

Will Trump's Syria Withdrawal Protect the Kurds?

by Sherkoh Abbas, Jerry Gordon and Robert Sklaroff

It has been nearly a month since the December 14, 2018 [phone call](#) between Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Trump during which an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Syria was discussed by the President. Trump basically said he was taking out 2,200 US troops in Syria giving Erdogan the opportunity to clean up the remnant of ISIS forces in eastern Syria. That Trump call with Erdogan lent the impression that once again the US was going to abandon the Kurds. However, as we will see, Trump's challenge to Erdogan has gone through several transformations following his December 19, 2018 declaration outside the White House that he was immediately bringing the troops home as the US-led coalition and Kurdish partners had effectively defeated the Islamic State, leaving the field to Turkey. Erdogan [requested](#) US logistic assistance in completing the transfer of Turkish -backed forces down the Euphrates River to Deir al-Zour province in Eastern Syria 240 miles distant to accomplish that objective. The reality, given his faux staged coup in July 2016, he purged his senior military. Further, his experience [denying](#) use by the US Fourth Infantry Division of the Turkish Mediterranean port of Iskenderun during the 2003 Iraq invasion taught him how powerful were the US capabilities that circumvented his obstruction. He was miffed that, following Trump's withdrawal announcement, US Coalition Commanders were [recommending](#) leaving heavy weapons in the possession of the Kurdish YPG -led mixed Arab and Assyrian Christian Syrian Democratic Force (SDF).

The Kurdish -led SDF performance against ISIS demands support

The reaction to Trump's withdrawal announcement was a veritable jeremiad in the form of a [resignation letter](#) from Secretary of Defense James Mattis outlining the reasons for his position. Principal among them was he had set conditions that US forces would remain until a stabilized Syria and withdrawal by Iran was achieved and that involved maintaining the alliance with the SDF. To the Trump team that appeared to be mission creep from the original objective of the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State. President Trump in response advanced Mattis' leaving taking to December 31, 2018 upon receipt of the Defense Secretary's letter.

Simultaneously State Department official Brett McGurk, Special Envoy to the US-led Global Coalition resigned to leave by year-end. McGurk authored US [opposition](#) to the September 2017 Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. That resulted in the rout of Peshmerga and Kurdish civilians from the oil-rich Kirkuk governorate [takeover](#) by Iran-led Shi'ite Hashd Al-Shaabi Popular Mobilization Militias equipped with US weapons backed by an Iraqi Armored force.

Before leaving his Pentagon post former Secretary Mattis [signed](#) an order implementing withdrawal. That left open the question of conditions precedent and the schedule for US troop withdrawals. Despite that uncertainty Mattis' order set in motion a series of [steps](#) by the military to reinforce existing positions as staging for an eventual withdrawal. As we shall see later it created internal divisions between the Pentagon and National Security Adviser Bolton which in turn led to contretemps with Turkish President Erdogan on one emerging condition- the matter of protection of the US -backed Kurdish YPG – led SDF.

The SDF had earned its reputation the hard way over five years at the cost of thousands of valiant fighters [killed](#) and wounded as the battle-hardened 60,000 ground force fought in battles against ISIS at Kobani, Hasaka city , Raqqa and Deir al-Zour province along the Euphrates River in northeastern

Syria. Those US- backed SDF operations reduced the size of the Islamic State Caliphate by over 99 percent which at its apogee was equivalent to size of Britain. US -coalition airpower, Special Forces and Marines – backed SDF units had also repulsed both Russian ‘green men’ contractors and Assad regime units in the critical [Battle of Khasham](#) in Deir al-Zour on February 7, 2018.

Reaction of Kurds and Israel to Syria Withdrawal

The Trump announcement and Defense Secretary Mattis’ resignation unnerved the Kurds and other regional allies: the Israelis, Jordanians, Iraqis, the UAE and the Saudis. President Trump said that Israel had billions of US Defense aid commitments and could defend itself. Israeli PM Netanyahu’s [reaction](#) was: “In any case, we will take care to maintain the security of Israel and to defend ourselves in this area.” During their discussions in Brasilia on the sidelines of the January 1, 2019 inauguration of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Secretary of State Pompeo [assured](#) Israeli PM Netanyahu that US commitment to countering Iranian aggression in the region will not be changed with the announced Syrian withdrawal. Israelis were skeptical: 61 percent of Israelis who responded in a [poll](#) by the Israel Democracy Institute said they did not feel secure with US withdrawal from Syria.

Outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot [estimated](#) that upwards of 100,000 Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi’ite Popular Mobilization Forces and paid mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan could be deployed in Syria. Brig. Gen (ret.) Yossi Kuperwasser, former IDF director of Research for Military Intelligence, now at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, [said](#), “If ... the [US] forces in the south are going to leave the area, it would mean that [Syrian dictator Bashar Assad’s] forces and the Iranians will have full control over Syria. This would mean that they may try to deliver weapons from Iran through Iraq to Syria, and then to Lebanon, and there’s not

going to be anything in between to stop them ... that's where the problem lies."

"It's true that the original mission of getting rid of ISIS forces was accomplished. But the question was whether to still have US troops in Syria to take care of the Iranian issue or not. ...The Iranians are going to be empowered and feel much stronger. It's not totally clear that the Islamic State cannot reemerge, taking advantage of the weakening of their adversaries in this area, and they can rise again."

Israel, he stressed, will take any measure it deems necessary to defend itself and never expected the US to protect it with forces.

Russia, has been "very satisfied" by Trump's decision, Kuperwasser [noted](#), and "will have more [of a] free hand to control what's going on in Syria." After the Trump announcement, Russian President Vladimir Putin [quick withdrawal](#) from Syria had been conveyed to "America's partners in northeast Syria, namely the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)." But the Kurds and others see this as a [mobilize](#) against a potential Turkish attack by approaching