Bob Schieffer: I’m Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I’m Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and this is the Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts. Many of them from the CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on the ongoing conflict in Syria and the sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces there, we’ll talk with Melissa Dalton. She is a senior fellow and deputy director of the CSIS International Security program and director of the Cooperative Defense Project. Prior to joining CSIS in 2014, she served in a number of positions at the Department of Defense and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. She most recently was a senior advisor for force planning.

Ms. Dalton is also a member of the congressionally mandated serious study group which released its report in late September of this year. Thank you Ms. Dalton for getting to the truth of the matter.

Bob Schieffer: I’d like to just start by asking you, do you know anyone or have you found anyone who knew this was coming, the president’s decision to withdraw these troops from Syria?

Melissa Dalton: Well, thanks so much for having me on the program for this timely discussion. I think it’s important actually to note that the president’s recent decision actually tracks quite closely with his tweet of last December in terms of where his position has been on a U.S. forces operating in northeast Syria. I think the president has actually been pretty consistent in terms of his belief that U.S. forces are working by, with and through local partners on the ground, with international coalition allies has successfully eliminated ISIS’ territorial control in both Syria and Iraq and so therefore it’s up to partners in the region to carry the ball forward.

Bob Schieffer: But no one knew this was coming at this particular time. Am I correct in saying that?

Melissa Dalton: In the aftermath of the tweet last year, there seems to have been a calibration by the national security community to brief the president on a range of options in terms of how to conduct a responsible withdrawal while at the same time trying to secure the gains from the counter terrorism efforts of the last five years. And so the national security community, the U.S. military, was on a track knowing that an endpoint was coming but trying to proceed towards that responsibly. Working with local partners, with international allies, but I believe it was surprising to those working day to
day on the ground to receive this news following President Trump’s phone call with President Erdogan, that he was quite intent upon U.S. forces withdrawing quite precipitously in light of the Turkish intent to proceed with an its own military intervention into northeast Syria.

Bob Schieffer: I notice that you wrote that recently Russian television had pictures of U.S. forces leaving, I guess Syrian forces coming back in. You said that was a real information opportunity for Russia. Tell me what you meant by that.

Melissa Dalton: Russia has been a close ally of the Assad regime for decades. It has a strong strategic military relationship with the Assad regime. It’s its primary supporter of the Syrian military. And in 2015 had intervened military to backstop the Assad regime as it was faltering in its military campaign against the Syrian opposition. Russia also has clear strategic interests in Syria in terms of maintaining its warm water port at Tartus and has been building a military air base in central Syria since its intervention. The Russians have been quite keen to consolidate the Assad government’s control over Syrian territory. And it’s been a thorn in Russia’s side that the U.S. has continued its forced presence in northeastern Syria to try to secure these counter terrorism gains. But also frankly on the sub-national governance project that the United States and its local partners have been conducting following pushing ISIS out of these territories.

Because at the end of the day, what that sub-national governance model representative was an alternative to the Assad regime and contrary to Russia’s strategic ambitions in Syria, shoring up Assad’s consolidation and from that military victory, trying to project political power into the region. Essentially with a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, Russia now has a terrific opportunity to capitalize upon the gaps in governance, in international backing for local actors on the ground and has actually swooped in to be the broker of a deal between the Assad government and the United States Kurdish partners that we’ve been working closely with to try to forestall further Turkish military intervention. Russia comes out on balance as a victor in this latest episode of the Syrian conflict.

Bob Schieffer: Where are we right now? A lot has changed since we learned that the president had decided that now was the time to withdraw American forces. How would you sum up what’s there right now and what’s happened?

Melissa Dalton: Right, so it is an evolving situation. But since the phone call with President Erdogan, we’ve seen the Turkish military but also a very uniquely using local Arab Syrian militias push into northeastern Syria. Some of these militias are the very same militias that were used in an earlier operation that Turkey conducted called Euphrates Shield a couple of years ago. And what has been less covered in the international media has been the extent to which those local militias really wreaked havoc upon that area of Syria through demographic re-engineering, through very pernicious behaviors such as rape and murder and desecration of religious sites that has not been documented. And so there are fears and some emerging reports that similar
atrocities might be happening in northeast Syria at the hands of these militias supported by Turkey.

Turkey also has been using its air force to strike YPG installations, putting U.S. forces that are trying to extricate themselves under pressure even with communications amongst NATO allies. This is an incredibly dangerous situation in the fog of war. Mistakes can happen. In this instance the right move is to withdraw U.S. forces from that conflict and hopefully move them out of harms way. In the face of this intervention from Turkey, as it became clearer that U.S. forces were going to have to move out quite quickly for their own force protection, but also following the orders of the president, the YPG, our local Kurdish partner made the calculation that for its own best interest, its own survival that it needed to strike a deal with the Assad regime. Hence this deal brokered by Russia to its own strategic advantage, but understandably with little other recourse. This was the protection that the YPG could immediately secure.

But I think it's also important to note that that security may be less than enduring in terms of its viability. We have seen a pattern of behavior by the Assad regime over the arc of this conflict. When it consolidates its control over areas of Syria, there are retribution attacks. People are imprisoned, tortured, disappeared. It is very much in the playbook of the Assad regime and particularly for those partners, those civilians that are implicated in this effort with the United States over the last five years are in danger.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa, there is no doubt that this is a mess on the ground in northeastern Syria and you just described a lot of it, including, I know that you've been talking about the 160,000 civilians who have already fled. How much of a strategic mess is this for the United States overall?

Melissa Dalton: The 160,000 estimated displaced just since the last week's Turkish intervention is increasing by the day. This is an estimate from UN sources. It's important to note also that just as it's become more tenuous for U.S. forces, military forces to be there, all of the international INGOs have had to pull out their international staff. The ability to deliver humanitarian assistance to these displaced people is growing increasingly difficult. Where these people will go, they could get pushed to different communities. Some of them are seeking refuge in nearby Iraqi Kurdistan, which has already absorbed significant numbers of Syrian refugees since the start of the conflict. That will put pressure on Iraq itself and security being tenuous in the Iraqi governance model does not bode well for U.S. interests there.

There is also the question of the ISIS detainees and their families that are...

Bob Schieffer: What happens to them?

Melissa Dalton: Yes, exactly. They have been under the control of the Syrian democratic forces, the local partner that the United States has been working with, but primarily the YPG element, which of course is now understandably very
distracted and engaged by the Turkish intervention and trying to shore up the steel with the Assad regime. There are some reports that they are under strain to maintain security around the detention facilities as well as the camps that house tens of thousands of ISIS families, that mostly include women and children. And before all of this episode of the situation of these detainees and their families was a significant humanitarian and security challenge with no clear international plan for what was going to happen with them. Now that there is no state based actor that is in charge, no clear pathway for how these people will be processed from a security perspective, let alone how will they, on a day-to-day basis, be cared for. There are very high risks of prison breaks from the detention facilities themselves, of those detainees being absorbed into the ISIS insurgency that is regional and active, and ISIS then having the ability to regenerate in ways that basically rewinds the tape to 2013.

Andrew Schwartz: Explain why this is problematic strategically for the United States. I mean, on the one hand, you have Russia going on Russian television and gloating and saying, “Look, the United States is an unreliable partner. The Kurds have had to turn to Assad for help. The United States abandoned them. That’s an example of the United States retreating from its allies and partners, so you can’t rely on the United States.” That’s one thing, you’ve described some of the other things. Why is this a problem strategically for the United States and why should Americans be concerned about this? We’re over here. They’re over there. Yes, these are all horrible things happening. You have this bipartisan uproar here in Washington. It’s across the aisle. Why is this a problem?

Melissa Dalton: Right. You’ve hit on two of the points in terms of alliances and partnerships to start. There is no task around the globe that the United States can conduct that doesn’t rely upon allies and partners for our own security, for that of our citizens that are abroad as well as the security challenges that different actors around the globe, whether it’s China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, non-state actors present. We need our allies and partners in order to be able to address those challenges abroad so that they don’t hit us at home. So that’s thing one.

Thing two is this counter-terrorism challenge. If ISIS is able to reconstitute, regenerate its cells, become active, it may be able to, once again, take territory to launch extra territorial attacks, whether that’s on Europe or to plan attacks abroad. Even in the last five years as it’s been under considerable pressure, it has through its ideology, it’s social media presence, been able to inspire attacks abroad. That will only increase if these detainees are able to refill the ranks, and also have destabilizing effects on regional partners that the United States works very closely with.

And then the third piece relates to what the Trump administration itself has prioritized as important in its national security strategy in terms of strategic competitions with China and Russia primarily, but also in Iran and North Korea. Two of those actors have very strong interests in the trajectory of
Syria’s conflict and are greatly advantaged by the United States withdrawing and the diminished leverage that we have there. They will have the strongest hands at the table in terms of the ultimate political settlement that they want to drive towards.

What does that mean? It means that Russia can then use this strategically to re-shift the power balance in the region to shore up diplomatic economic energy ties have with other actors in the region. When it comes to Iran, the ability to further buttress its networks of proxies, its military capabilities. Israel has been trying to diminish through unilateral airstrikes over the last couple of years. We’ll be able to reconstitute and extend potentially from Iraq to Lebanon, putting considerable pressure on our key partner, Israel. So the stakes for the United States strategically are quite high.

And if I may, I think there’s also an important point to be drawn in terms of there’s political resonance in Washington for ending forever wars. This is something that the president himself has talked about but has also expressed on the left. And I think the key point here is while that is a fine policy position to have, that the United States has to find a way to end wars responsibly. We can’t be abandoning our partners or our allies, the UK, the French that were working side by side with us on the ground, left holding the bag.

Andrew Schwartz: They didn't know we were leaving here.

Melissa Dalton: That is my understanding that they found out just about the same time as U.S. forces on the ground found out. This was not conducted in ways that are consistent with U.S. values.

Bob Schieffer: Let me ask you, because we kind of like to get down to basics on this podcast. I mean, unless you’re an expert who follows these things, as you do on a day-to-day basis, many Americans don’t understand this whole business. I mean, it’s like there are some good Kurds and then there are some bad Kurds. The Turks think that the Kurds who live in Turkey are trying to overthrow their government. They see them as a terrorist organization and in fact, I believe the United States lists them as a terrorist organization. Yet, we have allied with the Turks who were in Syria. Explain how that happened.

Andrew Schwartz: The Kurds are in Syria, you mean.

Bob Schieffer: Yeah, the Kurds.

Andrew Schwartz: Their enemies.

Melissa Dalton: Right, right. Not all Kurds are the same. The Kurdish community is quite expansive in terms of different communities, different political-

Andrew Schwartz: There’s 35 million Kurds across the Middle East.
Melissa Dalton: Exactly, spanning from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. So important to acknowledge that upfront. You're right. Both Turkey and the United States deem certain component of the Kurdish population, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, as a terrorist organization, and legitimately over decades has been in part seeking Kurdish autonomy and representation in Turkey through violent means, not unlike other terrorist organizations. It is not representative of the entire Kurdish community in Syria or Turkey or these other countries. And the PKK has been listed as a terrorist organization in both Turkey and the United States for some time.

Fast forward to the conflict in Syria, the emergence of ISIS taking advantage of gaps in governance security in Syria and Iraq, takes over Mosul, generates in Syria, starts beheading westerners to include Americans, and so the United States decides that it needs to intervene militarily given the profound counter-terrorism, national security importance of the challenge. And so in assessing the partners that the United States wanted to use at the time to work, quote unquote, "by, with and through on the ground," there were essentially two choices. There were groups that the United States had been training and advising and arming for at least two years until that point that were more located in Syria's center and also to its north that were Arab, that were Sunni and more representative of Syria's broader population, but were not coherent as a militia group and did not have the level of capabilities of that were needed for the task. There were also concerns within the U.S. national security community in terms of some of the ties that those groups had to violent extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and some of its spinoffs in Syria and the region.

So that was one choice, and then the other choice was the YPG, which is the Syrian Kurdish arm of the PKK, which was highly capable and also did not view the Assad regime necessarily as its primary motivator for its existence, unlike, I should have mentioned, the Syrian militias that I described also were highly motivated by opposing the Assad regime. They were not as focused on defeat ISIS. That was a secondary concern, whereas with the YPG, I think seeing the potential of a partnership with the United States, just as the United States had forged in Iraq with the Peshmerga there, saw an opportunity and ended up being quite effective in the initial campaign in Kobani. And from there, the partnership was forged.

Bob Schieffer: Those Kurds, the Turks see as an enemy and a threat to their security, whatever it is they might be doing with United States in Syria.

Melissa Dalton: That's correct.

Bob Schieffer: And that's really what this is all about, isn't it?

Melissa Dalton: Right. Well, at least in terms of the most recent confrontation between the United States and Turkey, but it has always been the tragic flaw of the U.S. approach to counter-terrorism in northeast Syria is relying upon that partner in direct contravention to the security interests of its NATO ally.
That said, I think the United States and working with allies recognized that that was tenuous, and so over time tried to compliment the YPG Kurdish element with other local Arab and minority forces that also had the dual purpose, not only of hopefully mitigating some of the Turkish concerns, but also making that force more inclusive, more representative of the local population so that it would have more legitimacy, more staying power as a stabilizing force.

Bob Schieffer: So what do we do now? What are the options?

Melissa Dalton: This is the million dollar question, Bob. Yeah, I mean, I think the unfortunate reality is that the United States has very little leverage at this point in the game. We have squandered the leverage that we had, which was not much, so it’s really a question of mitigation at this point. I think therefore, though, given that we still have very strong strategic interest in what happens in Syria, we do need to take some steps.

So the first would be related to the humanitarian question, so specific steps there would be these economic sanctions that the United States is moving forward with as well as our European allies are putting restrictions on arms sales to Turkey, using that potentially as a point of leverage to press Turkey to protect civilians, not indiscriminately shell civilian populations, and open humanitarian access to provide some relief to the civilian populations. The degree to which that pressure can also be exerted on Russia through existing sanctions and through diplomatic channels I think is important, and perhaps playing to their desire to be the power broker. Perhaps they would be open to that conversation. I think that’s thing one.

The second step would be related to counter-terrorism, this detainee question that there a very limited window that may remain in terms of being able to transfer some of the most high value detainees out of the country. The two UK detainees, the Beatles have already been transferred to Iraq. There’s been a longstanding ask by the United States for European nations to repatriate their citizens. There is an urgent need while there is still some window to get those detainees out of Syria before they go poof into insurgent networks and back to their home countries for judicial processing.

It’s incredibly tenuous and that window is closing. Also on the CT file, negotiating with Russia and Turkey for the United States to maintain air access over Northeastern Syria so that the United States can target ISIS cells from outside, from Iraq, from other places in the region will be quite vital.

Then the third piece on counter terrorism would be to buttress security cooperation with Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, the neighboring countries with Israel to try to forestall the regeneration of ISIS but also keep pressure to the extent possible on the Iran networks. It’s worth noting that at least in my understanding of how the U.S. plans to proceed with its withdrawal forces, that there is still a plan for now to retain a small garrison of forces at a place called Al-Tanf, which is small base down on the Jordanian border, that is
very essential for maintaining some intelligence on the Iranian threat networks that transcend the Iraq, Syria border. The extent to which the United States can maintain that presence, the fact that it’s accessible through Jordan perhaps opens the door for maintaining that presence for some period of time.

Bob Schieffer: What would you say would be the incentives for Russia to try to help out and resolve this situation or for Iran for that matter to join in it? It seems to me that right now they’re doing just fine by doing nothing at this point.

Melissa Dalton: I think Bob this is a really good point, particularly when it comes to Russia because I think rewinding the tape to two weeks ago and where we came out on the Syria study group report is that had the United States taken a more holistic approach to Syria, that Russia was at a point where they had enjoyed military success through its allies on the ground and through their own military success and they were looking to translate that into a political settlement. The United States through non-military tools, but while sustaining very small presence in Northeastern Syria had an opportunity to make life very difficult for Russia, frozen conflict, stalemate, whatever you want to call it, but there was some leverage there. That leverage is now gone since we removed our forces and have not shown interest in exercising other tools of national power to pressure Russia on the Syria file. I think there’s very limited ability to incentivize Russia at this stage of the game other than exposing the fact that it is not interested in building an inclusive new social political compact in Syria. It’s more of the same for Syrians that have endured this conflict and is that an enduring solution? So it’s more pressure, it’s more exposure. I don’t know that Russia would really be open to incentives at this point.

Andrew Schwartz: Can’t Russia establish itself as a peacemaker and someone, reintroduce themself as in the world as an entity that can be an agent for good in this situation and show the U.S. up?

Melissa Dalton: I think Russia has had opportunities to do that across the arc of the Syrian conflict. They helped broker the removal of most of the chemical stockpile in Syria, but lo and behold, not all the chemical weapons were taken out. They have been part of the Geneva negotiations since 2012 but have forestalled that process. They have been impediments at the UN Security Council in addressing atrocities that have been ongoing by the Assad regime in Syria. I’m very doubtful of their ability to actually constructively bring this crisis to an end.

They are calling for the return of reconstruction dollars, of lobbying Arab partners in the region to provide those dollars in resourcing. They themselves don’t have the resources to bring to bear, given their own domestic economic troubles. They’ve also been calling for the return of refugees. But the ability to mobilize and show a good faith effort at
leadership on the international scene, I have not seen evidence of that over the last eight years.

Andrew Schwartz: You mentioned earlier that the United States retroactively to Trump's call with Erdogan that sparked all of this, President Trump is sanctioning Turkey, to try to slow Turkey's assault down. He's threatened to revoke some of Turkey's NATO status, yet Turkey is a U.S. ally, and in fact, we have 50 nuclear weapons stored inside Turkey at their Incirlik Air Base. So we now have a situation where this might be the first time that we're actually in Turkey's harm's way. They might be shooting at our forces while they're housing our nuclear weapons and Turkey's our ally.

Melissa Dalton: Right.

Andrew Schwartz: So what's happening here? I mean, are they going to remain our ally or are they going to stay in NATO? How's this going to play out, Melissa?

Bob Schieffer: Are we going to move the nuclear weapons?

Andrew Schwartz: How are we going to get them out of there?

Melissa Dalton: Right. A lot of really great questions. I mean, I think the United States needs to take a step back and assess Turkey in the greater context of its interests that include Russia and Russia's attempts to ply Turkey away from the United States, the S-400 deal. Other strategic CALC issues when it comes to the sanctity of NATO as an Alliance structure. If Turkey can fall off, well others follow, the viability of the Alliance structure going forward.

But I think it requires persistent and open dialogue to address these concerns. It needs to be taken very methodically because there are these strategic consequences for how the United States is going to position itself vis-a-vis Russia going forward. So taking a deep breath and thinking about how we're calibrating our reaction to this immediate crisis, which does require some action needs to be put in this broader context.

There are also ongoing concerns in terms of Turkey's governance, its respect for human rights at home that have been deeply worrying for the United States for some time. So I think a strategic rethink about the relationship with Turkey is quite necessary. But I don't think we're at a point where we need to sever the NATO tie that is of profound strategic importance for the United States as well as that of our allies.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa Dalton, I want to thank you for the very sobering truth of the matter on this issue regarding Syria. Thank you very much. We'll be back next week. I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.
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