



# A WELCOME DELAY: THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA

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After announcing in December that the US will withdraw its troops from Syria, President Donald Trump and the White House back tracked a number of weeks later, declaring the withdrawal may yet take a number of months. Last month, the US administration then announced that it would maintain at least 400 US troops, including 200 troops who will operate as part of a prospective multinational force that will maintain a safe zone in north-eastern Syria and another 200 troops in al-Tanf, which is located by the Iraqi border and within miles of the Jordanian border. Since 2016, al-Tanf has been a critical launching pad for anti-ISIS operations but also lies in close proximity to Iran-aligned forces.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties over the role of US troops in Syria beyond the anti-IS campaign and the as-of-yet unclear parameters of the proposed safe-zone in the northeast, it is welcome news that the US will no longer be conducting a precipitous withdrawal. That would be bad news: the Islamic State (IS) still has 30,000 fighters at large in Syria and Iraq, while Iran-aligned forces are becoming entrenched in the political landscape and are consolidating their gains. IS may have lost its “Caliphate” and is on the decline but it is far from defeated and continues to present a menacing threat to both Syria and Iraq. In both countries, the jihadi organisation has proven a formidable and resilient force, maintaining pockets of resistance against local forces as it attempts to re-establish itself, as well as initiating a campaign of assassinations, predation and extortion against local communities.

The US has been here before. In its previous incarnation, al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had its back to the wall until US troops withdrew in 2011 under the orders of President Barack Obama. In the space

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of just three years, the jihadists re-emerged by taking control of swathes of territory across Syria and Iraq, capitalising on the Syrian civil-war, sectarian tensions in Iraq and the collapse of the Iraqi military by establishing and declaring its proto-state in June 2014. Like Obama's withdrawal in 2011, Trump's withdrawal from Syria could allow the group to revitalise itself in the coming months and years but also to reinvent itself in conflict environments that will be conducive to the group's ascendancy for many years.

Beyond IS, a withdrawal will inevitably leave a void that will be filled by America's enemies, such as the tens of thousands of proxies Iran has deployed in Syria or a combination of these groups and those forces aligned with the Syrian regime. As Obama's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 showed, Iran has a proven and effective capacity to fill the voids left by the US to entrench and embolden its proxies. That then provides it with an unrivalled capacity to shape the political landscape. In Syria, Iran will almost certainly move to fill any voids left by the US to influence the country's politics, economy and security sector, as well as the reconstruction resources that may at some point be injected into the country by the international community.

The US has substantial leverage to ensure Iran does not have a free hand to shape the country as a whole and its troop deployment insulates at least some parts of the country from Iran and the regime of Bashar al-Assad, concurrently providing these areas with reprieve from conflict. Withdrawing will see Iran acquire much-needed strategic depth, including its long-sought land bridge linking Tehran to Beirut and the Mediterranean. This would come at a moment where US sanctions as well as Israeli incursions into Syria have put Tehran under substantial pressure in recent months. Of course, the presence of approximately

2,000 US troops might on the surface seem very low but this misses the broader picture. Aside from the symbolic significance of maintaining troops in the country, America's presence is almost always amplified by the sizeable, unrivalled and uncontested military infrastructure it enjoys in the region. Regime-aligned forces learned this the hard way back in February, when 500 pro-regime forces – including Russian mercenaries — attacked US forces but were then met with American warplanes, including Reaper drones, F-22 stealth fighter jets, F-15E Strike Fighters, B-52 bombers, AC-130 gunships and AH-64 Apache helicopters. In the end, 200 to 300 of the pro-regime fighters were killed.

In other words, despite the limited on the ground footprint, the US still has a substantial capacity to impose and cultivate rules and limits for warfare, while the symbolic weight of America's presence in the east should never be underestimated.

A US withdrawal would also raise the chances of a conflict between Turkey and Syria's Kurds. Turkey has national security concerns over the People's Protection Units (YPG), the organisation that dominates the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has fought alongside the US under the auspices of the campaign to defeat so-called Islamic State. The YPG is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has fought the Turkish state for more than forty-years. The future of the YPG in Syria's northeast, where it established its own self-governed autonomous region during the course of the civil war, is a thorn in Turkey-US relations that predates the current administration.

Turkey is still a critical ally and member of NATO, while the SDF have constituted Syria's most effective fighting force. Working alongside its allies in Europe, the US can help



both sides reach a compromise by way of an admittedly difficult strategy. Support for the YPG can be conditioned on its willingness to take real and genuine steps to share power with other groups in the northeast, including both Kurdish and Arab groups. This will be conducive to the overall goal of establishing credible and legitimate governing structures that can help alleviate humanitarian crises, begin the process of stabilization and reconstruction and prevent conflict relapse.

For Turkey, the emergence of alternative, predominant actors in the northeast can create a balance that reduces the chances of the northeast becoming a YPG-dominated statelet but Ankara must also be willing to accept that the YPG will continue to be a powerful feature within the Syrian landscape, in large part because it remains a highly organised political and fighting force. That said, it is a force that can be constrained if the northeast is underpinned by an inclusive political order. Contrary to the hyperbole surrounding Turkish apprehensions toward the YPG, Ankara has in fact engaged the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the YPG's political wing, before and has hosted its head Salih Muslim. The Turkish government is not entirely averse to negotiating with the organisation, while Ankara found in the 1990s that by cooperating with the US and by developing stronger relations with the Iraqi Kurds, it became far more capable of influencing events in Iraq.

There are limited alternatives. Turkey lacks the capacity to suppress the YPG in eastern Syria. It would struggle to keep the peace in the Kurdish-dominated northeast if it deployed its already stretched armed forces, risking in the process a quagmire that enables the ascendancy of jihadist terrorist groups. The YPG could turn to and embrace the Syrian regime if it is left to choose between either a Turkish onslaught or negotiations with an administration that is in the process of normalising its relationship with the international community. The YPG is inseparable from Syria's security and governing structures, yet Turkey will lose the capacity to shape the landscape altogether if the YPG is forced into the regime's orbit of influence.

Moving forward, if the US were to withdraw from Syria and leave without establishing a compromise over the SDF or, at the least, de-escalation mechanisms that could reduce the likelihood of conflict between Turkey and the SDF, then that could have costly ramifications in other countries where the US relies on partner, US-aligned armed non-state actors, including in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. Most importantly, it will substantially reduce US influence and leverage over the post-war reconstruction phase, hastening the Assad regime's control of the country as a whole in the process and leaving a void that will be filled by Iran and Russia. The US will not be alone and should capitalise on European commitment to staying the course