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The United States Decision to Withdraw Forces from Syria:
Significance for Israel
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For the United States, which still has interests in the Middle East, a hasty withdrawal of forces from Syria weakens its influence on processes in the region and limits its room to maneuver in the face of existing challenges. The US administration leaves its allies with question marks regarding US ability to back their policies, and at the same time, heightens Iran's motivation to strengthen its grip and influence in the area. Israel remains alone in its campaign against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and at most will receive political backing from the United States in the context of this struggle.

The decision by President Donald Trump to remove United States forces from Syria took the US political and security elites and American allies in the region by surprise. In recent months and following the appointment of a special US envoy to Syria, senior figures, including National Security Adviser John Bolton, had declared, contrary to Trump's initial approach, that American forces would remain in Syria until the Iranians left and a political settlement was reached. The resignation of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis illustrates the wide gap between the President's decision and the position of professional associates.

The immediate reasons for President Trump's decision at this point are still not clear, or whether they are related to internal causes and/or to the "deal" that he is trying to advance with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which will link the sale of Patriot air defense systems as a substitute for the S-400 that Ankara wants to purchase from Russia and the further sale of F-35 planes to Turkey. It also appears that the withdrawal is intended to prevent friction between the US and Turkish forces in northeastern Syria. In any event, the decision does not appear to be a component of a broader agreement in Syria that involves Russia as well.

President Trump explained his decision by saying there was no further need for American forces in Syria since the mission to defeat the Islamic State was accomplished successfully, and the US did not have to be the regional "policeman." Indeed, the military efforts of the coalition headed by the United States have recorded many victories in their attacks on the Islamic State, but active fighting forces remain in Syria and Iraq (according

to recent reports there are about 3,000 fighters in the area). In spite of the declarations from Washington that it does not wish to repeat the mistakes of the Obama administration when he decided to withdraw from Iraq, there is still no orderly strategy for the day after the elimination of the territorial grip of the Islamic State, to ensure that the threat does not return and to prevent the development of conditions that allow construction of an infrastructure for the return of Salafi jihadist elements in Syria and elsewhere. Whatever the case, the instability that continues to characterize the focal points of Islamic State growth – particularly Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya – and the enormous difficulty of obtaining the economic and human resources needed to meet the needs of the local population, hamper the translation of military successes into a comprehensive plan of action.

Whatever the immediate cause, this decision, together with other moves and statements by President Trump since he took office, shows that even if he has set himself a number of objectives in the Middle East, and above all, a change in Iranian policy, Trump is not prepared (partly due to his wish to please his voters) to continue carrying the burden and the risks of US forces in the Middle East. In the background are reports that the army has been instructed to start limiting the number of troops in Afghanistan. This follows complaints that the United States has not received any gratitude from its allies in the region. In effect, apart from the efforts to renew and reinforce the sanctions on Iran, this move leaves the US with no coherent policy regarding the objectives that it would like to achieve.

Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear to US allies in the region that it is difficult to rely on the administration as a central component of their strategy for dealing with the threats before them. The withdrawal of forces (about 2000 soldiers, the majority of them Special Forces) is perceived as another “betrayal” by the United States of its allies, and this time the price will be paid by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which comprise mostly Kurdish forces that were established and armed by the United States and led the ground fighting efforts against the Islamic State in Syria. Washington’s decision aggravates its loss of credibility among regional elements, and also undermines the status of senior administration figures who are spokespeople for US policy.

The American move plays into the hands of Iran, which aims to limit any US presence in the Middle East, and particularly in Syria, as much as possible. The US presence in eastern Syria, along the border with Iraq, has restricted Iranian freedom to transfer troops and weapons by land from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. The position of Iran (and of Russia) is that its forces are there at the request of the Syrian regime, and are therefore legitimate, while the United States imposed itself on Syria. President Trump’s

decision reinforces the Iranian view that at this stage it has no reason to change its assessment of the risks or to change its objectives and the way to achieve them.

Indeed, notwithstanding the impassioned rhetoric against it from the US administration and the re-imposition of sanctions, Iran has so far not changed its regional conduct, particularly its desire to continue consolidating its presence in Syria and help Hezbollah to increase its military power. In this context, the reports that the United States is not linking its policy against Hezbollah to its policy regarding the Lebanese government are encouraging to Iran. As Tehran sees it, regional developments actually reflect a positive trend, and particularly what it can interpret as a lack of American determination, a weakened Saudi Arabia following the murder of the journalist Khashoggi, Russia's efforts to limit Israel's freedom to maneuver in Syria, and the aversion in Israel to any escalation of hostilities with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Significance

The departure of the American forces will accelerate the process whereby the Assad regime reasserts its control of areas in eastern and northern Syria that are under Kurdish control and benefit from US support. The move also strengthens Assad's image as the winner of the civil war - with the support of the Russian-Iranian coalition. It appears that the first objective of these partners will be to define efforts to take control of areas along the Iraq-Syria border, including the Tanf area and traffic routes from east to west, plus the Kurdish region in northeast Syria, including the oil fields. It is highly probable that the SDF will decide in this situation to cooperate with the Assad regime, but they will also cease fighting against Islamic State pockets, since they feel betrayed by the United States, and also because they fear that Turkey will carry out its threats to broaden the campaign against them to northeast Syria, and exploit the new situation in order to grab land along the Turkey-Syria border.

It seems that with its decision to withdraw its troops, the United States has abandoned the "Syrian file" almost entirely to Russia and lost an important bargaining chip in the efforts to influence any political settlement in Syria, if and when it is achieved. At least according to some of the parties involved, such settlement should include reference to the issue of the Iranian presence in Syria. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the only remaining United States leverage – its possible contribution to Syrian reconstruction as an essential component of promoting a settlement that includes a change of government and the removal of Iranian forces – is indeed viable, if only because there is little chance that President Trump will agree to invest significant economic resources in Syria, which ranks low on the overall American agenda.

While Russia favors the withdrawal of the US forces, it has asked for US involvement in the process of crafting a political settlement in Syria, in order to achieve international support and participation in Syrian reconstruction. Russia will try to use Trump's departure from the theater to increase in its own ability to influence and maneuver in Syria, and thereby demonstrate that its policy reflects determination, responsibility, persistence, and stability. The message is that the US move establishes the status of Moscow as a central element in the Middle East. In this context, as Russia probably sees it, the issue of the Iranian presence in Syria will acquire even more importance as a bargaining chip in its efforts to persuade the US to work with it on other issues, beyond the Middle East.

Even if the United States still has interests in the region, its conduct in Syria and its response to the Khashoggi murder weaken its influence and its room to maneuver with respect to existing challenges. This in turn leaves its allies with questions about the ability of the US administration to back up their policies while increasing the motivation of elements that have already been working for some time to exploit the administration's hesitation in order to strengthen their own hold and influence. Israel expected the United States to take more determined steps to remove Iran and its proxies from Syria, and to continue the US military presence in eastern Syria in order to block the Iranian "overland bridge" from the east to Syria.

For Israel, the main significance is the possibility that the withdrawal will encourage Iran to reinforce its territorial grip on areas that until now were under US influence. Even before, the shaky relations between Washington and Moscow meant Israel could not rely on the US as a broker against Russian pressures, including the restrictions it has imposed on Israeli freedom to operate in Syrian airspace. In effect, Israel is left alone in the battle against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and the most it can hope for in its handling of the struggle is United States political support.