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Fikra Forum

Congress Can Still Help Shape the Endgame in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Advisers advised, Congress criticized, and ground partners pleaded with President Donald Trump when he decided to rapidly withdraw the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops stationed in Syria. This policy ticked off a box, fulfilling yet another campaign promise to “get out of Syria” and bring U.S. service members home, even if his own supporters disagree. As most individuals following the conflict know, withdrawing troops from Syria will actually reverse many of the gains Americans troops have made with a small, but effective fighting force.

Fortunately, the President has softened his decision, and anywhere from 200-1,000 troops may remain in northeast Syria and at al-Tanf base in the south for now. However, the President’s core promises of the enduring defeat of ISIS and exerting maximum pressure on Iran could break down in the coming months as U.S. engagement wanes.

That is why this new Congress should not let President Trump have the last word on Syria policy. Fortunately, the bipartisanship leadership on Syria in both House and Senate—as seen in key legislation like the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and the March 15 public commemoration of eighth anniversary of Syria’s peaceful demonstrations—continues, with Hill veterans and new freshmen members alike enjoying good working relationships across the aisle on issues pertaining to Syria. While foreign policy concerns have occasionally erupted into media firestorms, the bipartisan consensus on U.S. engagement in Syria in large part remains.

Members of the House and Senate on both sides of the aisle should renew the powers of congressional spending and oversight to ensure that the United States continues to meet its national security objectives: defeating ISIS, resisting Iran’s hostile influence, holding war criminals accountable, supporting allies, and restoring faith that the world can count on the United States to support its words with action.

The Constitution is clear that the executive branch and our Commander-in-Chief lead in foreign affairs. So what can Congress—House and Senate, Democrats and Republicans—focus on to help shape policy?

First and foremost is making the case for continued U.S. troop presence. Disengaging our troops entirely from Syria rewards U.S. adversaries and hurts allies. House and Senate committees on Armed Service and Foreign Affairs, along with rank-and-file members, must use the bully pulpit of Congress—including hearings, public statements, letters to administration officials, and media appearances—to make the case to the President and the American people why our small but effective force in Syria matters. The people's representatives must also publicly clarify the reasoning behind U.S. troop presence in the face of public confusion over the issue in order to develop broader support.

Whether or not the withdrawal actually moves forward, Congress should plan for robust oversight of every step of the process. Members should demand clarity on the administration's plans and their effects on the ground through letters to and congressional hearings featuring administration and Pentagon officials. Members should also publicly (via media appearances and statements) and privately (via phone calls and off-the-record meetings) support administration officials such as Ambassador James Jeffrey, now the State Department's designee on both Syria and ISIS, and other officials who understand the region and are actively engaged in navigating the United States' Syria policy.

Congress also has options outside of the withdrawal issue to help shape a strong Syria policy. A robust, resilient civil society is the antidote to the extremist ideologies of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). Regrettably, funding to stabilize areas and support civil society were cut last summer by the current administration, even while peaceful activists like Raed Fares, [assassinated by al-Qaeda affiliates](#) in November 2018, made the [strong case](#) for U.S. support. Restoring funding through the appropriations process and legislation, like the Global Fragility Act, will encourage the many Syrians who want nothing to do with extremism, yet see little encouragement or support from the international community at present.

Financial pressure is also key: the United States must take the lead in stifling funding for Bashar al-Assad's [well-documented war crimes](#)—torture, barrel bombs, forced starvation—against civilians. This includes the recent increased Russian and regime shelling inside Idlib Province, [which the State Department has rightfully condemned](#). Not only will increased sanctions demonstrate that the United States take a stand against gross human rights abuses, this is one of the only levers still available to push for an end to the conflict through political negotiations with Assad and Russia at the table. The previous congress failed to pass the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#) in December 2018, a crucial arrow in the quiver, and now the bill remains stuck. The House has passed [H.R. 31](#), the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, and the Senate has passed [S. 1](#), which included the Caesar bill. Nevertheless, both chambers have yet to work out a compromise in order to bring this bill into law. Members of Congress can also encourage their parliamentary counterparts in Europe to join a multilateral sanctions effort central to bringing Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table.

On the other side, opportunistic Syrian, Iranian and Russian businessmen should not be rewarded with reconstruction contracts. Now that Russia rightfully senses it has the upper hand, congress should expect Putin to ramp up his fundraising for Western money to support reconstruction in Syria, especially in areas loyal to Assad. While this policy may appear benevolent, it only rewards those who broke the country. Funds in the hands of regime loyalists do nothing to encourage the return of refugees who rightfully fear retribution by a vengeful regime which wants them to remain outside of Syria permanently. The Brussels conference on Syria in March was an encouraging sign of restraint. Further congressional legislation along the lines of the House's No Assistance for Assad Act, [H.R. 1706](#), is designed to keep reconstruction funds safely away from corrupt, regime-connected businessmen.

Members of Congress also have a public forum, and should use it to speak out for Americans killed or imprisoned by Assad. The death of Layla Shweikani, a Chicago-born humanitarian and the first confirmed American killed by the

regime, [should alarm everyone](#), as should the regime's [kidnapping of an American doctor](#), Majd Kamalmaz. Her death and his disappearance should spark the same congressional outcry and publicity as that of others imprisoned or killed by authoritarian regimes, like Jason Rezaian and Jamal Kashoggi of The Washington Post or journalist Austin Tice. Of course, Members of Congress should also raise awareness through floor speeches, public statements, media appearances, and social media that this has and is happening to hundreds of thousands of Syrians everyday.

There is plenty more to be done to secure U.S. national security interests and moral leadership in Syria, troop withdrawal or not. Congress has a unique role in shaping foreign policy, and both Senate and House must work together in standing up to murderous dictatorships and holding the U.S. government accountable. ❖



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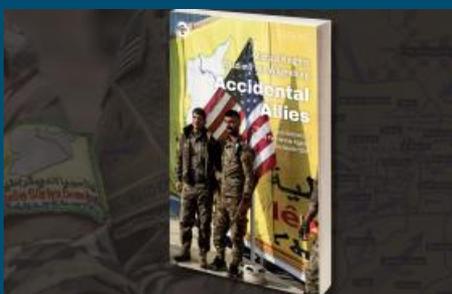


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