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Trump Bows to Domestic Pressure by Delaying His Withdrawal from Syria; A Storm Is Gathering in the Levant

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Global Research, January 03, 2019
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Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Intelligence, US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: SYRIA

In response to domestic pressure, Trump agreed to extend the deadline for withdrawal of thousands of US troops from the northeaster Syrian province of al-Hasaka from the initial 30 days previously announced until April this year. Journalistic warmongers and hawks in think-tanks and among the US establishment have been railing at Trump with implausible arguments for maintaining the presence of US forces in Syria. The attacks on Trump are mainly justified on the pretext of protecting the US allies, the Kurds, from possible extermination by the Turks. Other analysts dare to repeat the absurd US mantra that "ISIS has between 20,000 and 30,000 militants in Syria and Iraq" to justify the continuous occupation of northeast Syria. If these arguments were not enough, others claim that Trump would be delivering the north of Syria to Iranian and Russian scarecrows, or that he would be facilitating the "Iranian-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut connection". Trump remains determined to pull out, despite his allies Israel, France and the UK begging him to stay longer in the Levant.

No delay will change the fate of al-Hasaka province or the unfolding course of events: 2019 will mark the return of the northeast province to the control of the Syria government forces; Turkey is choosing its camp; and the Arabs – afraid of becoming orphans like the Kurds – are overwhelming Assad with their warmth, acting as though they had not been waging war on his country since 2011.

As far as concerns the Kurds in al-Hasaka, based in the north-east of the Syrian province, they have offered themselves as human shields to Trump's forces since they considered themselves US allies. Today, following Trump's decision to withdraw his occupation forces, they have come to the clear recognition: the US can't be trusted as an ally. Indeed, president Donald Trump did not consult with his European allies and certainly not with the YPG/SDF Kurds of Syria before deciding on withdrawal of his forces. The YPG, a branch of the PKK in Syria, understand that the continuous presence of the US forces as occupation troops imposes the burden of rebuilding the destroyed cities and infrastructure on the Kurds. Trump is not willing to undertake this reconstruction, and is failing to gather enough financial aid for this purpose from the Arab oil-rich countries who understand that the war in Syria is over.

It is thus clear that the current US establishment is not willing to invest in al-Hasaka province, and neither are the Arab allies who see no benefit in continuing to support "regime change" in Syria. The Arabs are engaged today in reopening their embassies in Damascus in an attempt to repair relationships they ruined during seven years of war.

Sudan, the Emirates, Bahrein have all resumed official relations with the Syrian government, and soon Kuwait will do the same. Other countries are expected to follow suit. Saudi Arabia is not against the idea. Indeed, Sudan, Bahrein and the Emirates are very close allies to Saudi Arabia and would never move forward towards president Bashar al-Assad without Riyadh's consent.

Saudi Arabia has been sending many positive signals to Damascus: the opening of the Syrian-Jordanian Naseeb crossing was not without its blessing, and Saudi Arabia is expected to play a positive role during the forthcoming European-Arab league meeting expected in February 24 in Cairo, Egypt. Saudi Arabia has never cut contacts with Syria since King Salman took power: in 2015, through a Russian initiative, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman met with the Syrian president's security envoy General Ali Mamlouk at Riyadh airport to explain that he inherited the anti-Assad policy from the previous Saudi ruler and that he would like to see some distance between Iran and the Levant. Mamlouk has maintained direct links with Brigadier Khaled Bin Ali Bin Abdallah al-Hneydan, the Saudi intelligence chief. He explained that Syria is faithful to its friends, the Iranians, and is not willing to limit its relationship with Tehran, although Syria does not on that account wish to be alienated from other Arab countries. Mamlouk's recent visit to Egypt carried one message from Assad to the Arab league: "Syria did not split from the Arab League but it was the Arabs who detached themselves from Syria in 2012. Those who pushed Damascus out can bring it back in". Also, Saudi Arabia removed Adel al-Jubeir from his previous ministerial position as a Foreign Minister, he who repeatedly called throughout the years of war for the removal of Assad "by diplomatic or military means" is no longer fit as a future link be tween Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Damascus finds itself in a stronger position in 2019 than it has in the last seven years of war. Turkey is not willing to stand against Assad, but is relying on Iran and Russia to establish a proxy relationship with Damascus. President Erdogan needs Russia and Iran as strategic commercial allies. He knows that the US is not a reliable partner since it has armed Turkey's enemies, the Kurdish YPG/PKK in Syria, to the teeth, on the pretext of fighting ISIS. He also is aware that Assad could support attacks inside Turkish borders by Kurds and Arab tribes if Turkey doesn't align itself in a partnership with Russia, Iran and Syria. Turkey would suffer if Syria were to line up with the UAE and Saudi against it. The US Gulf allies, notably the Emirates, do not hide their animosity towards Ankara. The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash says his country wants to return to friendship with Syria and aims to "stand against the Iranian and Turkish fronts in the region [of the Middle East]".

This is forcing Erdogan to define a friendlier strategy towards Syria – without necessarily standing against the US since he does not plan to step out of NATO in the near future – by maintaining a harmonious relationship with his partners in the Levant, Russia and Iran. These are the best channels for Turkey to coordinate the presence of its forces and proxies in Syria and to avoid collision with the forces of the Syrian government. This was the context of the Russian-Turkish meeting in Moscow in late December 2018, where Erdogan agreed to refrain from replacing US forces in Manbij, allowing the US to withdraw first so that the Syrian Army can move in and later disarm the YPG/PKK in due course. Moreover, Erdogan doesn't want to see Assad joining the emerging Arab front against Turkey. Likewise, the Arab countries who are suddenly showing care and affection for Assad seem to want to keep their options open by bringing Damascus closer in case of a Trump U-turn against them, as he has turned away from the PKK Kurds in Syria.

But Turkey has still another problem to digest: Idlib and the jihadists. In rural Aleppo and rural Idlib, the jihadists of HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, i.e. ex-Nusra) have decided to cripple the pro-Turkish forces of Noureddine Zengi and have managed to take control of all fronts against the Syrian army. HTS took advantage of the presence of the bulk of pro-Turkish forces on Manbij front to attack the remnants forces left behind. These jihadists, supported by Turkistani militants, have never respected the cease-fire established in Astana by Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Their continuous violations have triggered many harsh Russian responses. If they decide to attack the Syrian army's defence lines in large numbers, the ceasefire will no longer be valid. Syria will have to fight back, with support from its allies and Russia. The timing – if this takes place before the US withdrawal – will be inappropriate.

هيئة تحرير الشام
الجناح العسكري

التاريخ: ٢٥ ربيع الآخر ١٤٤٠
الموافق: ١ / ١ / ٢٠١٩

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله وآله وصحبه ومن والاه وبعد :

إلى أهلنا المسلمين في مدينة دارة عزة أعزها الله ، أنتم أهلنا ، نحن منكم وأنتم منا ،ولامشكلة لنا معكم بل مشكلتنا مع من اعتدى علينا وقتل جنودنا ، فنطلب منكم التزام بيوتكم مشكورين حتى لا يصاب أحد منكم بأذى.

وإلى جنود الزنكي في مدينة دارة عزة وغيرها من المناطق نقول لكم : من ألقى سلاحه فهو آمن ...ومن دخل بيته فهو آمن ...ومن استسلم لنا فهو آمن ..

ويا جنود هيئة تحرير الشام نوصيكم بتقوى الله عز وجل ، وإياكم والكبر والغرور ،كونوا أذلة لأهلكم المسلمين ،لا تروعوا أحدا من الأهالي ولا تدخلوا بيتاً ، ونوصيكم خيراً بجنود الزنكي من استأمنكم فأمنوه ومن سلمكم نفسه فاحفظوه ومن أصر منهم على البغي فإلى رشده أرجعوه .

(وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ)

هيئة تحرير الشام
القائد العسكري العام
الجناح العسكري
المسؤول العام

Regardless of the situation on the Idlib front, the government of Damascus is determined to regain the territory under jihadist control whenever the occasion for battle presents itself.

But these are not the only jihadists left in Syria: ISIS still occupy five to six villages along the Euphrates river where US forces have given them quiet protection for many months. These villages are the only physical geography still under ISIS control in Syria and Iraq, yet the Pentagon ridiculously claims there are 20,000 to 30,000 ISIS militants in the two countries. Syrian intelligence estimates the number of ISIS militants in the Euphrates villages as less than 1500. In Iraq there remain ISIS sleeper cells yet, unless the Pentagon has details on every single sleeper cell, it is impossible to count the number of ISIS supporters in various Iraqi cities. Iraqi counter-terrorism units and Hashd al-Shaabi have established tight control on all provinces and have infiltrated many ISIS cells, quietly arresting many of them on a regular basis. Iraqi security forces estimate the number of ISIS militants at between 1500

and 2000 all over Iraq. The number of car bombs and "spectacular attacks" has been insignificant in Mesopotamia in the last months. There is no doubt that ISIS can attack isolated objectives or soft targets in remote villages or travel by night in small groups to demonstrate a presence. But there is also no doubt that its "Islamic State" has been thrown irretrievably into the bin of history. The impossibly high Pentagon estimates can only be interpreted as part of an effort to justify an indefinite US presence in Syria and Iraq.

No matter whether Trump decides to delay or speed up his withdrawal, the Kurdish YPG/PKK have chosen their camp next to Damascus. The sooner US troops pull out the better, if they wish to avoid a vindictive reaction from those who offered themselves as human shield for years and lost thousands of men and women for their dream of Rojava. No matter how long the US holds onto its hostility against the Syrian government, the Arabs are ready to invest in the reconstruction of the Levant, to atone for their sin of financing the war for years, and to return the prestigious Syrian state to their fold.

No one is more interested than the Syrian army in defeating ISIS and making sure there will be no return to an "Islamic State". For this to happen, Assad needs to eliminate al-Qaeda and all jihadists in Syria: Turkey would be happy to lift this burden from its shoulders, and Russia and Iran consider the extermination of Takfiris in the Levant as vital for their national security.

Turkey will take further positive steps towards Assad, who today enjoys a more prestigious position than at any time since 2011. Indeed the Levant is returning to the centre of Middle East and world attention in a stronger position than in 2011. Syria has advanced precision missiles that can hit any building in Israel. Assad also has an air defence system he would have never dreamt of before 2011 thanks to Israel's continuous violation of its airspace and its defiance of Russian authority. Hezbollah has constructed bases for its long and medium range precision missiles in the mountains and has created a bond with Syria that it could never have established if not for the war. Iran has established a strategic brotherhood with Syria thanks to its role in defeating the regime change plan. NATO's support for the growth of ISIS has created a bond between Syria and Iraq that no Muslim or Baathist link could ever have created: Iraq has a "carte blanche" to bomb ISIS locations in Syria without the consent of the Syrian leadership (following Assad's total blessing to the Iraqi leadership to join in the fight on ISIS), and the Iraqi security forces can walk into Syria anytime they see fit to fight ISIS. The anti-Israel axis has never been stronger than it is today. That is the result of 2011-2018 war imposed on Syria.

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