vote.” We did not start the wars with al-Qaida or ISIS, and we cannot declare a truce on behalf of adversaries who remain intent on killing our people.

Americans don’t like sending Americans to fight in distant lands, but there is a multigenerational requirement to secure the U.S. against terrorists. Sending small groups of advisers to help those who are willing to fight is an excellent alternative. The military calls this acting “By, With and Through,” allies. Our relationship with Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria has been one of the most effective examples of this approach. That said, the difference in this support and U.S. commitment to total war has to be explained to an American electorate, which is understandably skeptical.

The quick, violent and successful campaign to deny al-Qaida sanctuary in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which was very much “By, With and Through,” morphed into America’s longest war. We know we didn’t have to “own” the situation in Afghanistan. We also chose to fight a war with Saddam Hussein, which many Americans believe was a mistake that led to the rise of ISIS.

It is wrongheaded to say we “overreacted” to the Sept. 11 attacks, but it is appropriate to ask whether our subsequent policies were wise. Al-Qaida and ISIS remain at war with us. In framing our choice as between “war” and non-engagement, we repeat mistakes of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Bush and his administration listened when warned of al-Qaida’s dangers. The plan was to complete ongoing policy reviews. But before they could do so, al-Qaida struck. It took the Sept. 11 attacks for the Bush team and the public to grasp Osama bin Laden’s intent and capabilities. Though many tactical lessons were learned, two relevant strategic lessons understood by the Bush team may be fading from memory. First, if an international actor declares war on you, believe them. Second, the U.S. cannot allow semi-governed parts of the planet to become sanctuary for those who intend to do us harm.

The Obama administration believed we never should have gone into Iraq, which no doubt influenced their decision to bring U.S. forces home in 2011. Many argued that whether we should have or not, we had invaded Iraq, thereby making it vulnerable, and that we should at least leave advisory teams and enough airpower to assist the young Iraqi army in responding to attacks by Islamic militants. In the end, ISIS swept through northern Iraq and Syria, declared a caliphate, issued a successful call for foreign volunteers, and launched a global terrorism campaign. In 2014, Obama re-introduced troops and air power into Iraq, where our forces confronted not a terrorist group, but a conventional army holding territory.

The most effective, cheapest way to protect us from the multigenerational threats posed by terrorist organizations, while avoiding endless deployments of U.S. forces, is to support allies who are willing to fight. But after what we just did to our former friends, the Kurdish fighters in Syria, one has to wonder who will answer our call when we need help.

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