



Trump administration thinking 'very seriously' about withdrawing troops from Syria

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On Tuesday, President Donald Trump stated that the United States should withdraw its troops from the region and focus on "rebuilding our country" after recent U.S.-led coalition victories against the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group in Syria and Iraq.

The statement followed a surprise foreign policy announcement last week. During a speech on infrastructure investment, the president said U.S. troops would be leaving Syria "very soon."

At the White House on Tuesday, Trump reemphasized his position. "I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home. I want to start rebuilding our nation," the president said at a press conference with NATO allies. "We were very successful against ISIS. We'll be successful against anybody militarily, but sometimes it's time to come back home. And we're thinking about that very seriously."

In the coming days, Trump is expected to sit down with his National Security Council to discuss the future of the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS.

The recent statements on troops withdrawal were consistent with Trump's position on the campaign trail, but at odds with members of his own national security team who appear to be following a different playbook for U.S. involvement overseas. That disconnect has reopened questions about the Trump era in foreign policy and whether the United States will retire to domestic concerns or remain the indispensable power and presence on the ground in foreign conflicts.

According to reports, Trump's public comments reflected internal deliberations the president has had with national security team, but not necessarily the views of his top advisers. Trump has

made clear that "once ISIS and its remnants are destroyed that the United States would be looking toward having countries in the region playing a larger role in ensuring security and leaving it at that," Reuters reported, citing an administration official familiar with the president's thinking.

The official added that those conditions on the ground are still a long way off and President Trump is being advised to keep U.S. forces in the area for "at least a couple of years" to secure the gains made against the Islamic State.

Currently, the United States has roughly 2,000 special operations forces deployed to northern Syria to advise and assist local forces. On Monday, CNN reported that the Pentagon was weighing plans to send dozens of additional troops to northern Syria, a deployment that would seem to be at odds with the president's latest statements on troop withdrawal.

In a statement to Sinclair Broadcast Group, a Pentagon spokesperson for Operation Inherent Resolve declined to comment on the "hypothetical" changes in the U.S. presence in Syria as a result of Trump's statements. "The Coalition is focused on ensuring the lasting defeat of Daesh [ISIS] in Iraq and Syria," the spokesman said.

Colin Clarke, a terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation explained that the Islamic State's so-called caliphate has largely collapsed, but there are still pockets of ISIS fighters entrenched throughout Syria. "By no stretch has the threat from ISIS dissipated," he warned. "It's not what it used to be but it's going to remain a significant threat for the next five or ten years at least."

If the Trump administration doesn't see the fight through to the end, Clarke believes a resurgence of ISIS is "highly likely if not inevitable" within six months to a year after a U.S. withdrawal.

In addition to the possibility of a new terrorist insurgency, Trump is also risking political instability by making statements in contradiction to members of his own cabinet.

The president is sending "mixed signals" to U.S. allies and regional partners who recognize that ISIS represents "an enduring threat," Clarke noted. While those allies are seemingly in the fight for the long haul, "it's unclear whether the United States is or not."

Since the president launched his political campaign, he has maintained a consistent position on U.S. foreign military interventions. Trump routinely criticized the U.S. involvement in Iraq and has said the U.S. role in Syria should be limited to "knocking the hell out of ISIS" and then promptly bringing American troops home.

Members of his administration have outlined a somewhat different path forward, that includes an enduring presence in the region to secure the gains against ISIS and prevent Iran and other regional bad actors from seizing control of territory liberated by the United States and its allies.

Before he was fired by President Trump, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined the U.S. strategy in the Middle East, saying in January that the United States would have an enduring presence in Syria to provide stability after the military defeat of the Islamic State. The Trump administration would not repeat the mistakes of the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, that

contributed to the rise of ISIS, the former secretary said. "We cannot allow history to repeat itself in Syria."

Gen. Joseph Votel, the head U.S. Central Command outlined the challenges that still face the United States and its allies, namely ensuring the lasting defeat of ISIS. "In many regards, the military aspect of this has been the easier part," Votel said at a U.S. Institute of Peace forum. "It is the aftermath, it is the stabilization, it is the bringing back of governance...that really, I think, is much more challenging in the long-run."

At the same forum, U.S. special envoy to the global anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk stressed that the U.S. mission in Syria is to fight ISIS, "That mission isn't over and we're going to complete that mission."

Similarly, Defense Secretary James Mattis has argued for a sustained U.S. presence in the region, though he recently suggested that the United States would be shifting from an "offensive terrain-seizing approach to a stabilizing" the country with a greater mix of diplomatic personnel, rather than military advisers.

Up until the president's Thursday speech in Ohio, "it seemed like everyone had been on the same page," said David Adesnik, research director at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "It seemed that we were going to be in Syria for a certain period, defined by conditions on the ground, and the president has suddenly announced a reversal of that."

Given Trump's statements as a civilian and on the campaign trail, the troop withdrawal doesn't come as a complete surprise, but it raises questions about whether policies that go against the president's instincts have any staying power.

For the better part of his first 14 months in office, the president's national security team, including Tillerson, Mattis and outgoing national security adviser H.R. McMaster generally prevailed over Trump's instincts and campaign promises. For example, they were able to override Trump's "original instinct" to pull troops out of Afghanistan, convincing Trump to deploy an additional 3,000 troops to the country last September.

"We're still trying to figure out if the president commits to a policy that is somewhat at odds with his instincts and his campaign speeches, does that mean he will not stick with it as long," Adesnik said.

Cato Institute senior fellow Doug Bandow said that in the case of calling for a troop withdrawal in Syria, President Trump's instincts are correct. "The president's gut is right in this case. The challenge of course, is that his gut reaction has very little to do with U.S. policy," he explained.

Bandow recently wrote a piece calling on Trump to declare victory over ISIS and bring home American troops from Syria. The United States, he argued, has no vital interests at stake beyond defeating ISIS. With well over 90 percent of Islamic State territory retaken, regional actors should take ownership, he wrote, "everyone else in the Middle East should play clean-up."

President Trump has often pointed to the outsized role the United States plays in overseas conflicts, especially when it comes to shouldering warfighting and reconstruction costs. On

Tuesday, Trump argued the United States got "nothing" for the cost of the conflict. "Think of it, \$7 trillion over a 17-year period. We have nothing, nothing except death and destruction."

Rather than keeping a presence in Syria indefinitely, the United States should let other parties shoulder the cost of stability, Trump said in his Ohio speech. "Let the other people take care of it now."

The U.S.-led global coalition against ISIS is made up of 75 different partners. Some contribute financially, others play a role militarily. Brett McGurk stressed on Tuesday that the global coalition is built on "regional ownership," that regional actors need to step up and contribute to their own long-term stability and reconstruction.

However, the president's assertion that "other people" can fill the void left by the United States, has raised concerns in foreign policy circles that Trump is creating a power vacuum in Syria that will inevitably be filled by Iran, Russia, the Syrian government of Bashar Assad, and other powers that are hostile to U.S. interests.

The United States also risks handing over control of the vast majority of Syria's oil wealth in the northern part of the country to the Assad regime, Adesnik explained. If the United States abandons the territory it currently holds in partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces they will come under pressure to transfer that natural resource wealth back to the regime in Damascus.

President Trump has repeatedly argued that the United States' big mistake in Iraq was not "taking the oil." By leaving local partners without adequate protection, the United States would repeat that error, essentially allowing billions of dollars in oil revenue flow back to the Syrian regime and its benefactors, Iran and Russia.

Similarly, a hasty withdrawal risks recreating the conditions created when the United States left Iraq in 2011. The lack of stability and rapid drawdown of U.S. security forces created the conditions that gave rise to ISIS in the first place.

President Trump repeatedly criticized Barack Obama for his withdrawal from Iraq. If Trump makes good on his recent statements, he risks making "precisely the same mistake Obama made," according to Adesnik.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina recently warned that a withdrawal from Syria "would be the single worst decision the president could make."

The senator said on Fox News Sunday, "If we withdrew our troops anytime soon, ISIS would come back. And you'd be giving Damascus to the Iranians without an American presence, and Russia and Iran would dominate Syria."