



Trump's Syria Decision... And Its Consequences

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The White House's October 6th announcement that it plans to pull U.S. troops out of northern Syria, paving the way for a Turkish invasion of the territory, has been greeted with widespread dismay both in the United States and abroad. Yet in truth, it should not have been altogether surprising. The groundwork, after all, was laid way back in December 2018, when President Trump declared that the United States was immediately withdrawing all troops from Syria, now that the Islamic State had been defeated.

That decision was subsequently partially reversed as a result of internal pressure within the Administration from officials who argued about the need for a residual U.S. presence to, among other things, serve as a blocking force against Iranian infiltration. Now, however, the President is once again moving forward with his original plan. And although the decision has been roundly criticized by experts and lawmakers on both sides of the U.S. political aisle, it remains consistent with a number of the Trump administration's longstanding foreign policy priorities.

The first is a smaller footprint in Syria. While Administration officials have worked diligently to bring the Syrian civil war to a conclusion and ensure the start of post-conflict stabilization there, it would be fair to say that the White House does not have a clear idea of what it wants Syria to ultimately look like. Rather, the Trump team's objectives are more limited: to roll back and dismantle the Islamic State's nascent *caliphate* and to prevent a resurgence of the terrorist group there. Those goals have arguably now been achieved, allowing the White House to once again contemplate stepping back from active involvement in Syria.

The second is the President's persistent efforts to improve U.S. relations with countries that he views as significant geopolitical powers. One of them is Russia, which now maintains a robust strategic presence in Syria, and which has a long-term plan to strengthen its position in the region still further. Another is Turkey, with whom U.S. relations have lately been on the rocks – but which the President clearly hopes to engage in a more constructive manner on a range of issues. That's why the President's latest Syria decision was coupled with an invitation to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to visit the White House in mid-November. Quite simply, both represent confidence-building measures designed to reset Washington's relations with Ankara.

Finally, the President remains deeply dissatisfied with what he sees as an imbalance in global burden-sharing. This complaint has, over the past couple of years, come to characterize his dealings with NATO, but it pertains to the current situation in the Middle East as well. The White House has urged Europe and regional nations alike to take a more active role in managing the after-effects of ISIS' decline, including the repatriation or rehabilitation of terrorist foreign fighters. To date, however, neither Brussels nor Middle Eastern capitals have come up with much of a plan for dealing with ISIS "returnees" or for managing the burgeoning security and political crises created by lingering pockets of radicalism, like Syria's notorious al-Hol refugee camp. In the Administration's eyes, however, such failure does not automatically make the situation the responsibility of the United States. With his Syria announcement, the President is making clear that he sees the post-ISIS security environment not as America's problem but as somebody else's.

Yet, even if it's possible to understand the motivations behind the president's Syria decision, it's equally apparent that the potential consequences are likely to be catastrophic.

Already, the tectonic plates in the region have begun to shift significantly. Turkey's government has understandably taken the President's announcement as a "green light" to begin a major military incursion into northern Syria. In response, assorted Syrian opposition forces have been forced to consider alliance talks with their mortal enemy, the Assad regime, in order to build a common front against the invading Turkish force. And elements of ISIS are attempting to seize the opportunity provided by the disorder to retake pockets of territory recently lost by the group in Syria. These trends point to the start of a qualitatively new phase in the long-running Syrian conflict.

Perhaps most problematic, however, is the impact of Trump's decision on America's global alliances. Even before this latest development, the Administration's relationship with longstanding allies (like the nations of NATO) was strained. In its aftermath, U.S. partners are expressing serious doubts about whether America can be counted on at all. Indeed, even Israel – which has benefited greatly from the Trump administration's foreign policy priorities – has warned that, no matter how friendly the current team in Washington is, it cannot rely on the United States as a guarantor of its security. Similar conversations are assuredly now taking place throughout the region, in capitals like Riyadh, Baghdad, and Amman.

The Trump team thus now faces the same credibility problem that bedeviled its predecessor. During its time in office, the Obama administration's *laissez-faire* attitude toward the region – dressed up in a doctrine of "leading from behind" – made it a mere bystander to regional trends, rather than a driver of them. President Trump, who came into office decrying this passivity, has now put the U.S. in a remarkably similar place: one that promises to sideline the U.S. in regional partnerships and diminish America's ability to shape events in the region.

The consequences of Trump's decision thus promise to be profound – and profoundly negative for American interests in the Middle East.