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Trump's Syria strategy was always a mess

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On Monday, Jim Jeffrey, the Trump administration's special envoy to Syria, reiterated to an audience in Washington what he had been saying for weeks: That the United States would maintain a military role in the war-blighted country as long as it takes to shepherd a peace process that satisfied American interests.

A week earlier, Brett McGurk, Washington's top diplomat in the war against the Islamic State, warned that even though the jihadist organization was in retreat — driven from its strongholds in the Syrian city of Raqqa and Iraqi city of Mosul, its dreams of a theocratic “caliphate” in the Middle East dashed — it was far from defeated. “Nobody working on these issues day to day is complacent. Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished,” McGurk said at a State Department briefing. “Defeating a physical caliphate is one phase of a much longer-term campaign.”

Days before Trump announces victory over ISIS, officials were preparing for a long engagement

The Trump administration is planning to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria immediately. The president tweeted Dec. 19 that the U.S. had defeated ISIS in Syria. (Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

In September, on the sidelines of the meetings of the United Nations General Assembly, White House national security adviser John Bolton issued perhaps the most bellicose statement of intent: “We’re not going to leave [Syria] as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias,” he said. Given the deep partnership between Iran and the Syrian regime, Bolton seemed to be promising an indefinite occupation.

But none of these officials were on quite the same page as President Trump. On Wednesday, reports indicated that the administration was preparing for a “full” and “rapid” withdrawal from northeast Syria, where thousands of U.S. troops have operated largely in coordination with Syrian Kurdish militias. Trump took to Twitter, declaring that, since the Islamic State was “defeated,” there was no reason to maintain that troop presence.

Senior staffers in the State Department, Pentagon and major foreign embassies all seemed stunned by the development. It was yet another twist from a president whose foreign policy vision has swung wildly from military adventurism to isolationism to random points in between.

But maybe it should not be too surprising. No matter the coterie of traditional Republican foreign-policy hawks in his team, Trump has made no secret of his distaste for protracted foreign entanglements, a wariness shared by the Obama administration that preceded him.

“Both the Trump and Obama administrations have resisted becoming more involved in Syria’s larger civil war but many senior officials — including at the State Department and Pentagon — have supported an ongoing troop presence in Syria until security conditions improve and a

political solution can be reached,” reported The Post’s Missy Ryan. “Defense officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a decision that has not yet been announced, said the withdrawal was expected to occur as quickly as possible and would affect the entire force of more than 2,000 U.S. service members.”

Yet Trump has also loudly tried to assert himself as a different kind of player in the region. He mocked Obama’s efforts to counter the Islamic State (even while largely pursuing the same strategy). He moved to scrap the Obama-era nuclear deal with Iran and pushed for further confrontation with Tehran (ignoring the entreaties of European allies and the leadership in neighboring Iraq). He preened over his decision to launch a couple of missile strikes on the regime of President Bashar al-Assad (even though those barrages amounted to not much more than a slap on Damascus’s wrist). He touted his administration’s relentless air campaign against the Islamic State (even as we learn more of the hideous toll exacted on civilians in Raqqa and Mosul by the U.S. coalition’s bombardments). And he drastically cut the number of Syrian refugees to be resettled in the United States (even as international organizations warned of the generational trauma facing millions of Syrians chased from their homes).

At no point has Trump been able to articulate a clear endgame for U.S. policy regarding Syria. That’s also not surprising: The conflict is dizzyingly complex, involving competing regional powers, a mess of rival factions and few easy pathways toward a lasting settlement. But Trump’s sudden decision to remove U.S. troops is yet another instance where his impulsiveness has superseded any effort to pursue a coherent strategy.

To sum up, Trump defies his entire national security team, goes against the wishes of key allies, and weakens the pressure campaign against Iran. But he delivers big time for his autocratic friends Putin and Erdogan.

In Washington, a chorus of critics in the capital’s think tanks and in Congress voiced their disquiet after the news broke. They argued, as Trump’s own officials have, that the Islamic State is far from defeated and that the conditions for its resurgence — including security vacuums — may deepen. They lamented how Washington was once more undermining the region’s Kurdish factions, which were instrumental in pushing back the jihadists on the ground, but now are at risk of being subdued or co-opted by more powerful actors. Relief groups also warned of the prospect of new humanitarian crises should fighting in Syria’s fragile northeast resume again.

Barbara Leaf, a former U.S. ambassador and a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, suggested Trump was “harkening back to a campaign promise” to detach the United States from its costly wars. But, she told Today’s WorldView, he “gutted his own declared policy on Syria as well as taking a whack at his Iran strategy, a major part of which is ostensibly aimed at blunting Tehran’s destabilizing activities in the Middle East.”

A rapid U.S. withdrawal also reflects Trump’s disinterest in the hard work ahead. “ISIS was not going to disappear because of a counterterrorism operation and they will be back in some form anyway,” wrote Faysal Itani of the Atlantic Council in a policy brief. “We will lose any leverage we had against Assad or Iran — though I do not think it ever amounted to much without an offensive military mandate. I expect Turkish and Iranian land grabs would ensue if there were no U.S. security guarantee to the Kurds.”

Critics of U.S. military interventionism argue there could be worse outcomes. “It can’t be America’s purpose to indefinitely forestall every plausible unwanted contingency in this region,” noted John Glaser of the libertarian Cato Institute, suggesting in an email statement that fears of Turkish incursions against the Kurds or Iranian gains don’t justify an indefinite military commitment to Syria — least of all one that has not been authorized by Congress. He added that the United States can still “engage in diplomacy to try to curb Ankara. And as far as ISIS, it’s not at all clear that their permanent defeat depends on U.S. boots on the ground.”

The problem with Trump is that he has not shown the interest in such tricky diplomacy or championed the extensive reconstruction and humanitarian efforts still required in devastated cities like Raqqa and Mosul. In an essay in Foreign Affairs, Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes argued that Washington is locked in “a kind of Middle Eastern purgatory—too distracted by regional crises to pivot to other global priorities but not invested enough to move the region in a better direction.”

Trump is only the latest U.S. leader to have to reckon with this dilemma, but it’s one he seems singularly incapable of resolving.