



U.S. withdrawal from Syria puts a check on mission creep

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As dire as the situation in Syria may be, President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria could well prove the lesser of two evils.

The big picture: The U.S. military presence in Syria has continued despite its lack of congressional authorization or coherent strategy, risking another long entanglement of U.S. forces in a Middle Eastern country. It is also illegal under international law.

Background: The Obama administration first deployed U.S. troops to Syria to complement its aerial bombing campaign against ISIS with special operations forces and coordinate with local anti-ISIS militias on the ground, gradually expanding from hundreds of troops to roughly 4,000.

- The mission expanded, too, from merely defeating ISIS (substantially accomplished some time ago) to ushering Syrian President Bashar al-Assad out of power, expelling Iranian forces, and edging out Russia.

The other side: Trump's decision has come without a clear public explanation or the kind of careful inter-agency process that would enable the most responsible withdrawal (though the fault for that may lie more with his hawkish advisers).

- Moreover, Syria is unlikely to achieve peace and security in the near term: The Turks may engage in operations against the Kurds in Syria's northeast, and ISIS may make some gains.

Yes, but: That doesn't justify an unauthorized and indefinite military presence.

- U.S. diplomats can try to curb Turkish plans against the Kurds.
- ISIS' permanent defeat probably does not require a U.S. ground presence in Syria. ISIS is already decimated, and surrounded by enemies determined to nip its potential re-emergence in the bud.
- It's impossible for the U.S. to forestall every unwanted contingency in the region. Just as ISIS itself was a byproduct of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, so too could a continued presence in Syria create unintended consequences.

The bottom line: Absent achievable goals and a strong national security imperative backed up by congressional authorization, the U.S. presence in Syria is illegitimate and better off wound down.

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