

Consequences of US Withdrawal for Syria and the Region: Renewed Destabilisation

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After the sudden announcement of US withdrawal from Syria, followed by confusion in Washington and the resignation of Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, the attention shifts to the longterm consequences of this decision for Syria and the region. Considering the withdrawal is set to be completed within a rapid 60-100 days, the consequences are likely to be significant.

Firstly, the most immediate impact will be felt by Kurdish allies in US-controlled areas in the north-east - a sizeable 30% of Syrian territory. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Defence Force and the Kurdish YPG, both of which were effective in reducing the threat of ISIS, are likely to abandon that campaign with lack of resources or military back-up from the US, and low morale. This could lead to the following scenarios vis a vis the Kurds:

- (i) Kurdish forces are pushed out by Turkey, who would then control much of the northeast in addition to Afrin in the northwest. Turkey could use this to increase their bargaining strength in negotiations.
- (ii) A resuscitation of ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates. Despite losing 95% of its territory, roughly 2,500 ISIS fighters remain¹, contrary to Trump's claim that they have been eliminated. Moreover, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the SDF are considering releasing up to 3,200 foreign and local ISIS prisoners.²
- (iii) the Kurds switch loyalties. They already demonstrated willingness to do so the last time Trump considered pulling out in April 2018, entering into talks with the Syrian regime. It took heavy persuasion from Jim Jeffrey, US special envoy to Syria, to keep the Kurds on side with the US. With the US gone, Kurdish forces would prefer to enter into a deal with Damascus rather than face an onslaught from Turkey.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/19/has-isis-been-defeated-in-syria-as-trump-claims>

² <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/201220181>

Secondly, a sudden US withdrawal would have major implications for civilians. Syrians and Kurds in the northeast are fearing for their safety and bracing themselves for a surge in fighting between Turkish forces and the SDF, or attacks from a resurgent ISIS. Having already seen some of the worst fighting in the conflict take place in the north, many civilians are now preparing to flee their homes.³ But it is not only in the northeast that the impact will be felt. In October, pro-regime forces attacked and besieged 50,000 Syrian refugees trapped in the Rukban camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border, but were forced back by US troops. Withdrawal of the US from Al-Tanf base on the border potentially puts the refugee community in danger of further attacks.

Thirdly, the announcement of US withdrawal has also resulted in diminished trust in US reliability. The notion that US announcement will damage trust among its Kurdish allies is accurate but this should be viewed in the context of Kurdish expectations. The US abandoned their Kurdish allies in the past, albeit in Iraq not Syria, but this did not prevent the Kurds from working with the US during the 2003 war and in 2014. Kurdish groups have proven to be highly pragmatic in their relations with the US - if it is in their interests to work again with the US, they would most likely do so. More worrying for the US is the long-lasting damage this does to US credibility as a global partner, and the fact this adds to a growing list of reasons why the US cannot be relied upon to keep its commitments to its allies. The problem here is not just a tarnished 'brand' but real strategic consequences; US allies will increasingly defect to rival camps - this has already happened to some extent with Turkish-Russian cooperation, while this loss of trust amongst allies was a key factor behind Mattis' resignation. Meanwhile the absence of the US at the Astana talks have proven their stock as valuable deal-brokers has plummeted, unsurprisingly so after the US pulled out of the Iran deal.

Fourthly, as critics of the policy have pointed out, US withdrawal is likely to give Iran, Russia and the Syrian regime a major advantage in the conflict. Unsurprisingly Russian president Vladimir Putin praised the decision, arguing that it would be conducive to a political settlement. But again, this consequence should be put in context: the Russians and their allies already have the upper hand in the Syrian conflict, both in terms of territory and diplomatic efforts. As noted above, the US has not been party to the Astana talks between Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian regime, and the opposition - US troop withdrawal merely confirms what is already being played out on the political scene and is unlikely to dramatically alter those dynamics. Nevertheless, the fact the US will also end its air campaign, something many commentators did not anticipate after the initial announcement of withdrawal⁴, does hand a big advantage to the pro-regime alliance, granting Russia more or less the freedom of Syria's airspace. Though Turkey, as an anti-regime actor, remains in Syria, it poses no threat or restraint to Russian or Iranian entrenchment. Additionally, despite the continued and blatant disregard for Syrian sovereignty, the regime will of course use US withdrawal in its propaganda campaigns, to claim that the regime (and not Trump's personal interests and whims) have managed to oust US troops and resist western imperialism.

Not everything, however, will necessarily work in favour of the pro-regime alliance. With US forces out of Syria, Israel is likely to adopt an even more aggressive and proactive strategy in Syria to counter what it considers to be a threat from Hizbollah and Iran. Israeli-Iranian clashes already escalated earlier this year, triggering warnings from Russia. With the loss of their US ally, Israel has already made it clear that they will step up their campaign against Iran's military presence in Syria. Thus rather than winding down (as had been the trajectory of the past 6 months), military confrontations in Syria now look likely to increase on a number of fault-lines.

³ https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/trump-withdrawal-syria-shock-allies?bftwnews&utm_term=4ldqpgc#4ldqpgc

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, while the sudden nature of US withdrawal will trigger several negative developments in the Syrian conflict, this does not necessarily validate the status quo. US military presence in Syria has been deeply problematic. The strategy, first devised under Obama, was to wage a limited war against ISIS to avoid more contentious decisions about the Syrian regime. In doing so, the US effectively took the problem of ISIS off the regime's hands, allowing the latter to focus its attacks on the FSA and civilian areas. From a legal perspective, one could also argue the US campaign was unauthorised from the start, lacking a UN resolution or even congressional approval for the stationing of ground troops. The gradual swelling of the US mission in Syria has produced 19 military bases in the north of Syria alone, rendering the whole furore over possible US intervention in 2013 as rather pointless and contradictory. By stationing troops and bases in Syria, the US helped shape the strategies of its allies and enemies alike, all expecting the US to remain for the longterm - with the US now leaving in such a slapdash fashion, a large vacuum will open up; as outlined above, this is likely to produce a destabilising scramble for territory, resources, and power. Judging by statements coming out of Washington, the US has no plan for the post-withdrawal phase, no plans for stabilisation, and no plans for a political settlement to a conflict they helped to intensify, leaving Syrians and other parties to deal with the fall-out.

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