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Next Steps for U.S. Policy in Syria and Iraq

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In just over a year in office, the Trump Administration has accelerated coalition military efforts to decimate ISIS in Syria and Iraq, reducing the land under the false caliphate's control to less than 10 percent of its previously held territory. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran continue to bolster the Syrian regime led by President Bashar al-Assad, and Turkey and Turkish-backed fighters are consolidating gains in the northwestern part of Syria. President Donald Trump has repeated his desire to withdraw U.S. troops sooner rather than later. The U.S. needs to develop a coherent strategy for Iraq and Syria to achieve realistic and attainable goals. These should include: consolidating the defeat and preventing the reestablishment of ISIS, al-Qaeda, or similar groups; curtailing Iranian influence; containing the destabilizing spillover effects of Syria's civil war; deterring the use of chemical weapons; and maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity while supporting the autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

A Complicated Situation

The Trump Administration correctly determined that defeating ISIS was the top U.S. policy priority in Syria and rapidly escalated military pressure to whittle down ISIS and bring it to the verge

of total defeat. But ISIS is a resilient, adaptive, and savvy enemy that could resurge, as it has done before, if Washington turns its back. In recent weeks, ISIS has expanded in areas south of Damascus and has launched counteroffensives in eastern Syria, after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), controversially supported by the United States,¹ diverted many of its militia forces to combat Turkey's military offensive against the Kurdish enclave in Afrin in northwestern Syria.

The situation in Iraq is better, but still worrisome. Unlike in Syria, the United States could work with a friendly government in Baghdad and a strong ally in the KRG, with whose Peshmerga militia the Pentagon had worked for many years. Yet ISIS remains a threat in pockets of western and northern Iraq, and Iran has built up a network of radical Iraqi Shia militias that it has deployed in Syria as well as in Iraq.

Achievable and Realistic Goals

The U.S. has strategic interests in both Syria and Iraq. The challenge for policymakers is formulating a policy that advances these interests without a risky and costly mission creep toward the overly ambitious goal of nation-building. President Trump was correct in saying that he wants U.S. forces to come home from Syria, but this must be carried out in a responsible way, taking into consideration regional dynamics and the situation on the ground. The pace of withdrawal should be based on security conditions on the ground in eastern Syria, not on a predetermined timetable.

The U.S. should develop a policy based around realistic and achievable goals such as:

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In Syria

- **Finish the job of defeating ISIS, and prevent it and similar groups from rising again.** The U.S. military presence in Syria needs to be tailored for a counterterrorism mission first with the ultimate goal to prevent ISIS or a similar terrorist group from re-emerging. Policymakers should not keep U.S. troops in Syria a day longer than is needed to accomplish this and should avoid the temptation for nation-building. The U.S. should also push for regional Arab allies to assume a greater responsibility for stabilizing eastern Syria with troops and economic support. For example, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, could provide special forces to replace the estimated 2,000 U.S. special forces in Syria, while Qatar and Kuwait primarily could provide economic support to the liberated areas. While this coalition will require continued U.S. air support, logistical help, and intelligence support, it will require fewer American ground forces as Arab allies step forward to replace them.
- **Re-establish America's traditional good relationship with Turkey.** For seven decades the U.S. and Turkey maintained a great security relationship as NATO allies. However, the past several years have proven to be challenging as the mercurial President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become increasingly authoritarian. It is in both countries' interests to restore good relations. The U.S. should work closely with Turkey to shape the future of northern Syria. This will require reaching a mutual understanding about the role of Syrian Kurdish militias, which also may require promoting a cease-fire between Turkey and the PKK, and a broader political settlement between the Erdogan government and moderate Kurdish political parties in Turkey.
- **Contain and mitigate the destabilizing spillover effects of Syria's civil war.** Washington must focus on preventing the fighting from spilling across Syria's borders and threatening U.S. allies, particularly Israel and Jordan, and limiting the flow of refugees to Europe by helping to take

care of them closer to their homes. The U.S. also should work closely with allies to stop the flow of foreign fighters from Syria back to their home countries.

- **Prevent a war from escalating between Iran and Israel.** The past few weeks have seen multiple Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria. Tehran also hopes to create a land bridge through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. This would pose a direct threat to Israel. In the end, Iran poses a much greater threat to regional stability, and to Israel, than ISIS did.
- **Deter the use of illegal chemical weapons by the Assad regime.** President Trump has restored U.S. credibility after President Barack Obama's failure to enforce his red line on the use of chemical weapons. The U.S. must continue to lead an international effort against the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

In Iraq

- **Help Iraqis build a secure and stable government in Iraq.** Iraq will hold national elections on May 12 that are crucial for advancing its fragile recovery from the ISIS onslaught. Washington should encourage Iraq's Shia leaders to build an inclusive government that would welcome participation by Iraq's Kurdish, Sunni, Christian, and other minority groups. Reaching out to moderate Sunni Arab leaders in particular is vital to undermining the appeal of ISIS and other Sunni Islamist militants.
- **Maintain support for Iraqi security forces.** ISIS has been defeated militarily, but could make a comeback, as it has done before. Washington should continue efforts to professionalize and reform internal security forces to prevent abuses, nepotism, and corruption. Washington should also continue training the Iraqi army to preserve it as a counterweight to pro-Iranian militias that have been folded under the government's security umbrella.

1 The SDF is predominately formed of fighters from the People's Protection Units—a Syrian Kurdish militia with ideological roots in Marxism and with links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organization designated as a terrorist group by the U.S.

- **Maintain Iraq's territorial integrity while supporting the autonomy of the KRG.** The Kurdish militias were reliable allies in the fight against ISIS inside Iraq as well as Syria. Washington should promote better relations between the KRG and central government in Baghdad, and broker an agreement on the equitable sharing of oil revenues.
- **Minimize the role of Iran's influence.** Iran has sought to expand its influence as ISIS has receded, and is pushing a political role for the radical Shia militias that it controls. This would be a Trojan horse that would subvert Iraqi sovereignty the same way Hezbollah, another Iranian surrogate group, subverted Lebanon's sovereignty. Washington should press Baghdad to contain and marginalize the political influence of the pro-Iranian militias and promote better relations between Baghdad and the GCC states to provide a counterweight to Iran's baleful influence.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration should not make the same mistake that the previous Administration made in Iraq by withdrawing military forces before the government was ready and able to fill the vacuum. The drawdown of U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq should be a gradual one, linked to security conditions on the ground, not governed by a rigid timetable. This would allow a coordinated transition in Syria as GCC allies step up to relieve U.S. troops. An abrupt U.S. departure would be a strategic error that would benefit Iran, the Assad regime, Russia, Hezbollah, and ISIS.

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