

Chomsky: Trump's Actions On Syria Reflect The Foreign Policy Of A Con Man



Donald Trump's handling of U.S. foreign policy with Syria has baffled and angered both the diplomatic and military establishments in the United States. Nonetheless, he continues to maintain power as "an effective con man who has a good sense of what animates his voting

base," Noam Chomsky argues in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows.

Trump rose to power with the aid of vitriolic but disingenuous "anti-establishment" rhetoric that appealed to millions of disgruntled voters. Essentially, Trump promised to "drain the swamp" in Washington, and to advance a domestic and foreign policy agenda serving U.S. national interests and those of "average people." However, Trumpism in practice has meant something different: rolling back the remaining tatters of liberalism on the domestic front, sharpening racist xenophobia, facilitating the rise of white nationalism and eroding longstanding global alliances that the United States formed after the end of World War II. *Truthout's* C.J. Polychroniou asked Chomsky to share his thoughts on Trump's stance toward Syria, the impeachment effort against the president and the dynamics of the 2020 election.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, since coming to office, Trump has shown on numerous occasions that he is not a normal foreign policy president. But can you make any sense out of his stance toward Syria?

Noam Chomsky: The first of Trump's recent steps was to withdraw the small U.S. contingent that was a deterrent to Turkey's expansion of its invasion of Syria and to authorize Erdoğan's plans to extend his atrocities and ethnic cleansing of Syrian Kurds. His second step was to move U.S. troops to "secure" the oil-producing areas. The latter, apparently after he was told about the oil, is easy to understand. He has held all along that our only standing interest in the Middle

East is to “secure” its oil for our own benefit. As for the first step, we can only speculate, but it seems quite likely that the motive is what guides him consistently: How will the action affect me? Trump is an effective con man who has a good sense of what animates his voting base. In this case, he presumably expected (correctly it seems) that withdrawing a few hundred troops would appeal to the sector of the population that resonates to his message that America is foolishly expending its blood and treasure to help “unworthy” people who don’t even thank us for our sacrifices on their behalf, and that Trump is the first president to stand up for the suffering American people instead of giving everything away to foreigners out of stupidity (or treachery).

It’s worth recalling that [repeated](#) polls have [shown](#) that Americans vastly overestimate the scale of foreign aid — and recommend that it be considerably higher than it actually is (putting aside what constitutes “aid”).

Much has been written and said about the betrayal of the Kurds, a U.S. ally in the war against ISIS (also known as Daesh). This isn’t, however, the first time that the U.S. has betrayed the Kurds and other former allies.

Betrayal of the Kurds has been virtually a qualification for office since Ford-Kissinger abandoned the Kurds to the mercy of Saddam Hussein when they were no longer needed. Reagan went so far as to support his friend Saddam’s chemical warfare campaign against Iraqi Kurds, seeking to shift the blame to Iran and blocking congressional efforts to respond to these hideous crimes. Clinton’s method was to provide the arms for the murderous government assault on Turkish Kurds, which killed tens of thousands, wiped out 3,500 towns and villages, and drove hundreds of thousands from their homes. (See Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism*, Chapter 3. London: Pluto Press, 1999). Clinton’s flood of military aid increased along with the shocking crimes, as Turkey became the prime recipient of American arms (outside of Israel-Egypt, a separate category).

Trump’s contribution is particularly disgusting. The Kurds lost 11,000 soldiers, men and women, leading the war against ISIS for which Trump claims credit, helped by some U.S. special forces (five casualties are reported) and air support. Erdoğan demanded that Kurds eliminate defensive fortifications (filling in trenches, etc.) near the border, and at the request of the U.S. command, they complied, trusting Washington’s promise that it would protect them from a

further Turkish assault. Trump's tweet broke that promise, leaving Kurds exposed to the invasion by Turkish-backed forces, most it seems jihadis and criminals. For years, Turkey has been helping tens of thousands of jihadis to flood into Syria for its anti-Assad war and to establish a Turkish presence. No surprises in how the extended Turkish assault has been carried out.

Former prosecutor and U.N. investigator Carla del Ponte said Erdoğan should be investigated and indicted for war crimes. What about Trump? After all, isn't he the one who gave Erdogan the green light to launch an invasion into the Kurdish semi-autonomous region in Syria?

Turkey had already invaded and occupied Kurdish-controlled regions of northern Syria, killing hundreds and displacing hundreds of thousands, with [credible charges of serious war crimes](#). Trump's green light was for extending the operation with [the] alleged goal of ending a terrorist threat, in reality in order to put an end to the highly promising social and political achievements in Kurdish-led Rojava by violence and terror, ethnic cleansing, and resettling the region with Syrians of Turkey's choosing.

On war crimes, it is well to remember the stirring words of Justice Robert Jackson, chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg Tribunal where Nazi war criminals were judged and hanged: "We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow. To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well. We must summon such detachment and intellectual integrity to our task that this Trial will commend itself to posterity as fulfilling humanity's aspirations to do justice."

When we ask how these words have been heeded since, we know how history should judge us, and what to expect of punishment for war crimes — even in perfectly clear cases of aggression with no credible pretext, the "supreme international crime" of the Nuremberg judgment: the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq in 2003, to take a textbook example.

Continuing with the Nuremberg judgment, we might recall that "to initiate a war of aggression," such as the invasion of Iraq, "is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." Included in the

accumulated evil of the whole is the recruitment of such militants as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who joined the resistance to the invasion and, after an education in Abu Ghraib, went on to lead the criminal enterprise ISIS, finally killed in a U.S. special forces operation on October 27.

Moving to the domestic front, are the Democrats likely to benefit from impeaching Trump, or will the gamble to do so prove to be a costly one for them?

My own guess is that it will turn out to be rather like the Mueller investigation. Trump will be impeached by the House, then acquitted in the Senate, where few Republicans are likely to be principled enough to face Trump's adoring and militant voting bloc. Then Trump can declare victory for the Tribune of the People, [saying he] has once again protected "real" red-blooded Americans from the machinations of the Deep State and the treacherous liberal elites.

Economic models predict that if nothing changes with regard to the direction of the economy, Trump will win in 2020 with an even bigger margin. Is this a surprising development, given all the chaos that surrounds Trump's presidency?

These models are largely based on public perceptions of current economic trends. These take no account of the fact that the Trump economy carries onward the slow Obama recovery from the Great Recession, now with [a real unemployment rate of over 7 percent](#) with almost stagnant real wages and declining benefits — and spectacular enrichment of a tiny sector to the point where over 20 percent of the country's wealth is in the hands of 0.1 percent of the population while [half the population has negative net worth](#).

In the past, these models have been accurate, though we should recall that the best predictor of electability, dramatically for Congress, is campaign spending, as Thomas Ferguson has shown, again in current work. But we are not in normal times. The Republican "radical insurgency," as it was called several years ago by Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, has gone far off the traditional rails under Trump, undermining democracy and posing an extraordinary threat to the persistence of organized human life on earth — in the all-too-near future. How such factors will enter into the election is not easy to say, though it is unfortunately not difficult to predict the consequences of four more years of Trumpism.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.