

Trump Is Leaving Behind a Trap for Russia, Turkey and Iran in Syria

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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The US executive [order of withdrawal](#) from Syria has been signed off on, indicating that President Trump is determined to recall the few thousands US troops in Syria back home. It is well known that regular troops are much more vulnerable during withdrawal operations than in combat or deployment positions. Accordingly, the withdrawal, which seems to be happening despite widespread scepticism in Syria and Iraq, will likely take less than the announced 100 days to complete. US military command keeps the dates secret to avoid casualties. Although the departure of the US is much welcomed by all parties in and around Syria – except for the Kurds – Trump is intentionally leaving behind a very chaotic situation in the Levant, and is setting a deadly trap for Russia in the first place, but also for Iran and Turkey.

Judging from what Presidents Trump and Erdogan said to each other during their last phone conversations, it seems the US establishment has decided to leave Syria [in Turkey's hands](#). This is far from an innocent move. Indeed, the Pentagon has deliberately pushed the several thousand ISIS fighters in the area under its control to the shore of the Euphrates river, facing the Syrian Army and its allies on the Deir-Ezzour front. This means that, in case of a fast US withdrawal coordinated with Turkey, Ankara's troops will be able to move into the Kurdish-Arab province of al-Hasaka, starting perhaps with Manbij or [Tal Abiad](#), facing no opposition from ISIS for the simple reason that there aren't any ISIS militants in the area. The two cities are hundreds of kilometres away from the ISIS-controlled area along the Euphrates in Deir-



Donald J. Trump ✓

@realDonaldTrump

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President [@RT_Erdogan](#) of Turkey has very strongly informed me that he will eradicate whatever is left of ISIS in Syria....and he is a man who can do it plus, Turkey is right “next door.” Our troops are coming home!

5:54 AM - 24 Dec 2018

Ezzour.

Turkey can eradicate ISIS in Manbij, Tel Abiad, Ain Arab, Raqqah and all the way to Qamishli simply because ISIS is not present in the entire area but along the Euphrates opposite the Syrian Army forces where the US pushed it.

In the case of a sudden Turkish attack, the YPG Kurdish forces (Syrian PKK) will have to rush

towards the advancing Turkish troops and try to slow them down, waiting for the Syrian government's help and allowing civilians to leave towards Damascus controlled areas or to flee toward Iraqi Kurdistan. Such a move will disrupt the Turkish-Russian-Syrian relationship. Moscow has already [warned](#) Turkey against moving into the northeast Syria. Any Turkish move, or even the advance of its jihadist proxy forces in Syria, amassed on the border of the Kurdish controlled provinces, will trigger a reshuffle in the relationships between Moscow and Ankara and between Moscow and Damascus. Such a realignment can only be avoided if President Erdogan resists the temptation to invade and accedes to Russia's clear preference that the US departure be followed by discussions about the future of the area.

Turkey was already contemplating – according to well-informed sources in Syria – annexing the north of Syria rather than occupying it. Any occupation of Syrian territory will generate international complications and lack of recognition worldwide. However, Turkey has learned from Northern Cyprus that annexation can continue for decades with only sporadic reactions from the international community. Russia's annexation of Crimea might be taken as a precedent.

If Erdogan doesn't coordinate with Russia and Iran, the Idlib front will be opened. Pretexts are not lacking since the jihadists are continuously violating the cease-fire agreed in Astana. A Turkish invasion will lead the Syrian Army to attack Idlib, the city and rural area under jihadist control, while also attacking ISIS on the Euphrates with a view to a quick victory.

Any possible ISIS future massacre and attacks in the Kurdish controlled provinces will give a retroactive moral legitimacy to the past years of US occupation of Syria territory. Pundits and US establishment officials will tell the world how the illegal US presence in Syria over the years had served to fight terrorism (ISIS).

In Damascus there is a growing understanding between Kurds and government representatives, as [negotiations continue](#), about how they will face ISIS together once the US pulls out all forces, a withdrawal expected in less than one month.

There is a need for military coordination to create a secure passage for the troops to squeeze ISIS between two forces on several fronts along the Euphrates river before it expands toward the vast area of al-Hasaka. That will require the support of Russian Air Force, the Syrian Special forces, Iranian ground forces allies and Hezbollah to participate in this very decisive battle to end ISIS, a job the USA did not find time for during the last couple of years of its occupation of the same area.



The YPG will find themselves cooperating with Russia after having fought under USA command for many years. Simultaneously, more Syrian and allied forces will be pushed towards Idlib to prevent the jihadists from taking advantage of the ISIS extermination operation to attack.

For Turkey, any unilateral plan to move into Syria without coordinating with Russia is not to its full advantage. US withdrawal will allow Turkey to reach neither ISIS nor the rich [oil and gas fields](#) in DeirEzzour, including al-Omar's abundant oil and [Conoco](#) gas fields. These will be targeted and reached by the Syrian government forces and their allies only after the US withdraws its forces. Last February, Damascus ordered its forces to cross the Euphrates in an attempt to attack ISIS and control the oil and gas fields. These were attacked by the US coalition, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of [Syrian and Russian](#) Wagner contractors.

Turkish combat skills were not very impressive when Turkish forces clashed with ISIS in many areas, including Jarablus, Al Rai and Dabiq, in 2016. The forces of Ankara were able to control these cities only after a deal with ISIS who managed to absorb the first wave of attack and inflict severe losses on Turkish forces during the first weeks. ISIS pulled out once the battle was doomed and it was attacked from the rear.

It is likely that neither the Turkish army and its allies nor the Kurdish YPG are capable of defeating ISIS alone. The Syrian army, on the other hand, with the help of their allies and the Russians, have driven ISIS out of many places on the Syrian geography including Palmyra, Suweida and surrounding steppe, spread over tens of thousands of kilometres, in urban and open area warfare.

What is certain is that the Kurds have everything to lose from Trump's decision to withdraw, as he daily gives more indications that he wants to end his occupation of northeast Syria in favour of Turkey. They have [profited](#) greatly from the US presence, thinking it would never end. Now they don't have many choices unless they have developed suicidal tendencies, as their decision in [Afrin](#) suggests.

The quick US withdrawal is expected and even designed to create, no doubt, an initial confusion in the triangle Turkey-Syria-Iraq in the first months. ISIS, Turkey, and al-Qaeda

may take advantage of this, hoping to turn the situation to their advantage. Nevertheless, this withdrawal will no doubt be a long-term blessing to the Syrian government, whose officials had not dared to hope for such an outcome. The US establishment has been a source of continuous havoc in the Levant and especially to the “Axis of the Resistance”; it has been the protector of al-Qaeda (in Idlib) and ISIS (in the area Trump declares his intention to withdraw from) in Syria and Iraq. Its departure is a sign that the US is coming to grips with the fact that its hegemony is no longer unilateral. Russia is moving forward while the US is backing off in the Middle East.

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