

POLITICS

# U.S. Troop Withdrawal Upends Syria Policy, Leaving a Search for Solutions

American policy makers scramble to maintain clout and contain Russia, Iran



Turkish troops walked alongside an armored personnel carrier through the town of Tukhar, Syria, on Monday. PHOTO: AREF TAMMAWI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Michael R. Gordon*

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WASHINGTON—President Trump’s decision to quickly remove American forces from northern Syria has upended years of U.S. strategy, leaving policy makers looking for ways to maintain clout and contain Russian and Iranian influence in a strategically important region.

The order to withdraw about 1,000 American troops set in motion fast-transpiring events that current and former U.S. officials say has diminished Washington’s ability to shape deliberations over Syria’s future. It came as Turkey widened its military assault against Kurdish forces, who were U.S. allies in the fight against Islamic State militants. The Kurds in turn opened talks with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which is backed by Russia and Iran. The Assad regime is now sending its military into Kurdish-held areas.

On Tuesday, Russian forces also filled the vacuum left by departing American troops and began to conduct patrols between the Syrian and Turkish militaries near the northern Syrian town of Manbij.

Only weeks before, American officials were calculating that control of oil-rich areas in northeast Syria by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces would give the U.S. leverage to pursue a political settlement that could end the civil war, which has been exploited by Russia, Iran and Islamic State.

“Our ability to play a role in an eventual political discussion is severely limited with our decision to withdraw from Syria,” a former senior defense official said.

“The strategic negotiating advantage of controlling and keeping stable a third of Syria, earned through our successful military campaign alongside the SDF, is essentially gone,” the former official added. “The winners in all of this are the Assad regime and their Iranian and Russian backers. They will decide the fate of Syria.”

Trump administration officials say they have other ways of affecting events, including using the lure of international reconstruction funds to influence the terms of any political settlement and benefiting from Israel’s airstrikes against Iranian forces in Syria.

On Monday, Mr. Trump spoke with Turkey’s president, calling for a cease-fire. The White House said Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser Robert O’Brien are being dispatched to Turkey to negotiate an end to the offensive and the U.S. is imposing economic sanctions on Ankara.

But a statement from Mr. Trump and other remarks by administration officials haven’t addressed the broader question of how to stabilize Syria. And the departure of American troops from northern Syria, which is set to take place in the coming weeks, appears to open the door for the Assad government and the Russian forces and Iranian operatives that support it to supplant the U.S. as the Kurds’ main partner.

That would solidify Russia’s role in the Middle East and make the Trump administration’s goal of eliminating Iranian forces and proxies more challenging. It could also give a boost to militants from Islamic State, which is trying to make a comeback, according to the Pentagon’s inspector general.

Mazloum Abdi, the Syrian Democratic Forces commander who has worked closely with the U.S., acknowledged that dealing with Mr. Assad and Moscow would require making painful compromises, given that the Kurds have sought to maintain their autonomy. “But if we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will sure choose life for our people,” he wrote in an essay on the Foreign Policy website. His essay was posted Sunday, a day before he spoke with Mr. Trump.

State Department officials have said in recent months that the U.S. was actively pursuing three major goals in Syria. They were trying to ensure a lasting defeat of Islamic State and pressing for the eviction of Iranian forces and their proxies from Syria. Ultimately, the U.S. aimed to reach a negotiated settlement that would lead to a more inclusive government and get Mr. Assad to end the ruthless policies that U.S. officials say fueled the rise of the militants and led him to depend more heavily on Iranian military support.



Turkish-backed forces from the Free Syrian Army train near Azaz in northern Syria on Oct. 7. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

“The third objective that the president gave us was to try to

achieve a political resolution to the Syrian conflict,” Joel Rayburn, a deputy assistant secretary of state and envoy on the Syria issue, said in an appearance at the Council on Foreign Relations nearly two weeks ago. “This will require serious pressure from the United States and from the rest of the international community on the Assad regime and on those who are the patrons of the Assad regime.”

Senior administration officials said they weren’t backing away from this goal. That assurance appears to be at odds with Mr. Trump’s repeated tweets that he is extracting American troops from a distant conflict that has little bearing on U.S. security.

“The Kurds and Turkey have been fighting for many years,” Mr. Trump tweeted on Sunday. “Others may want to come in and fight for one side or the other. Let them! We are monitoring the situation closely. Endless Wars!”

The plan to use the oil-rich areas of Syria as leverage first emerged in 2017 when H.R. McMaster was Mr. Trump’s national security adviser. Back then, more than 2,000 military advisers and other troops had moved into Syria along with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces to fight Islamic State militants.

As Islamic State's self-declared caliphate was being destroyed, Mr. McMaster highlighted the importance of maintaining control of northeast Syria as Washington sought to broker a political solution for the country—a point he repeated last week.

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The Kurds control “65 to 70% of Syria’s oil reserves,” Mr. McMaster said.

“Guess who wants that really badly?” he continued. Russian President “Vladimir Putin and the Assad regime. Once you cede control there, you cede influence of what does a post-civil war Syria look like,” Mr. McMaster said last week at the Foundation for the Defense of

Democracies, a Washington think tank.

Robert Ford, a retired American ambassador to Syria, has said the U.S. military commitment was never large enough to determine events inside Syria and that the leverage provided by its presence in the northeast part of the country was vastly overstated. In effect, he said, the U.S. is now leaving a situation it could never have controlled.

Others say that while the U.S. leverage was limited, it has in its recent policy decisions have forfeited the main influence it had.

“It is only a matter of time before a full American withdrawal from Syria is realized and America’s ability to have a meaningful say in any aspect of the Syrian crisis is dealt a mortal blow,” said Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, a nonpartisan Washington-based research center.

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