



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Implications of the US Withdrawal from Syria

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The withdrawal of US forces from the Kurdish areas of northern Syria will help strengthen Iran's standing in the country, make Russia the leading power in the region, and possibly lead to the resurgence of ISIS terror. All these outcomes will have far-reaching policy implications for the Middle East's pro-Western actors and for the war on jihadist terror.

On the morning of October 24, 1973, the Israeli ambassador in Washington was summoned for an urgent discussion with White House Chief of Staff Gen. Alexander Haig. The meeting marked the high point of the pressure the US was putting on Israel to halt the fighting on the Egyptian front and lift the siege of the Egyptian Third Army. Haig did not mince words and warned that if hostilities were to continue, President Nixon would consider disengaging from Israel.

For the first time since the special US-Israeli relationship emerged in the early 1960s, Israel's position and interests were on a direct collision course with Washington. The Nixon administration, which laid the foundations for normal US relations with Egypt during the Yom Kippur War, did not intend to let Israel spoil this process even at the cost of a crisis and damage to US-Israeli ties. Thus did Israel experience firsthand the price of friendship with (and dependency on) "Uncle Sam." Jerusalem was forced to accede to the American dictate.

Israel during the Yom Kippur War, the Iranian Shah at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Hosni Mubarak at the outset of the 2011 "Arab Spring," and now the Kurds—the common denominator is that at those allies' most critical moments, their main patron, on which they had pinned their hopes, did not stay by their side. Washington saw developments differently and considered its interests alone, even at the cost of damaging American credibility.

And what is the American interest today? To disengage from the Middle East.

According to a study entitled “The Costs of War” published by Brown University in 2018, since 2001 the US has spent \$5.9 trillion on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Pakistan. The US is tired of pointless wars that consume huge budgets and take a grave human toll (since September 11, 2001, about 7,000 American soldiers have been killed in Middle Eastern combat). The Americans no longer want to be the “world’s policeman” and seek to distance themselves from the region. That, indeed, is the line that connects the Obama administration and Trump administrations. But whereas the former acted hastily and destructively, the latter strives for the same goal by delegating power and strengthening allies with weapons while eschewing direct responsibility.

The result, unfortunately, is the same, and it ultimately boils down to the question of cost. In the challenging, crisis-ridden arena of the Middle East, the cost is always high.

The impact of the US withdrawal from the Kurdish areas of northern Syria (though not from all of Syria) can be broken down as follows:

- **Strengthening the Russian-Iranian side in Syria.** After a struggle of more than eight years and not a few assessments that Bashar Assad’s days were numbered, the withdrawal brings him nearer to his dream of regaining control of the entire country. The bottom line is that Israel gets “four for the price of one”: Assad plus Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. The Syrian army, though gaining strength, is still weak. The Russians, in the absence of the Americans, have become the region’s balancing and mediating force. The arms that Tehran is sending in an effort to encircle Israel, along with the attempt to build up a northern front at the Israeli-Syrian border, constitute a significant challenge that the IDF will have to address.
- **The danger of ISIS remnants returning to action in the Middle East or in their native countries.** The Kurds are holding more than 10,000 Islamic State fighters or supporters in detention camps. While some are residents of the Middle East, others hope to return to their homes in (primarily) Europe. The Kurds’ focus on counteracting the Turkish advance will leave the detention camps exposed and could lead to the freeing of ISIS members.
- **The refugee crisis.** Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, now with 3.6 million Syrian refugees in his country, would like to return them to Syria. But because the Assad regime has neither the desire nor the ability to absorb them, the upshot would be a humanitarian disaster. In recent years, Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah have been working to alter the demographic balance in large parts of Syria by bolstering the Shiite population at the expense of the Sunnis. In April 2018, Assad passed “Law 10,” which enables the state to nationalize real estate assets and property in cases where ownership cannot be proved. The time for private persons to claim the property expired some time ago, and Assad and his allies are now free to pursue their plans. What will be the fate of

the refugees, the great majority of whom are Sunnis, who will be returned to Syria? For this issue there is still no solution.

- **The danger of a Syrian-Turkish-Russian conflict.** The departure of US forces, and the Kurds' invitation to Assad's army to take their place, could lead to a Syrian-Turkish clash. The Russians, of course, will not let Assad lose. For Moscow and Damascus, the US withdrawal is a gift. It will enable the Syrian army to take control of the approximately one-third of the country the Kurds held (until recently in cooperation with the Americans) without having to fight the Kurds. Hence, the Turkish invasion, which Assad has depicted as a campaign of aggression and conquest, could lead to a Syrian-Turkish-Russian confrontation. Moreover, despite the fact that Turkey launched "Operation Peace Spring" on its own steam, it is still a member of NATO, and a military clash between it and Syria would be no small matter (though it is clear from the recent meeting between Putin and Erdoğan that neither Moscow nor Ankara is interested in such a clash).
- **The erosion of US credibility in the eyes of its Middle Eastern allies.** This question, which arose during Barack Obama's tenure amid the "Arab Spring" and the nuclear deal with Iran, is being further heightened by President Trump. After the Kurds shed their blood to quell the terror threat from ISIS, the expectation was that the US would show understanding for their situation and express gratitude (however naïve it may be to think that way) for their effort in combating jihadist terror. And now, instead of winning support for their goal of autonomy, or backing in the face of the menacing Turkish advance, the Kurds get a cold shoulder from Washington. President Trump, not unlike his predecessor, does not appear to grasp that the US's regional allies—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel—interpret his move completely differently from the way he does. With the playing field left open, special damage control measures are necessary.

In the absence of the containing and deterring presence of the US in the Middle East, the region will revert to something resembling the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s as regional alliances and collaborations emerge to counteract a common enemy. In those days it was the Soviet communist threat; today it is the Iranian danger. But unlike the earlier period, when Israel was viewed as the Arab world's ultimate enemy, it is now regarded as an actor with which one can cooperate (including by parties having no diplomatic ties with Jerusalem) so as to contend with the cardinal danger that threatens the region's stability—Tehran.

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