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# Trump hands Putin another win with Syria pullout

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By [James Hohmann](#)

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**BY JAMES HOHMANN**

*with Mariana Alfaro*

**THE BIG IDEA: Vladimir Putin has won so much these past three years that he may get tired of winning.**

The U.S. intelligence community's January 2017 [report](#) on Russian interference in the previous year's presidential campaign sought to explain why Donald Trump was so attractive to Moscow. This sentence has fresh salience: "Pro-Kremlin proxy Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, proclaimed just before the election that if [Trump] won, Russia would 'drink champagne' in anticipation of being able to advance its positions on Syria and Ukraine."

Coming on the heels of Trump [holding up](#) assistance for Ukraine as his administration [urged](#) its new president to investigate a Democratic challenger, Trump's order on Saturday to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria has given the Russians a new reason to reach for the bubbly.

The American retreat forced our Kurdish allies, outmanned and outgunned by the invading Turks, to turn toward the Kremlin and seek help from Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus that they had spent years fighting to break away from. Syrian government forces, propped up by the Russian military, have long been held in abeyance by the U.S. presence. Now they're filling the vacuum. Kurdish leaders announced late Sunday that they have invited these troops into towns that have been under their control for years.

"The announcement by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that they had reached an agreement with the Iranian- and Russian-backed government of [Assad] further undermined the prospect of any continued U.S. presence in the country," [Liz Sly, Louisa Loveluck, Asser Khattab and Sarah Dadouch report](#). "The deal followed three days of negotiations brokered by Russia between the Syrian government and the SDF, which had reached the conclusion that it could no longer count on the United States, its chief ally for the past five years in the fight against the Islamic State ... It represents a gamble for the Kurds, who appeared to have secured no guarantees for the survival of the autonomy they have secured over the area over the past seven years. ...

"Badran Jia Kurd, a senior Kurdish official, said the Kurds felt they had no choice but to turn to Damascus in light of what he called the 'betrayal' of the United States. 'This has obliged us to look for alternative options,' he said. ... Residents of northeast Syria said they were stunned by the speed with which SDF defenses appeared to be collapsing ... Hundreds of Islamic State family members escaped a detention camp after Turkish shellfire hit the area, U.S. troops pulled out from another base and Turkish-backed forces consolidated their hold over a vital highway, cutting the main U.S. supply route into Syria."

"We don't want the Russians and Syrians in there, but obviously we understand why they reached out," a senior Trump administration official [told one of my colleagues](#). "This is total chaos," the official added, "a total s---storm."

A Turkish-backed fighter fires Sunday during clashes in the border town of Ras al-Ayn as Turkey and its allies continue their assault on Kurdish-held border towns in northeastern Syria. (Nazeer Al-Khatib/AFP/Getty Images)

**-- Mazloum Abdi, the commander in chief of the SDF, said the Kurds didn't want it to turn out this way: "We believe in democracy**

as a core concept, but in light of the invasion by Turkey and the existential threat its attack poses for our people, we may have to reconsider our alliances,” Abdi writes in [a new Foreign Policy op-ed](#). “We know that we would have to make painful compromises with Moscow and Bashar al-Assad if we go down the road of working with them. But if we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will surely choose life for our people. ...

“At Washington’s request, we agreed to withdraw our heavy weapons from the border area with Turkey, destroy our defensive fortifications, and pull back our most seasoned fighters. Turkey would never attack us so long as the U.S. government was true to its word with us. We are now standing with our chests bare to face the Turkish knives,” he adds. “We know that the United States is not the world police. But we do want the United States to acknowledge its important role in achieving a political solution for Syria. We are sure that Washington has sufficient leverage to mediate a sustainable peace between us and Turkey.”

**-- “Putin likely can't believe his luck,” a Western military official from a NATO member country, who recently served in Syria as part of the anti-ISIS coalition, [told Business Insider](#).** “A third of Syria was more or less free of ISIS and its security was good without any involvement of the regime or Russia, and now because of the Turkish invasion and American pullout, this area is wide open to return to government control. What was supposed to be a diplomatically complex issue that would have involved U.S. and European military power suddenly got as simple as sending in tanks and units unopposed throughout the eastern third of Syria.”

**“Putin continues to get whatever he wants and generally doesn't even have to do much,” an unnamed NATO official also told Insider.** “He got to sit back and watch the Turks and the Americans unravel five years of success and not only did it not cost him anything, he didn't even have to try to make it happen. Small wonder he'd interfere on Trump's side in an election.”

**-- The Russian Air Force has repeatedly bombed hospitals in Syria to crush the last pockets of resistance to Assad,** according to [a damning New York Times investigation](#) published on Sunday: “An analysis of previously unpublished Russian Air Force radio recordings, plane spotter logs and witness accounts allowed The Times to trace bombings of four hospitals in just 12 hours in May and tie Russian pilots to each one. The 12-hour period beginning on May 5 represents a small slice of the air war in Syria, but it is a microcosm of Russia’s four-year military intervention in Syria’s civil war. ... Physicians for Human Rights, an advocacy group that tracks attacks on medical

workers in Syria, has documented at least 583 such attacks since 2011, 266 of them since Russia intervened in September 2015. At least 916 medical workers have been killed since 2011. ...

**“Russia’s position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council has shielded it from scrutiny and made United Nations agencies reluctant to accuse the Russian Air Force of responsibility.** ... The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, opened an investigation into the hospital bombings in August. The investigation, still going on, is meant in part to determine why hospitals that voluntarily added their locations to a United Nations-sponsored deconfliction list, which was provided to Russia and other combatants to prevent them from being attacked, nevertheless came under attack. Syrian health care workers said they believed that the United Nations list actually became a target menu for the Russian and Syrian air forces.”

Turkish-backed Syrian rebels seize border town of Ras al-Ain

-- **“Trump tried to keep his talks with Putin at Helsinki last year secret from his staff and the world, but Russia's president held up the checklist for the cameras. Syria was on it,”** [Julia Davis recalls in the Daily Beast](#): “Trump is moving down Putin’s wish list, fulfilling the Kremlin’s aims at a rapid pace. He is chipping away at U.S. sanctions against Russia, deepening America’s internal divisions on the basis of race, faith, sexual orientation and political affiliation, vocally undermining confidence in our elections, intelligence agencies and institutions, all the while empowering our foreign adversaries and undermining NATO alliances. Trump’s claims that Ukraine—not Russia—is somehow responsible for the 2016 election interference fall right in line with conspiracy theories the Kremlin has been propagating for years. ...

**“The ousting of Marie Yovanovitch, the former ambassador to Ukraine, was also in line with the Kremlin’s wishes.** Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk [Putin is the godfather of his daughter] has a longstanding grudge against Ambassador Yovanovitch. Medvedchuk cheered for the U.S. ambassador to be recalled and the Russian state media predicted that Ambassador Yovanovitch would be Trump’s ‘first victim in Ukraine.’”

-- **“Washington’s abrupt decision to ditch the Kurds contrasted sharply with Moscow’s unwavering support for its ally Assad,”** [the AP’s Vladimir Isachenkov reports from Moscow](#). “In another power game, Russia hopes to see major gains in its long-running effort to retain leverage over its neighbor Ukraine ... President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who was elected by a landslide in April, has vowed to end the fighting [in eastern Ukraine], which has killed more than 13,000. Early this month, Ukraine, Russia and the rebels signed a tentative agreement to hold local elections in the east, a deal Zelenskiy insists conforms to a 2015 peace accord that was brokered by France and Germany. The agreement, however, has been criticized by some in Ukraine as ‘capitulation’ to Moscow. On Monday, far-right and nationalist groups are staging a major rally in Kyiv to protest Zelenskiy’s peace plan.

**“The White House’s publication of a rough transcript of the call was embarrassing for the 41-year-old Ukrainian president because it showed him eager to please Trump and dismissive of European partners whose support he needs to end the conflict in the east.** While Zelenskiy sought to play it down, it could help Russia by eroding support for Ukraine in Germany and France. ‘France and Germany have grown tired of Ukraine and are too busy with their own problems, and their only goal is to close the issue of the war in the east by any means,’ said Vadim Karasev, head of the Institute of Global Strategies, an independent Kyiv-based think tank. ‘If Russia offers a compromise, Berlin and Paris will heave a sigh of relief. By publicly kicking (German Chancellor Angela) Merkel and (French President Emmanuel) Macron, Zelenskiy untied their hands and there is no more talk about their ‘friendly support.’”

Trump says Syria troop withdrawal made him 'an island of one'

-- **Syria and Ukraine fit with a broader pattern.** Trump has pushed to bring Russia back into the Group of Seven, which it was expelled from after invading Ukraine. To fund construction of his border wall, [he diverted \\$770 million](#) from projects that have been approved to help American allies deter Russian attacks. He’s cast doubt on whether the U.S. would live up to its mutual defense obligations under the NATO charter. He’s supported Brexit and antagonized the European Union by picking fights over trade. It’s impossible to calculate the Kremlin’s return on investment for its 2016 interference in the U.S. election. Trump told two senior Russian officials during an Oval Office meeting

in 2017 that [he was unconcerned about their interference](#) in our presidential election because the United States does the same in other countries.

**-- As 2020 approaches, there is [no doubt](#) that Russian interests continue to favor Trump.** Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, [the Soviet-born associates of Rudy Giuliani](#) who were [arrested](#) last Wednesday night at Dulles as they prepared to leave the U.S. with one-way plane tickets to Europe, have made \$630,000 in contributions to Republican candidates and political action committees since the fall of 2016, including \$325,000 to a pro-Trump PAC. The men have been charged with campaign finance violations, including routing illegal contributions to federal candidates from an unidentified Russian source.

**-- Before leaving the White House to hit the links at his golf course on Sunday, Trump defended his decision as “very smart” and accused “those that mistakenly got us into the Middle East Wars” of pushing the United States to stay in “endless wars.”** Trump tweeted that it was “very smart not to be involved in the intense fighting along the Turkish Border, for a change.” For the past week, White House officials have been adamant that Trump did not greenlight Turkey’s invasion. But Trump undercut those denials somewhat with his tweets. “Others may want to come in and fight for one side or the other,” he wrote. “Let them!”

**-- Trump’s order to withdraw came after he privately agitated for days to bring troops home, according to administration officials, even while the Pentagon was making public assurances that the United States was not abandoning its Kurdish allies in the region.** “The officials, granted anonymity to describe internal deliberations, described Trump as ‘doubling down’ and ‘undeterred,’ despite vociferous pushback from congressional Republicans who have been loath to challenge the president,” [Seung Min Kim and Josh Dawsey report](#).

**“During deliberations in the past, Trump has repeatedly pushed to remove troops from Syria but has usually been dissuaded by top officials,** such as John F. Kelly, his former chief of staff. The usual argument against removing troops, according to former senior administration officials, would be that doing so would cause widespread deaths and chaos and Trump would be blamed for it. ‘Normally, convincing him he would be blamed for death and chaos could keep it from happening at least at that moment,’ one former senior administration official said. But current administration officials say many moderating officials like Kelly are gone, and longtime friends

say the move is consistent with Trump's worldview — and that he has long wanted to do this.”

**Trump has closely watched conservative criticism in recent days:**

He's complained frequently about comments from Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) but has been encouraged by Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and Fox News host Tucker Carlson, according to administration officials. One senior administration official told Josh that the president was particularly heartened by a segment from another Fox host, Lou Dobbs, defending him last week.

-- **Graham, who previously called Trump's decision on Syria “the biggest blunder of his presidency,” praised the president on Sunday for saying he'll [support](#) imposing some sanctions on Turkey.** “Turkey's actions will only benefit ISIS, Iran, and Russia, and creates a nightmare for Israel,” Graham [tweeted](#).

Pentagon chief: 'Despite our opposition,' Turkey advanced into Syria

-- **Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Turkey was fully committed to its operation regardless of what the United States did, and that the administration did not want to go to war with a member of NATO.** Esper added that Turkey is not acting like much of an ally. “I think Turkey, the arc of their behavior over the past several years, has been terrible,” he said on “Fox News Sunday.” “I mean, they are spinning out of the Western orbit, if you will.”

-- **House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) said NATO should consider expelling Turkey as a member, citing Ankara's partnership with Moscow:** “How do you have a NATO ally who's in cahoots with the Russians when the Russians are the adversaries of NATO? ... [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan's a bad guy, and I'm disgusted that the American president would feel comfortable with someone like Erdogan,” Engel said on NBC's “Meet the Press,” promising that the House will take up sanctions against Turkey this week and on a resolution to condemn Trump's policy. “I can think of nothing more disgusting, in all the years I've been in Congress, than what this president is allowing to happen with the Kurds.”

-- **“Amid reports of Islamic State militants escaping prisons in the area, a U.S. official confirmed that the American forces had been**

**unable to carry out plans to move several dozen high-value detainees to more secure locations,”** [Karen DeYoung, Dan Lamothe, Missy Ryan and Kareem Fahim report](#). “One official said that multiple Kurdish-run detention facilities were now unguarded and that the U.S. military believed hundreds of detainees had escaped. ... Turkey launched multiple artillery rounds Friday near a U.S. Special Operations outpost in the area, [despite knowing its location](#), officials said. ... Although ‘the Turks gave guarantees to us’ that U.S. forces would not be harmed, [a senior administration] official said, Syrian militias allied with them ‘are running up and down roads, ambushing and attacking vehicles,’ putting American forces — as well as civilians — in danger even as they withdraw. The militias, known as the Free Syrian Army, ‘are crazy and not reliable.’”

-- **“Some of the Special Forces officers who battled alongside the Kurds say they feel deep remorse at orders to abandon their allies,”** [the New York Times reports](#). “They trusted us, and we broke that trust,” said one Army officer who has worked alongside the Kurds in northern Syria. “It’s a stain on the American conscience.” Another officer who also served in northern Syria added: “I’m ashamed.”

-- **“There is blood on Trump's hands for abandoning our Kurdish allies,”** [said retired Marine general John Allen](#). The four-star general who commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan and served as President Barack Obama’s special envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS [told CNN](#) that this weekend’s events were “completely foreseeable” after the U.S. “greenlighted” Turkey’s incursion. “There was no chance Erdogan would keep his promise, and full-blown ethnic cleansing is underway by Turkish supported militias,” said Allen, who endorsed Hillary Clinton in 2016. “This is what happens when Trump follows his instincts and because of his alignment with autocrats.”

Lawmakers react to U.S. withdrawing from Syria

-- **Trump faced bipartisan congressional criticism on the Sunday shows for his Syria decision.** [Felicia Sonmez reports](#): “Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.), an Air Force veteran who was a pilot in Iraq and Afghanistan, was among the most vocal members of the president’s party to condemn the move. ‘You hear the president and people like Rand Paul talk about endless wars all the time, and it’s kitschy. But actually, we were preventing an endless war,’ Kinzinger said [\[on CBS\]](#). He added that ‘for me — as a guy that served in the military and really got into politics because I believe in the role America plays — to see

this yet again, you know, leaving an ally behind ... is disheartening, depressing.' ... Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), meanwhile, announced that both chambers are readying a joint resolution urging Trump to reverse his decision."

Before Trump gave Saturday's order, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said last week: "A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime."

**-- Turkish-linked forces filmed themselves executing a Kurdish captive in Syria.** [Liz Sly reports](#): "The most gruesome and explicit of the videos shows Turkish-allied Syrian fighters pumping bursts of automatic fire into the body of a bound man lying on the side of a desert road as a gunman shouts to his comrades to take his phone and film him doing the shooting. Another trembling, handcuffed man crouches on the opposite side of the road as the shooting erupts. 'Kill them,' one man is heard shouting. The video is one of a series of photographs and videos posted on Twitter accounts of the Turkish-backed rebel groups and circulated by the [SDF] that suggest some of the Syrian rebels participating in Turkey's offensive to capture territory in Syria might have committed war crimes."

Inside northern Syria, where Kurds defeated ISIS but now face threat from Turkey

**-- Connecting the dots:** "The uproar in Washington over President Trump's corruption in Ukraine and malfeasance in Syria has obscured a broader story," [writes deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl](#). "**In little more than a month, virtually every other foreign policy initiative the Trump administration has pursued has imploded** — thanks mostly to the president's increasingly unhinged behavior. The unraveling started on Sept. 7, when Trump abruptly announced that he had canceled a previously undisclosed summit with the Afghan Taliban due to be held the next day at Camp David, and shelved a draft peace deal that a State Department special envoy had spent a year negotiating. The immediate result was a spike in violence in **Afghanistan** — and at least the temporary shelving of Trump's ambition to pull U.S. troops out of the country before the 2020 election.

"A week later, **Trump's 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran came undone.** Following an Iranian-sponsored attack on a Saudi oil complex, Trump ruled out a military response; instead, he told French President Emmanuel Macron that he was open to a plan to meet Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the United Nations and lift

sanctions on his government in return for negotiations. The gambit failed: Rouhani left Trump waiting on a phone line. ...

“Just two weeks after the Iran debacle, **Trump saw his nuclear negotiations with North Korea crumble — again.** At a meeting in Stockholm, Kim Jong Un’s delegation rejected a U.S. proposal for an incremental deal — a far cry from the total disarmament Trump once sought — and walked away, refusing to agree to a date for future talks.  
...

“The attempt to oust the socialist government of **Venezuela** flopped back in April. The plan for the ‘ultimate deal’ between **Israelis and Palestinians** has never been released, and Trump’s point man on that project, Jason Greenblatt, announced his departure last month. True, Trump is still pressing his trade war with **China** and announced a partial deal on Friday. But most tariffs remain in place and the easy victory over Beijing he once promised is nowhere in sight.”