Trump’s Policy on Syria
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Criticism of President Donald Trump’s abrupt decision to withdraw from Syria continues to dominate commentary on the American role in the country. One thing is sure, however, and that is that the decision helps to explain the way the president deals with important foreign policy and national security issues involving the interests of the United States and many other regional and international actors.

A Decision Long in Coming

The president had declared his intention more than six months ago to withdraw American troops from Syria, but his national security team at the time—Secretaries of Defense and State, James Mattis and Mike Pompeo, respectively, and National Security Advisor John Bolton—cautioned against it. They insisted that the United States still had three objectives in the country: completely eradicating the so-called Islamic State, forcing the withdrawal of Iranian troops and Iran-supported militias from Syria, and assuring stability after a political process. The surprise decision thus came to contradict that rationale and what the administration’s envoys to Syria, James Jeffrey, and to the international coalition to fight IS, Brett McGurk. Incidentally, Mattis and McGurk left their posts in protest as of the beginning of January.

Needless to say, Trump’s decision to leave Syria has again shown that he is the most isolationist president in American history. Despite increasing the defense budget to unprecedented levels, his overarching wish is to withdraw American troops from the military bases with utmost significance to US national interest such as those in the Middle East and East Asia. What is intriguing is that Trump’s decision comes while the Islamic State (IS) still controls significant pockets of Syria and the tension with Russia continues. By contrast, the president did not announce any withdrawal from Iraq where the United States deploys a contingent of 5,200 soldiers, which enjoys a relatively stable and friendly government, and where important successes have been achieved against the organization.

What is arguably the case is that despite the complexities of the Syrian conflict, the withdrawal decision is intimately linked to the president’s relationship with Russia which maintains military bases in Syria and had repeatedly demanded that American troops leave that country. In fact, it is unlikely that answers to this relationship will be forthcoming before the conclusion of the investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller.
Impacts All Around

With the decision made, the question that presents itself at this juncture relates to its impact on actors on the Syrian front and on who will fill the vacuum left by the departing American troops from areas rich in hydrocarbon resources and strategically adjoining Iraq’s northwestern border.

First, the likely biggest losers are the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that were trained and equipped by the United States for the war against the Islamic State. Composed mainly of Kurdish fighters, these forces lack the popular legitimacy necessary in the areas they control which are mainly Syrian Arab. In the absence of American troops, these will find their position untenable, especially considering Turkey’s insistence on their disarmament and departure from the area. What adds to their predicament is the obvious American-Turkish coordination and cooperation that were evident in the telephone conversation between president Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prior to the decision. Without Americans working to protect their fortunes, SDF troops may not have much to resist Turkish forces; they may even have to surrender their American-supplied heavy weapons as a condition for Turkey continuing to fight IS in the region.

An important consideration here is a question related to how much of the area where SDF operates can Turkish forces control? The Turkish position on this matter is still unclear. What is known is that the area is very large and controlling it will require the costly deployment of a large contingent of troops and their equipment. In addition, funds are needed for running local government and supporting infrastructural and social development to serve tens of thousands of repatriated civilians, especially in the city of Raqqa that has been largely leveled by American aerial bombardment in the fight against IS.

Second, there is no escaping the question of what Russia prefers to happen and whether it will be satisfied with a mere American withdrawal as Washington and Ankara appear to be coordinating their moves. Thus far, there does not seem to be similar American-Russian cooperation on the withdrawal issue, at least publicly, but Russia looks to Syria’s hydrocarbon resources as a prize for its heavy military involvement in the country. That, at least, could be gleaned from Russian President Vladimir Putin’s gleeful reaction after Trump’s decision. What is also possible is that Russia and Turkey can strike a deal by which they can share filling the vacuum in eastern and northeastern Syria as well as the Syrian desert. Russian companies are already preparing to extract Syrian gas from these areas, an indication that Russia and Turkey may be the biggest beneficiaries from inheriting the areas previously controlled by US forces.

Third, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is likely to emerge victorious by nominally re-claiming the lands Russia will control after the American withdrawal but, nonetheless, remain weak. As it
is, he can hardly leave Damascus as his regime suffers from a collapsed economy that cannot fund the needed reconstruction project. And despite scenes of Arab embraces, the latest of which were the visit by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to Damascus and the United Arab Emirates’ decision to re-open its embassy there, Assad is unlikely to recapture his pre-war role or stature in the Arab world. Neither is he likely to overcome the isolation imposed on him by western powers because of the massacres he committed against his own people.

Indeed, outside actors’ negotiation about inheriting Syrian territories is a direct result of the failure of the centralized Syrian state to hold on to them over the last seven years of civil war or to assure the unity of the Syrian people, millions of whom are either internally displaced or refugees abroad. The Syrian opposition that is allied with Turkey today, especially that under the banner of the Free Syrian Army which liberated border areas from the Kurdish Popular Defense Units (YPD), still considers Assad to be its top adversary. The FSA is willing and able to maintain its grip over areas it now controls with Turkish help if the price of the American withdrawal is to turn it over to the Syrian regime.

It is thus possible that Syria in the long term will be divided into different areas. Some of these will be under Assad’s control, but with Russian guardianship, where many Iran-supported militias can operate. Other areas will be under the opposition’s control, but with Turkish guardianship, as the Kurds lose their grip over the areas they governed with American assistance. This will mean that the desired political solution to the Syrian conflict, one that would include a real transition from authoritarianism, is far from becoming a reality. In fact, the changes in territorial control are more a reflection of the interests of regional and international actors than a drive to arrive at the vaunted political solution. Trump’s decision thus is only another expression of this dynamic that reflects both the president’s understanding of American interests in Syria and his desire to retrench back into the United States. In the process, he hopes that others will pick up the fight to eradicate the Islamic State’s menace and pay the costs of Syria’s reconstruction; the latter of which he announced would be Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, Trump’s decision on Syria points to serious challenges to his administration’s own pronouncements about what the United States wanted to do in Syria: confront Iran, face up to Hezbollah, and help in forging a political transition. All those who enunciated these policy objectives—Mattis, Pompeo, and Jeffrey, among others—have been humbled and embarrassed. Furthermore, Trump’s decision puts the United States in an untenable position vis-à-vis its allies in the region and sends a message that it is not a reliable partner. This was evident in the criticism leveled by French President Immanuel Macron whose forces perform a similar function to American forces in Syria.
Finally, withdrawing from Syria has wider implications for the Middle East where an authoritarian Russia that has participated in the slaughter of Syrian civilians sees itself on the cusp of replacing the United States in the region. A Russian condominium there means not only the continuation of Bashar al-Assad’s oppressive regime that escapes accountability and the rule of law but also the renewed imposition of authoritarianism everywhere.

The overall message that must be understood by Syrians and Arabs looking for a democratic political order and working to assure a respect for human rights is that their struggle must depend on self-help and hard work. Reliance on the United States under Trump is folly, because what concerns him is only what enriches American coffers. He is a businessman trading in American values for a financial gain. To him, Syria is a losing venture and withdrawing from its conflict is more rewarding than defending values that mean nothing to him.