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# Trump Withdraws the US from Syria: Context and Repercussions

Policy Analysis Unit

## Trump Withdraws the US from Syria:Context and Repercussions

Series: **Situation Assessment**

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### Policy Analysis Unit

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

+974 40354114

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

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## Introduction

US President Donald Trump ordered the “full” and “rapid” withdrawal of US troops from Syria on 19 December 2018. The decision, announced with a tweet,<sup>(1)</sup> sent shockwaves around Washington and among US allies, especially as it was accompanied by a declaration by White House officials that the president intended to cut US forces in Afghanistan by half. Political and military leaders in Washington fear the decision to withdraw from Syria will leave a power vacuum that will be filled by US opponents, specifically Russia and Iran. An early US withdrawal could also free the way for an ISIL resurgence. The immediate repercussions of Trump’s decision, apparently timed to increase domestic popularity, without coordinating with his national security advisers, were the resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis and the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett H. McGurk. Foreign Secretary Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton also opposed the decision, but their attempts to discourage Trump came to no avail.<sup>(2)</sup>

## Trump’s Justifications

According to President Trump, there is no longer any justification for the United States to remain in Syria following the defeat of the Islamic state. America should not be the “policeman of the Middle East”, making sacrifices to protect others.<sup>(3)</sup> This rhetoric is echoed in the American public where the economy is a priority, with the popularity of slogans such as “America First” or Trump’s standpoint that allies should pay for protection.

Trump rejected criticism that his decision would create a vacuum in Syria that Russia and Iran would benefit from, saying that Russia, Iran and others “are not happy about the U.S. leaving, despite what the Fake News says, because now they will have to fight ISIS and others, who they hate, without us.”<sup>(4)</sup> He also pointed out during his series of justifications that he had come to an agreement with Turkish President Erdogan. Turkey will thus take responsibility for eliminating the remnants of ISIL, while Saudi Arabia is financing the reconstruction of Syria. “Saudi Arabia has now agreed to spend the necessary money needed to help rebuild Syria, instead of the United States,” he said, adding: “See? Isn’t it nice when immensely wealthy countries help rebuild their neighbors rather than a

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1 Donald J. Trump, “We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency,” Twitter, December 19, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2LqOprb>

2 Ramsey Touchberry, “Donald Trump’s Syria Withdrawal Isn’t Supported by Mattis, Pompeo or the Troops, Lindsey Graham Says,” *Newsweek*, December 20, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2AlgcFO>

3 Donald J. Trump, “Does the USA want to be the Policeman of the Middle East,” Twitter, December 20, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2RmIQ2k>

4 Donald J. Trump, “Russia, Iran, Syria & many others are not happy about the U.S. leaving...,” Twitter, December 20, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EA6jWU>



Great Country, the U.S., that is 5000 miles away. Thanks to Saudi A!”(5) Trump’s announcement of the potential roles of Turkey and Saudi Arabia in Syria is consistent with his long-held conviction that US allies who rely on its protectionist umbrella are required to pay for that protection, share the cost with the United States, or protect themselves.

## Context of the Decision

Trump’s rejection of the idea that the United States has the responsibility to protect others or serve their interests for free stems from domestic and electoral calculations, even if it is tantamount to a new strategic doctrine. It is known that the withdrawal of US troops from Syria was one of the electoral promises that Trump had pledged as a presidential candidate. Trump has also made clear attempts to strengthen the base of his right-wing support in the face of the growing legal and political problems related to the Mueller investigations into alleged collusion between his campaign and Russia in the 2016 elections. This December has been one of the worst months of Trump’s presidency, especially as investigations are closing in on him personally, and on his family and his work. His administration continues to suffer waves of firings and resignations. Moreover, November 2018 saw a sweeping midterm electoral victory for the Democratic Party in the House of Representatives. This allowed the democrats to disable Trump’s domestic agenda and conduct extensive investigations around him personally and his administration. Given that the president’s authority in foreign policy is broader than in domestic politics, Trump may have chosen to invest in it early before the Democrat majority takes over the House of Representatives early next year. Trump’s decision notably followed a telephone conversation he had with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on December 14, 2018, arranged by Pompeo after Ankara threatened to carry out a military operation targeting US-backed Kurdish fighters in northeastern Syria. Mattis, Pompeo and others contributed to the preparation of Trump’s notes to guide the phone call to put a stop to the military operation that Turkey is threatening to launch east of the Euphrates. Trump, however, accepted Erdogan’s complaints that the United States was undermining Turkish security by supporting the Kurds. He responded by asserting that the US did not want to remain in Syria and therefore decided to withdraw, ignoring his advisers’ comments.(6)

According to a US official, Trump, after receiving assurances from Erdogan that his country will take on the task of fighting ISIL, told him, “It’s all yours. We are done” in reference to Syria.(7) On the same day Trump announced his decision to withdraw from Syria, the US State Department announced its agreement to sell the \$3.5 billion US Patriot missile system to Ankara, without reference to

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5 Donald J. Trump, “Saudi Arabia has now agreed to spend the necessary money needed...,” Twitter, December 24, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EHD4la>

6 Phil Stewart, Lesley Wroughton, “In Mattis resignation, a singular challenge to Trump’s agenda,” *Reuters*, December 21, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://reut.rs/2AiKuZ2>

7 Jeremy Diamond and Elise Labott, “Trump told Turkey’s Erdogan in Dec. 14 call about Syria, ‘it’s all yours. We are done’,” *CNN*, December 24, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://cnn.it/2Tbkiqp>

Turkey halting its purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system.<sup>(8)</sup> Two days after Trump announced the decision to withdraw, Erdogan announced that Turkey would take on the battle against ISIL as the United States withdrew its troops. He stressed that he would also target the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYG) supported by Washington.<sup>(9)</sup> Turkey began sending military reinforcements to its border with Syria on 23 December 2018, in the understanding that it was implementing the agreement between both parties.

## Reactions to the Withdrawal

Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria raised surprise and concern inside and outside the United States. The convictions of Republican congressional leaders were echoed by Democrats. Outwardly, Trump's decision, which was not coordinated with regional and international allies (except Turkey), raised fears that the United States under Trump was pursuing an isolationist approach and was no longer a dependable force. In light of growing Russian and Chinese expansionist policies, this renewed European calls to build self-defense capabilities.<sup>(10)</sup> The letter of resignation sent by Mattis detailed the repercussions of the withdrawal decision on US credibility and on international security and stability. The letter was a rare rebuke of Trump from a senior member of the US administration.

The most important concerns about the withdrawal decision are:

US withdrawal will strengthen the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria. With the gains made by the Syrian regime in recent months on the ground, with Russian Iranian support, a US withdrawal now means that the United States will lose its place at the negotiating table for future political compromises and will upset the current balances on the ground.

The decision will enable Iran to consolidate its influence and regional expansion, despite the Trump administration making the containment of Iran a major strategic priority in the region. In September 2018, Bolton said that the United States would only withdraw from Syria if Iranian forces and allied militias withdrew. <sup>(11)</sup> Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why Bolton and Pompeo objected to Trump's decision, both being considered hawks of the administration when it comes to Iran. A White House official said that Washington would continue to use other elements of power with Iran,

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<sup>8</sup> Aaron Mehta, "Turkey cleared by US for \$3.5 billion Patriot missile deal, despite S-400 row," *Defense News*, December 18, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EVhfnz>

<sup>9</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña, "Erdogan Says Turkey Will Delay Assault on Kurds and ISIS in Syria," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://nyti.ms/2T9mQW6>

<sup>10</sup> Jan Strupczewski, "Exit of trusted Mattis sparks concern among U.S. allies," *Reuters*, December 21, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EX1mb2>

<sup>11</sup> Paul Sonne and Missy Ryan, "Bolton: U.S. forces will stay in Syria until Iran and its proxies depart," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://wapo.st/2Tp3FaX>



including economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure,(12) but these elements alone are unlikely to succeed in curbing Iran's growing regional influence.

The Kurdish combatants, and their supporters in Washington, like McGurk, fear that US withdrawal would leave them to be crushed by Turkey. According to a Trump administration official, McGurk tried to convince senior officials in the Trump administration to allow Kurdish fighters to communicate with the Assad regime to reach an agreement that would protect them from a Turkish military operation, but his efforts appeared to have yielded little success.(13) McGurk consequently submitted his retirement date for the end of this month. For their part, the Kurds considered Trump's decision "a stab in the back."(14)

ISIL suffered a series of major defeats and most of the Syrian territory they formerly controlled was restored, leaving them with just 1% of the land they had originally seized. However, this does not mean that ISIL has been entirely wiped out of Syria, or even Iraq. According to coalition estimates, there are still some 2,000 fighters in the Syrian town of Deir ez-Zor, and the number could reach 8,000 if the fighters hiding in the desert south of the Euphrates river are included.(15) A report by the Inspector General of the US Department of Defense estimated the number of fighters in Syria and Iraq to be about 30 thousand fighters. According to General Joseph Danford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, the United States needs to train 35,000 to 40,000 local troops in northeastern Syria to maintain long-term security and to prevent ISIL from taking back land it lost. Only about 20% of this number have been trained. (16) This has prompted many senior military officials and politicians to warn of the repercussions of Trump's decision.

## Conclusion

The decision to withdraw from Syria is final. This does not mean that it will be implemented immediately; it will take weeks, if not months. The military may find ways to slow and stall the pace of withdrawal as much as possible, despite the president's insistence on completing it rapidly. The Defense Department is now considering alternatives for its direct presence on Syrian soil. In addition to the air strikes that will continue, a recent formation of commando teams could be stationed on the other side of the border conducting special operations whenever necessary, as Trump pointed

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12 Dion Nissenbaum, Nancy A. Youssef and Vivian Salama, "In Shift, Trump Orders U.S. Troops Out of Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://on.wsj.com/2SWy3sL>

13 Matthew Lee, "U.S. envoy to anti-IS coalition quits over Trump's Syria move," AOL., December 22, 2018, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://aol.it/2EYB5tQ>

14 "at ,2018/12/We Will Curse Them As Traitors': Syrian Kurds React To U.S. Troop Withdrawal Plan," NPR, December 24, 2018, accessed on 30" 14 <https://n.pr/2ReGaUh>

15 Lee.

16 Ibid



out during his brief secret visit to Iraq.<sup>(17)</sup> There are about 5,000 US troops in Iraq. But all of this will not be able to compensate for the actual absence of the US on the ground, especially if competition between forces seeking to fill the void heats up.

In short, Trump's decision in Syria is another expression of the chaos created by his national security strategy emanating from his "America First" campaign slogan. His recent decisions in Syria and Afghanistan demonstrate the gap how Trump and "the establishment" understand this strategy. Trump appears not to have read his administration's national security strategy.<sup>(18)</sup> His interest remains focused on maintaining his popular support base, which is becoming increasingly important to him as the legal and political challenges pile up in front of him.

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<sup>17</sup> David Smith, "Trump hails foreign policy shift on surprise visit to US troops in Iraq", *The Guardian*, 27/12/2018, accessed on 30/12/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2rVZ97Z>

<sup>18</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *The White House*, December 2017, pp. 2-3, accessed on 30/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2CzLLd7>