

## MIDDLE EAST

# U.S. Troops Withdrawing From Syria Draw Scorn

Trump, Defense Secretary Mark Esper say residual force could stay in northeast Syria to protect oil fields

*By Sune Engel Rasmussen and Isabel Coles*

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ERBIL, Iraq—Civilians in Kurdish areas hurled fruit and insults at a U.S. troop convoy that crossed from northern Syria into Iraq early Monday, venting anger over a withdrawal they see as the U.S. betraying its allies in the fight against Islamic State.

As a large convoy of military vehicles flying American flags rolled across northern Iraq toward a base in Erbil, U.S. officials including President Trump said several hundred U.S. troops would remain in northeast Syria to protect oil fields there. But most are leaving, and as stony-faced U.S. soldiers on the move flashed victory signs, a young man in the Iraqi town of Bardarash flipped a middle finger at the convoy as it passed through.



Residents of Qamishli in northern Syria hurling projectiles at U.S. military vehicles on Monday. PHOTO: HAWAR NEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the dusty rolling hills north of Mosul, the row of American flags on the side of the armored vehicles could be seen from far away. Before reaching Erbil, separate parts of the convoy joined

together to form a line of at least 50 vehicles, including white Land Cruisers.

During a roadside break, the soldiers didn't return greetings and retreated immediately and silently into their vehicles when The Wall Street Journal approached them. Earlier in the day, onlookers in the predominantly Kurdish area cursed the soldiers as they passed by, according to a man in Duhok, about 37 miles from the Syrian border. One man called them "sons of bitches" and shouted at them to get out, he said.

"We are disappointed," said Mahmoud Salah, a Syrian Kurdish worker in the Iraqi town of Kalak who said his cousin died fighting alongside the Americans. He considered the U.S. withdrawal a betrayal, he said. "We will always think that," he added as he watched the convoy drive past.

The line of military vehicles conveying part of the roughly 1,000 U.S. troops ordered to leave Syria faced the greatest hostility inside Syria as it left the country. A video posted by the dominant political party in northeast Syria, the Democratic Union Party, showed demonstrators temporarily blocking the convoy with hand-drawn signs, including one that read: "To the U.S. Army who are leaving northeast Syria now tell your children that the children of the Kurds were killed by the Turks and we did nothing to protect them." Young men could be seen throwing stones and fruit at the convoy in footage posted by television network ABC's Adam Harvey.

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Hostility from the Kurds could complicate future U.S. operations in the region, including efforts to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State and maintain control over Syria's oil fields. The Kurds were the U.S.'s main partners in the fight against the extremist group in Syria, and they see the American pullback as a historic act of treachery that leaves them exposed to attacks by Turkey, which regards

the Kurdish YPG militia as terrorists.

Ankara launched a cross-border offensive nearly two weeks ago to seize territory and create a safe zone along its border with Syria. It agreed with Washington to a five-day cease-fire—which ends late on Tuesday—to allow the Kurds to leave the area. Turkey's incursion marks a pivotal point in Syria's multisided conflict.

The Kurds could aim to cede the area they control in northeastern Syria, including the major oil fields there, to the Russia and Iran-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad as a defense against Turkey, analysts say. Such a shift would allow the Assad regime to reassert sway over

most of the country after more than eight years of civil war, and complicate any American effort to control that oil.

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin is set to host Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Russian resort town of Sochi. A central point of discussion will likely be divvying up oversight over the border areas between Russia and Turkey.

Though some U.S. troops left Syria earlier, the convoy on Monday appeared to be the largest movement since Mr. Trump's decision to pull troops from the country's northeast.

U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper, speaking Monday at a press conference at a U.S. military headquarters in Kabul, said administration officials have discussed keeping a residual force in northeast Syria to "deny access to the oil fields" to groups like Islamic State.

"We presently have troops in a couple of cities that are located right near that area," Mr. Esper said. "The purpose is to deny access, specifically revenue, to ISIS and any other groups that may want to seek that revenue to enable their own malign activities."

Asked about the plan at a cabinet meeting Monday, President Trump said he was willing to leave some troops in Syria to secure oil facilities.



A U.S. soldier gesturing from his vehicle on Monday in Iraqi Kurdistan, after troops pulled out from their positions in Syria.  
PHOTO: MANU BRABO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"I always said if you're going in, keep the oil," Mr. Trump said. "We'll work something out with the Kurds so that they have some money, so that they have some cash flow. Maybe we'll get one of our big oil companies to go in and do it properly."

It wasn't immediately clear if the Kurdish leadership would continue to support any residual U.S. ground force. They have previously urged the U.S. to reconsider their troop withdrawal plan, and

might still prefer to work with the Americans instead of giving up their aspirations of autonomy by joining the Assad regime.

Mr. Esper late Saturday said all of the roughly 1,000 U.S. troops ordered to leave northeastern Syria would be redeployed to western Iraq and conduct operations against the Islamic State extremist group from there. The troops are leaving Syria via helicopters, planes and ground convoys, a process that will be completed within weeks, Mr. Esper said. He didn't say where precisely those troops would go.

Iraqi officials didn't respond to requests for comment on the relocation of American troops. The U.S. already has around 5,000 troops in Iraq, many of them based in the western province of Anbar.

The arrival of more American troops could prove a headache for Baghdad, which has struggled to balance the interests of its allies Washington and Tehran as tensions between them increase. Pro-Iranian factions in the Iraqi parliament are already agitating for the expulsion of U.S. troops and are likely to seize upon the arrival of more of them. Militias with close ties to Tehran have previously threatened to strike U.S. interests in Iraq.

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Qassim Muslih, a top paramilitary commander in Anbar province, expressed deep reservations about the prospect of U.S. troops relocating there. "It would be a big source of concern for us since it means U.S. forces are using Iraqi lands for their own purposes," he said.

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As the American convoy prepared to leave Syria on Sunday, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic

Forces said its fighters withdrew from the key border town of Ras al-Ain to fulfill a part of the cease-fire agreement.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said Ankara was following the situation closely. "If pledges are kept, operation Peace Spring will be stopped," he said in a speech on Monday, referring to Turkey's military offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces. "Otherwise we will continue."

As the end of the cease-fire approached, the independent Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported more Turkish-backed fighters had moved across the border into Syria.

Turkey and Kurdish forces alike have accused each other of violating the cease-fire. Around 120 civilians have been killed since Turkey's offensive started, according to the Observatory, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced from their homes.

Mr. Trump on Monday said the cease-fire was holding despite minor skirmishes.



A U.S. Army convoy is greeted by a bystander in Iraqi Kurdistan as it heads to a U.S. base in Erbil on Monday. PHOTO: MANU BRABO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Sen. Gary Peters (D., Mich.), who served in the U.S. Navy Reserve, said the images of U.S. troops being pelted with fruit “should haunt every American.”

“Our men and women were serving shoulder to shoulder with Kurdish forces and to suddenly abandon them is something that the United States should never, ever do,” he said.

Several Republicans declined to comment on the fruit-throwing images. Sen. Jim Inhofe (R., Okla.) said: “That could have been a small group, that could be orchestrated, I don’t know.”

As U.S. forces vacated positions in several areas, including Manbij, Raqqa, Tabqa and Kobani, Syrian regime forces moved in alongside Kurdish fighters, local activists said. Syrian government forces were on the outskirts of Kobani on Sunday afternoon, accompanied by Kurdish fighters dressed in regime uniforms, said Suhaib Jaber, who heads Euphrates Post, an independent war monitor.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that Moscow could play a role in promoting dialogue between the Kurds and Damascus to prevent threats to Turkey and other neighboring countries from Syrian territory. “Both sides have shown interest in Russia’s assistance to this process,” he said.

—*Ghassan Adnan in Baghdad, Ann Simmons in Moscow, Nancy A. Youssef in Kabul and Lindsay Wise in Washington, D.C., contributed to this article.*

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