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# HOW TRUMP BETRAYED THE GENERAL WHO DEFEATED ISIS

**By Robin Wright** April 4, 2019

*General Mazloum Kobani Abdi led the campaign against ISIS in Syria, forging a partnership between scrappy local militias and élite U.S. forces. Then Trump withdrew the American troops.*

**Photograph by Delil Souleiman / AFP / Getty**

The Islamic State has finally fizzled. Its caliphate, daringly declared

from the pulpit of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, in Iraq, in 2014, had been the size of Britain, ruled eight million people, lured recruits from eighty countries, and threatened to redraw the map of the Middle East. It ended, in the Syrian farming hamlet of Baghouz, as little more than a junk yard about the size of Central Park, filled with burnt-out vehicles and dilapidated tents. Tens of thousands of ISIS loyalists, both fighters and their families, opted to surrender—and face life in crammed prisons and dreary detention camps—rather than become martyrs in ISIS's promised paradise.

The dangers are far from over. ISIS has sleeper agents. "There are thousands," General Mazloum Kobani Abdi, the reclusive politician turned commander who led the campaign against ISIS in Syria, told me, when I travelled through the former caliphate last month. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's "caliph" and the world's most wanted man, has evaded capture. ISIS also still has affiliates active from Nigeria to Afghanistan, from Egypt to the Philippines. "Frankly, our job has just started," Mazloum warned. "We are finishing the great battle, then we will fight a different kind of war."

The drive to flush ISIS out of Syrian territory was described as "the most successful unconventional military campaign in history" by the Middle East Institute last month. More than a dozen American diplomats and military officials involved in Syria told me the same thing. The campaign was distinct from the counterpart operation in neighboring Iraq, where the United States coördinated with a friendly government, retrained its conventional Army, provided sophisticated weaponry, established a headquarters for a coalition of seventy-four countries, and had legal status granted by parliament.

The campaign in Syria liberated roughly the same amount of territory. But it relied on an unlikely partnership between élite U.S. Special

Forces teams and a scrappy local militia led by Mazloum, a middle-aged Kurdish rebel whose face has been weathered by years of conflict and five stints in Syrian prisons. They all operated in defiance of the Syrian government and its Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah allies deployed nearby. Their mission was shrouded in secrecy. American troops wore no identifying insignias, ranks, or names on their uniforms. The Syrian fighters knew only the first names of the Americans, including the commander. Yet they established an unusual level of trust. The U.S.-led international coalition provided air cover, but it depended on the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., to protect their troops on the ground.

Together, they seized twenty thousand square miles in northern Syria, a dusty region of crops, pastures, and oil fields that reminded me of Oklahoma. When I drove around Raqqa, the former ISIS capital, little girls with ponytails and pastel backpacks were headed to school—after years of being banned from education or even from leaving home. Women, their faces uncovered, strolled to the street markets rising amid the rubble, much of it created by U.S. air strikes. Small groups of men sat curbside, sipping their morning tea and smoking, another practice that was banned under ISIS. At several shops, workers were pounding twisted construction rods—giant metal tumbleweeds pulled from bombed-out buildings—to flatten them, for use in reconstruction. Spring lambs, small and pristine white, nibbled along the roadsides.

In Washington and other Western capitals, the territorial defeat of ISIS, which for years was considered the greatest threat to global security, will almost certainly be studied as a model for future counterterrorism operations. “The S.D.F. is the best unconventional partner force we’ve ever had, anywhere,” Brett McGurk, the former lead coördinator of the campaign against ISIS, who is now a fellow at Stanford, told me. “The S.D.F. in effect conquered one-third of Syria, once the heart of the ISIS caliphate, with very low costs for the United States.” Mazloum, who is

on Turkey's most-wanted list, evolved into one of the most important U.S. allies in the Middle East.

The collaboration—which deepened over three phases—is an epic with twists, tragedies, and, ultimately, betrayal at an enormous cost to America's allies in Syria. Eleven thousand Kurdish fighters have died since 2014. The Americans have lost eight.

*Fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces staged a parade to celebrate the fall of ISIS in the Deir Ezzor province, which is home to Syria's most valuable oil fields.*

**Photograph by Delil Souleiman / AFP / Getty**

The alliance was seeded in August, 2014, a month after ISIS declared its caliphate and a week after a lightning ISIS offensive began in Iraq. Marauding ISIS fighters murdered thousands of Yazidi men and abducted truckloads of women. Tens of thousands of fleeing Yazidis, a mostly Kurdish-speaking minority summarily declared apostates by ISIS, were stranded on the arid peaks of Mount Sinjar without food, water, or a way out. Fearing genocide, President Obama authorized the first major U.S. intervention against the Islamic State—air strikes on ISIS positions in Iraq, and air drops of humanitarian goods to the Yazidis. However much Obama wanted to avoid another Middle East war, the United States had just taken on ISIS. The question was what to do next.

The crisis on Mount Sinjar eased after Kurdish fighters—including Mazloum's militia—created an escape route for the Yazidis into Syria. Pentagon officials took note. The United States had struggled to identify or create a credible rebel force in Syria. Mazloum had a standing militia that proved it could fight, even with only vintage weapons. Between 2011 and 2013, without foreign support, it had pushed Syrian government forces out of northern Kurdish towns during the Arab Spring and fought off an Al Qaeda franchise that moved on Kurdish turf. A senior U.S. military official looked for an introduction. The United States was not the only country interested in the Kurdish general, U.S. officials told me. On the morning of August 18th, Mazloum met Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force, the most élite unit in the Revolutionary Guard. The Iranians had rushed in—faster than the Americans did—to help the Iraqis hold off the ISIS juggernaut. Hours after meeting the Iranian commander, Mazloum rendezvoused with the American official in Suleimaniya, a Kurdish city in northern Iraq.

Mazloum came with complications, however. His original militia was the People's Protection Units, or Y.P.G.; it was Kurdish. Its political

arm sought autonomy in Syria. Many of its members, including Mazloum, had trained with a militant Turkish movement—the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K.—which was waging an insurgency to win autonomy in Turkey. The P.K.K. was on the U.S. and Turkish lists of terrorist organizations. Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, had lived in the Kurdish region of Syria for two decades before he was imprisoned, in 1999, in Turkey. Öcalan was a personal friend of Mazloum's; they were once photographed swimming together in the Euphrates River. "For a period of time, I served in P.K.K. ranks," Mazloum told me. "Öcalan was working here, and the people here had loyalty to him. But the Y.P.G. is not a terrorist organization. Always the Turks like to paint everything in Syria like it's the P.K.K., but this is not true." Yet Mazloum has relatives who are still with the P.K.K. Huge posters of Öcalan adorned every Y.P.G. and S.D.F. base I visited.

The American overture to Mazloum had both conditions and limits, senior U.S. officials told me. The U.S.-backed coalition could provide strategic advice but no major arms, because of the Y.P.G.'s history. If the Kurds took territory from ISIS, they had to include other ethnic or religious groups, notably Arabs and Christians, in setting up governance and security. The Kurdish militia had to accept that its region would remain part of Syria—and not try to break away into an independent Kurdish state. And they had to vow not to attack Turkish interests. If any of those terms were violated, the U.S. would walk away. Mazloum opted for an alliance with the Americans. "At the time, ISIS was getting stronger every day," he told me. "We were at capacity just stemming the tide and protecting our area. The United States intervening in this fight changed the balance of power between us and ISIS."

The makeshift alliance was tested a few weeks later, when ISIS invaded Kobani, a strategic town built as a whistle stop on the Berlin-Baghdad railway. Kobani is Mazloum's home town. He incorporated it into the

nom de guerre by which he is known. (His real name is Ferhat Abdi Şahin.) ISIS seized sixty per cent of the city, forcing most of its forty thousand residents to flee across the border to Turkey. In October, 2014, I watched from a nearby hill in Turkey as ISIS pounded Kobani with thundering artillery. ISIS's black-and-white flag billowed on the horizon.

Kobani proved to be a turning point for Washington. The Obama Administration expanded its intervention, from Iraq into Syria, with air strikes on ISIS forces in Kobani. Among the targets was Mazloum's home. ISIS had seized it as an operations center. Mazloum approved the U.S. decision to destroy it, a senior U.S. official told me. The marriage of American air power and a tough local militia on the ground—dubbed the "hammer and anvil" strategy—succeeded. After a gruelling five-month battle, ISIS experienced its first defeat. In January, 2015, Mazloum's militia hoisted its yellow banner atop Kobani's highest hill; fighters, both male and female, danced by firelight amid the city's bombed-out ruins. Kobani, where more than thirteen hundred Kurds perished, still ranks as the longest, deadliest, and most vicious battle with the Islamic State. It later became a base used by U.S. Special Forces and a small team of U.S. diplomats.

The partnership deepened in the second phase. In April, 2015, the U.S. approached Mazloum about leading the war against ISIS beyond Syria's Kurdish regions. The Obama Administration was on the verge of abandoning a separate Pentagon program to train fifteen thousand Syrians in Turkey and Jordan. Five hundred million dollars had been allocated for the program; ultimately, fifty million dollars were spent, and it produced only a handful of trained soldiers. "I wasn't happy with the early efforts," Secretary of Defense Ash Carter admitted at a news conference in Washington at the time. "So we have devised a number of different approaches." They relied heavily on Mazloum's militia.

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The Kurdish general was initially hesitant about fighting in Syria's Arab heartland, U.S. officials told me. Kurds and Arabs have a troubled history. Thousands of Sunnis from conservative local Arab tribes had joined ISIS. To liberate those areas, Mazloum told his U.S. counterparts, he needed to recruit Arab tribal sheikhs to support him and form an Arab wing of his militia. A purely Kurdish militia wouldn't be welcome, he warned. In turn, Mazloum wanted the U.S. to train the Arab fighters and provide them with weapons that he did not have—and that his own fighters could not receive because of the Y.P.G.'s controversial status. The U.S. agreed. The Y.P.G. merged with new Arab, Turkmen, and Assyrian wings into the new Syrian Democratic Forces. In October, 2015, the first U.S. team was deployed in Syria to train and advise them.

*The final frontline in the fight against ISIS was Baghouz, a farming hamlet near the Iraqi border.*

Photograph by Delil souleiman / AFP / Getty

In a grinding campaign that often involved house-to-house fighting and claimed the lives of thousands of S.D.F. members, the group slowly

seized territory—Tal Abyad, al-Hawl, the Tishreen Dam, al-Shaddadi, and Manbij—that cut off land routes for foreign fighters and supplies coming through Turkey. Thousands of U.S. and coalition air strikes demolished ISIS offices, barracks, convoys, checkpoints, and arms depots. They picked off ISIS leaders, including Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the social-media mastermind of ISIS, and Jihadi John, the executioner with a British accent who beheaded, on video, the Americans journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, three Western aid workers, and two Japanese reporters. The Obama Administration also quietly deployed hundreds of additional U.S. Special Forces to Syria. Mazloum, who had kept a low profile after multiple assassination attempts against him, began hosting top Pentagon brass and congressional delegations, including Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who travelled to liberated corners of Syria.

As S.D.F. capabilities expanded, the U.S. asked Mazloum to take on the biggest challenge yet: liberating Raqqa, the ISIS capital, a city with a quarter of a million residents. Implicit in the U.S. request was an awareness that the fighting was likely to be long, intense, and costly in human life. A senior U.S. official who worked with Mazloum remembered the conversation. "Whatever we laid out to him, what we wanted the campaign to be, he looked at me and said, 'I trust your judgment. We would probably, for other reasons, do this a little bit differently. I understand your logic, and I agree.' " Mazloum noted, however, that he would need more sophisticated arms for urban warfare. This time, he said, the Kurdish Y.P.G. fighters in the S.D.F. would have to receive U.S. arms, as well.

During the 2016 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump had repeatedly blasted the Obama Administration for not doing enough to defeat ISIS. He vowed to do more—much more. "I would bomb the shit out of them," he said at one rally. "I'd just bomb those suckers. I'd blow up the

pipes, I'd blow up the refineries, I'd blow up every single inch—there would be nothing left." In May, 2017, four months after taking office, Trump approved arms shipments—machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, armored cars, and engineering equipment—to the Kurds. The battle for Raqqa accelerated in June. The S.D.F. seized the ISIS capital in October. More than six hundred and fifty S.D.F. fighters—Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Syriac Christians—were killed in Raqqa.

*An S.D.F. fighter walks through the rubble of Raqqa, Syria, in October, 2017. More than six hundred and fifty S.D.F. fighters were killed in the battle for the city.*

**Photograph by Lorenzo Meloni / Magnum**

The joint campaign faced sporadic challenges—menacing warnings from the Syrian government, the deployment of Russian mercenaries nearby, and constant criticism from Turkey. In November, 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Trump, who was in Florida, preparing for a round of golf with Tiger Woods, to complain about U.S. arms flowing to Kurds in the S.D.F., which Erdoğan considered a terrorist group. Surprising his aides, Trump promised to stop the shipments. Former U.S. officials familiar with the call told me that the President did not fully grasp the details, players, or regional politics of his own decision to arm the Kurds—or that it was the decision that enabled the Kurdish-led S.D.F. to liberate Raqqa. U.S. officials had to convince Trump that the weapons were essential because the war with ISIS was not over, a former Pentagon official told me The U.S. arms shipments to the Kurds continued.

The campaign against ISIS was nearly derailed again when Turkish-backed fighters invaded Afrin, one of three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria, in January, 2018. The offensive followed news that the U.S. planned to create a border force of several thousand—half from the S.D.F. and half new recruits—to better secure the Syrian borders with

Turkey and Iraq. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters had passed through Turkish territory to join the caliphate. The U.S.-backed border force was designed to deal with a problem that Erdoğan had not addressed. Erdoğan countered that the U.S. was "creating a terror army" and vowed to "suffocate" it.

The Turkish-backed invasion forced Mazloum to pull S.D.F. troops away from the front line with ISIS, to defend Afrin—this time without U.S. air power to support them. Washington disapproved of Ankara's offensive, but Turkey was a NATO ally. The S.D.F. was no match for Turkey's tanks, artillery, and warplanes. After two months, Mazloum's militia retreated. Relations soured with the United States; the offensive against ISIS stalled. U.S. intelligence predicted that Mazloum might even end the partnership. "We're on the two-yard line," a senior U.S. Special Forces commander told NBC News. "We could literally fall into the end zone. We're that close to total victory, to wiping out the ISIS caliphate in Syria. We're that close, and now it's coming apart."

The S.D.F. was also scrambling to administer and secure the region —roughly a third of Syria—that it had liberated. Towns were war-ravaged. Basic services were destroyed. Many residents had fled. In Arab areas, the S.D.F. turned to tribal sheikhs to help form new city councils. "The S.D.F. did not just clear territory. They held it," McGurk, the former lead coördinator of the campaign, told me. "They recruited locals to govern and established a permissive security environment. That's what allowed us to be in Syria with a very light U.S. footprint."

Mazloum's militia, which included a large female force, returned to the ISIS battlefront last fall. The final hurdle was to clear Deir Ezzor province, which is home to Syria's most valuable oil fields. In December, the S.D.F. captured Hajin and began mapping out the next two months of operations with U.S. Special Forces. Their focus was on eliminating

the stubborn Islamic State pockets near the Iraqi border and stabilizing liberated areas to prevent an ISIS resurgence. "We have obviously learned a lot of lessons in the past, so we know that once the physical space is defeated we can't just pick up and leave," McGurk told reporters on December 11th. "We're prepared to make sure that we do all we can to ensure this is enduring." U.S. goals, he added, "will take some time."

Six days later, Mazloum was summoned by General Joseph Votel, the head of U.S. operations in the Middle East, for a video conference. The timing, at midnight in Syria, was unexpected. So was the message. "I was the first one to hear the words," Salar Malla, Mazloum's aide-de-camp and translator, told me. "Before you translate anything, you have to absorb it. I spoke the words, but I didn't believe them."

General Votel informed Mazloum that he had received a letter from the White House two hours earlier, ordering the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. Votel did not know the details, he told Mazloum, but he had wanted the Kurd to hear it from him rather than from the media. "It was a surprise," Mazloum told me, at his forward operating base. "We didn't believe that in the middle of the battle, when we're fighting against ISIS, when we're fighting against all the others, that our partners would abandon us. To be honest, the painful point for us was that America is a great country. How could a great country behave like that and abandon its allies in the middle of the fight? And, from that time on, how are people going to trust in the Americans or partner with them in any fight in the future?"

Trump had made the decision unilaterally, U.S. officials told me. There had been no interagency review, no conferring with military brass, no discussions with the dozens of other countries in the U.S.-led coalition. Many were as surprised as Mazloum was. The pivot had been another

telephone conversation with President Erdoğan. The Turkish leader asked why the U.S. needed two thousand troops in Syria if the caliphate was collapsing. Two days later, Trump tweeted, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency." The problem was that ISIS had not yet collapsed. It still had tens of thousands of fighters, families, and fans in pockets of the Euphrates River Valley.

In Washington, the backlash to Trump's abrupt decision was immediate. Defense Secretary James Mattis pleaded with the President to change his mind; when he didn't, Mattis resigned. So did McGurk. Even Trump's Republican allies expressed outrage. Lindsey Graham called the decision a "stain on the honor of the United States." A bipartisan group of senators appealed to the White House. "If you decide to follow through with your decision to pull our troops out of Syria, any remnants of ISIS in Syria will surely renew and embolden their efforts in the region," they wrote.

In a rare public statement, Mazloum also appealed to Trump, asking him to keep at least half of the two thousand troops in place until all of the Islamic State's territory was liberated. "We would like to have air cover, air support and a force on the ground to coordinate with us," Kobani told reporters travelling with an American military delegation. "American forces must remain beside us." Trump had once pledged to protect the S.D.F., Mazloum said. "I want him to live up to his word." In a separate conversation, he admitted to me, "We're worried about being alone again."

Mazloum did not waver, however. "Immediately, we started thinking of the phase after the American presence in Syria, and how we're going to distribute our forces and depend on our own capacity to preserve those gains," he told me. "At the end of the day, this is an internal American

decision, and we cannot intervene in it. So we started thinking about how we're going to be able to fight and do policy without them."

A senior U.S. official who had worked closely with Mazloum reflected, "Never once did he not live up to exactly what he said he was going to do." The S.D.F. fought on as the United States quietly began pulling out troops and equipment. The final front line was Baghouz, the farming hamlet near the Iraqi border. It was a long slog, with repeated pauses to allow civilians, including the families of ISIS fighters, to leave. "We don't want the images from our last battle to be bloody," Mazloum told me. "We're not ISIS."

When Baghouz finally fell, on March 23rd, Mazloum hosted a small liberation ceremony at his base. "It was a great day that we celebrated with all our friends and allies," he messaged me on WhatsApp. "We are proud about what we did, that victory is not just for Kurds. It is for all humanity." Mazloum invited his American counterparts to attend. In front of the stars and stripes, a band of young Syrians dressed in red-and-gold uniforms played the American national anthem.

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