

# Region reacts to US withdrawal from Syria

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**US President Donald Trump's sudden decision to withdraw US troops from Syria has created consternation among allies and raises the risk of intensifying clashes between Israel and Iran. *Jonathan Spyer, Nicholas Blanford, and Kathryn Haahr* analyse the implications of the move for regional stability**

## Key Points

- Following US President Donald Trump's surprise announcement of a US troop withdrawal from Syria, the Syrian Kurdish leadership – fearful of a Turkish offensive – will engage in likely protracted negotiations with Damascus over its future.
- Israel regrets the turn of policy, but remains confident in its own defence capabilities, and will continue to strike against a consolidated Iranian presence in Syria and resupply of weaponry to Hizbullah, with a rising risk of open conflict.
- Amid considerable policy confusion, a partial withdrawal is likely to go ahead, although the timelines, locations of remaining troops, and future mission parameters will likely be determined by Trump's advisers.

US President Donald Trump's announcement via Twitter on 19 December 2018 of his intention to rapidly withdraw US forces from the area currently controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in eastern Syria came as a surprise to both allies and rivals of the United States. The announcement was immediately welcomed by Iran, Russia, the Syrian government, and Turkey, all of whom stood to emerge as potential beneficiaries from a US withdrawal. Nevertheless, the announcement has heralded a period of uncertainty and contradictory statements that has left Washington's allies and adversaries confused about future US policy towards Syria.

The US presence at the beginning of 2019 was mainly located in the area of Syria east of the Euphrates river. Officially, it consisted of 2,000 personnel, although *Jane's* judges that the actual number is likely to be higher. US Army Major General James Jarrard, commander of Special Operations Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, told a news conference in late 2017 that the number was 4,000, although he later claimed that he had misspoken. Adding in French, UK, and other allied forces operating in this area, total troop numbers are almost certain to be considerably more than 2,000.

According to a 2017 report by the Turkish Anadolu news agency, the US deployment included two air bases (in the Kobanê and Rumeilan areas), and a further eight bases in the Hasakah, Manbij, and Raqqa areas. As of 11 January 2019, some military equipment had been withdrawn from Syria, according to US officials, although it remained unclear how much longer the 2,000 troops would remain in the country.

## **Initial reactions**

The primary purpose of the deployment of the 2,000 US troops to Syria was to support the Kurdish SDF in defeating the Islamic State, which held a large area of territory in the eastern half of the country. Trump declared in a 19 December 2018 tweet that the Islamic State had been “defeated” in Syria and that there was no longer a need for US forces to remain in country. However, US officials had previously declared publicly that the US troop presence was also linked to the deployment of Iran and its allied militias in Syria.



*The scene of a 21 January 2019 suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attack on a convoy in Syria’s northeastern Hasakah province, which killed five SDF fighters accompanying US-led coalition troops. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State, challenging US President Donald Trump’s claims that the militant group had been defeated in Syria. (AFP/Getty Images)*

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In September 2018, US National Security Advisor John Bolton said that US forces would remain in Syria until Iran and its allied militias left the country, a statement that suggested Washington was committed to a longer and deeper engagement in Syria beyond the immediate goal of defeating the Islamic State. Although the conflict in Syria has subsided since mid-2018, leaving Syrian President Bashar al-Assad still in power, Iran has not indicated that it is willing to leave. Instead, it has shown signs of entrenching in Syria to strengthen its links to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to build a military deterrent against Israel.

Since Trump's announcement of an imminent troop withdrawal, US officials have attempted to bring some coherence to the administration's strategy. Trump's senior advisers, including Bolton and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, appear to have walked Trump back from a rapid exit from Syria, but at the time of writing the timeframe and extent of the pullout remained unclear. Visiting Israel in the first week of January, Bolton said that the US would only withdraw from Syria once it had guaranteed the protection of its local allies, including the Kurds, a comment that infuriated Ankara.

Although limited, the US commitment in Syria is of strategic significance. As a result of the war against the almost-defeated Islamic State, the Kurdish-dominated SDF, by early 2019, exercised de facto control over an area comprising 28% of the territory of Syria, including approximately 80% of Syria's oil and gas reserves, prized arable land, and control of significant water sources on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Assad's government wants access to these resources and has a strategic goal of reuniting Syria under its exclusive rule, fully supported by Russia. Meanwhile, Iran is seeking freedom of movement and activity for militias in the Iraq–Syria space that are associated to its Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). The US base at Al-Tanf – situated in the south of Syria near the borders with Iraq and Jordan – and the SDF-controlled area, to a lesser but notable extent, constitute significant barriers to this goal.

Turkey, meanwhile, remains focused on confronting the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel: YPG) that constitute the majority of the SDF, and is also concerned by the close links between the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat: PYD) and the umbrella grouping that includes the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê: PKK), which has been engaged in an insurgency against Turkey since 1984. For Turkey, the destruction of the SDF-controlled area – or at least its distancing from the border – is a high priority.

Iran, Russia, the Syrian government, and Turkey therefore welcomed Trump's announcement, although they differ on next steps. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made clear his desire in an op-ed in *The New York Times* to carry out an additional operation in the SDF-controlled area, akin to the earlier cross-border interventions under operations Euphrates Shield (2016–17) and Olive Branch (2018). Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran would prefer the area's negotiated return to central Syrian government control.

### **Kurdish responses**

The main opponents to the US decision are the Syrian Kurdish leadership and Israel. The Syrian Kurdish leadership was already aware of Trump's statement in April 2018, when he expressed his desire for the withdrawal of US forces by the end of that year. This led to the reopening of direct contact between the SDF and Damascus in July 2018. A delegation led by senior official Ilham Ahmed of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the SDF's political arm, travelled to Damascus on 27 July 2018 for talks with government representatives led by Assad's special security adviser, General Ali Mamluk.

However, in conversation with *Jane's* at that time, Ahmed and other senior SDC officials – including SDF spokesperson Nuri Mahmoud and senior Syrian Kurdish politician Aldar Khalil – suggested that the US would not leave imminently despite Trump's statement. Aldar Khalil told *Jane's* on 24 July 2018 that it was “not logical that the US will leave immediately or soon: after [the Islamic State], the US will fight Iran. And they will fight Iran within Syria”.

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