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ELECTION 2020

Democrats Criticize Trump on Syria but Offer Few Plans of Their Own

White House candidates are hesitant to spell out their policies toward engagement in the Middle East



Syrian funerals are held in Hasakeh, north Syria, on Monday. U.S. politicians have grown war-weary following nearly two decades of military engagement in the Middle East. PHOTO: BADERKHAN AHMAD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Sabrina Siddiqui

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WASHINGTON—Democratic presidential contenders are unanimously condemning President Trump’s withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, calling the decision a reckless move that undermines allies in the region while emboldening adversaries.

But when pressed to detail an alternate strategy in Syria, the candidates are hesitant to spell out what their policies toward engagement in the Middle East would entail.

Amid renewed a debate over America’s footprint in the Mideast, Democrats seeking the White House in 2020 are decrying Mr. Trump’s abrupt drawdown of roughly 100 troops from northeast Syria, while agreeing with his underlying impulse to reduce U.S. troop levels in the region and steer clear of conflicts overseas.

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Should President Trump be doing something differently in Syria? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

“As president, I will tell you, I will always take any threat to our security very seriously and do what is necessary to avert any threat to our nation’s security,” California Sen. Kamala Harris said following a campaign event in Tipton, Iowa, last week. “But I can’t tell you what the circumstances will be when I’m elected.”

Asked if there was still a role for U.S. troops in the region, Ms. Harris said: “I don’t know. I don’t know. Because it is that unpredictable with Donald Trump.”

The Syrian drawdown has faced bipartisan pushback from lawmakers in Washington, many of whom say it marked an abandonment of Kurdish allies who participated in the fight against Islamic State. The decision paved the way for Turkey’s incursion into northeast Syria, has strengthened the hand of terrorists and casts doubt on America’s reliability as a military partner, critics say. And despite the president’s vow to reduce U.S. military involvement overseas, there are more troops in the Mideast than when he took office.



Sen. Kamala Harris said she was unsure if there was still a role for U.S. troops in the Middle East. PHOTO: CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar says the U.S. shouldn’t have withdrawn troops “before we had a responsible and enforceable plan in place that protected our Kurdish allies and prevented ISIS from regrouping.”

But the role of U.S. troops in the region moving forward, she said, would be contingent upon whether military commanders and experts “conclude that troops in northeast Syria are providing

security to our allies and partners and countering threats to our national security.”

The Wall Street Journal reached out to all of the 2020 Democratic campaigns for more specifics on how the candidates would approach the yearslong civil war in Syria, and in what capacity the U.S. should engage militarily in the region. Seven of the 19 responded.

Tommy Vietor, who served as the National Security Council’s spokesman under President Obama, said politicians have grown war-weary following nearly two decades of military engagement in the Middle East.

“Politically, a lot of this is coming from a lingering understanding that the war in Iraq was one of the biggest strategic disasters in our country’s history,” Mr. Vietor said.

Democrats’ position on foreign policy is reminiscent of their dilemma with Mr. Trump on trade. Many in the field agree with him that free-trade deals have hurt American workers and that China’s strength must be checked. Instead, they have criticized his approach to tariffs or taken issue with provisions in the renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement.

During last week’s Democratic debate, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren said the U.S. should get out of the Middle East, forcing her campaign to later clarify that she was referring only to combat troops. But the comments reinforced an appetite among progressives to reduce the nation’s entanglements overseas.

A spokeswoman for Ms. Warren said the senator “believes that we have important economic and security interests in the Middle East, but 20 years of combat missions in the region have not advanced them.”

“As president, she would refocus on realistic goals and use diplomatic, intelligence, and development tools to achieve them,” said Alexis Krieg, a campaign spokeswoman.

Campaigning in Davenport, Iowa, last week, former Vice President Joe Biden delivered a scathing rebuke of U.S. foreign policy under Mr. Trump, while touting his own record as vice president, including negotiating with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Obama administration’s support for U.S.-allied Kurds in the region in the fight against Islamic State.

But when Mr. Biden pivoted to how he would address the crisis if elected president, he spoke in general terms of working toward a resolution with NATO allies and providing humanitarian support. At one point, Mr. Biden said there were perhaps no good answers in the region.

“We shouldn’t fool ourselves—there may never be a solution in Syria that satisfies our best hope for a region at peace with itself,” Mr. Biden said. “No one wants American troops to be forever

embroiled in conflict in the Middle East or ‘nation-building.’”

A spokesperson for Mr. Biden’s campaign didn’t respond when asked if he would re-engage U.S. troops in Syria and in what capacity.

A spokesperson for South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg pointed to a recent interview with NBC, in which the candidate said the U.S. would need to maintain a presence in the Middle East comprised mostly of counterterrorism activities and special operations troops to assist local forces on the ground.

“The way to do it is to stay ahead of these problems, to engage our allies and to lead an international community to promote stability and peace,” Mr. Buttigieg said, even as he acknowledged “it will be messy for probably as long as I’m alive.”

Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard was among the few candidates who flatly said it was “too late” to send troops back to northeast Syria.

“I’ve long called for an end to this regime-change war to topple the Syrian government,” said Ms. Gabbard, who was widely criticized for meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2017 and subsequently defending his regime. “It has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, destabilized Syria and the whole region, strengthened al Qaeda and ISIS and caused immense human suffering.”

Ms. Gabbard said the U.S. should, however, remain involved diplomatically and maintain a small number of American special forces “to carry out quick-strike operations against ISIS, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.”

Polling has shown that while a majority of Americans oppose Mr. Trump’s troop withdrawal in Syria, they remain wary of endless fighting in the Middle East. As a result, candidates have often struggled to toe the line between scaling back U.S. involvement overseas and the realities of withdrawing troops from decadeslong conflicts.

Mr. Vietor, the former Obama aide, said the complexities of foreign policy can’t easily be distilled into campaign sound bites, leaving little room for nuance.

“Part of the challenge is there’s no such thing as a Syria policy because there are actually many priorities and they’re often competing,” he said. “Specificity is not particularly helpful ... but it could be politically damaging.”

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