

Options for a Lighter U.S. Footprint in Syria

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Brief Analysis

There are alternatives to the overt presence of U.S. controllers on the ground, and allies can help maintain the tempo of strikes in various ways.

On February 21, the White House announced that 200 U.S. troops will remain in Syria in a “peacekeeping” capacity after the bulk of American forces are withdrawn as previously planned. The announcement was intended to signal ongoing U.S. commitment to Syrian allies and coalition members. From a military perspective, however, 200 advisors will not offset the loss of U.S. observers on the ground—a network that provides important context for the vetted targeting intelligence used to direct coalition air and artillery strikes onto Islamic State (IS) targets.

CURRENT STRIKE OPERATIONS

U.S. military doctrine mandates that targeting adhere to a rigorous process in order to achieve the desired effects while minimizing undesired consequences. This is particularly the case when dealing with dynamic (e.g., mobile or relocatable) targets, which are typically identified during the course of combat and must be targeted rapidly. Operations in Syria are focused on striking IS forces and protecting friendly forces, so most targets are dynamic.

There are two broad methods for executing dynamic targeting:

- **On-the-ground joint terminal attack controllers.** The targeting process can be guided by JTACs—specially trained, highly skilled personnel who are deployed alongside land forces and directly observe targets with their own eyes, via reports from nearby local partner forces, or by controlling video feed from remotely piloted aircraft. They provide pilots with all required information to effectively strike a target in accordance with the approved rules of engagement, ensuring that the risk of collateral damage is correctly assessed and balanced against the anticipated military benefits, and that the law of armed conflict is adhered to. Due to their forward presence, they can read the battle more accurately, and operate ground-level sensors and low-flying tactical drones that offer closer views on potential targets under horizontal cover (e.g., sunshades, bridges) or in bad weather. Their presence also reassures partner forces that international allies are committed to the fight.
- **Remote strike cells.** If JTACs are not on the ground, qualified personnel can provide targeting support to pilots remotely, feeding them additional intelligence and surveillance data while helping them assess collateral damage potential and other issues. Although these remote strike cells are sometimes slow to process targets, they offer the advantages of increased intelligence fusion (involving more types of space or airborne sensors), enhanced synchronization of fires, and another layer of vetting to prevent collateral damage. Such cells comprise a variety of professionals, including legal advisors, intelligence analysts, air and land component liaisons, and, most important, JTAC-qualified personnel.

Since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve in 2014, the U.S.-led coalition has used both on-the-ground JTACs and remote cells to control airstrikes in Syria. All such strikes conducted by U.S. forces have required the involvement of U.S.-standard JTACs—that is, highly trained controllers from NATO militaries that place greater emphasis on adhering to the laws of armed conflict than non-Western militaries. Artillery fire missions can be called by a broader set of non-JTAC forward observers, though such personnel are equally focused on adhering to the same laws.

OPTIONS FOR A LIGHTER U.S. FOOTPRINT

Even if the bulk of U.S. troops are withdrawn, coalition aircraft and artillery units in Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan could still conduct strikes in Syria with varying degrees of effectiveness. Each alternative model has advantages and disadvantages.

- **Covert U.S. presence.** One option is to deploy an enhanced covert presence in Syria, including American-manned paramilitaries or unacknowledged JTAC-certified U.S. Special Forces. This would impose a major new commitment on these small communities and might expose them to greater risks due to their low numbers and more limited self-defense capabilities.
- **Rotational U.S. presence.** Using the “fly-to-advise” model, U.S. military JTACs could be sent into Syria from adjacent countries to support special operations against IS, either staying there for short rotations or “commuting” to the battle on a daily basis. A rotational presence offers less flexibility than a constant presence, however, and incurs extra force protection risks (e.g., regular reliance on air transport). In addition, many of the advantages of embedding with local forces are lost using this model (e.g., fine-grain familiarity with friendly and enemy operational tempo).
- **Non-U.S. airstrike controllers.** The coalition could rely on other NATO-standard JTACs deployed in Syria, whether drawn from the sizeable European and Iraqi special forces components in the existing Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq, or from new force contributors. Fewer than half a dozen non-U.S. JTACs would likely be required, each with a small associated team. In some cases, U.S. teams withdrawn from Syria could be swapped with non-U.S. coalition special forces currently in Iraq, particularly units from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other highly capable militaries that may face fewer political concerns about protecting Syrian partners from Turkish actions—in contrast to European states, which are constrained by Ankara’s ability to unleash further refugee flows upon them.

- **Syrian airstrike controllers.** The coalition could also train trusted Syrian partners to more effectively call for fire support in close coordination with U.S.-led strike cells in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, or elsewhere. Operational models used by other NATO-standard militaries—such as Emirati forces in Yemen—have combined trustworthy local observers, iPhone-based tracking of friendly forces, and management of strikes by qualified JTACs in remote cells. If given specialized communications equipment and realtime full-motion video sensors, vetted Syrian operators could restore some of the ground-view that will be lost if coalition forces withdraw. A surge of U.S. intelligence focus on Syria would help these operators be even more effective.
- **Increased use of artillery systems.** A final option is to seek Iraqi government approval for moving more coalition tube artillery and long-range rocket artillery to the border with Syria. Artillery is highly responsive, and fire missions can be called by less-qualified forward observers, potentially including trusted local partners. If additional range is needed, coalition artillery could temporarily deploy into Syria with Baghdad's permission. Such operations are already undertaken from time to time, involving airmobile insertion of artillery into Syria for specific fire missions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The Trump administration has stated that U.S. troop withdrawals do not signal an end to the campaign against IS in Syria, nor an abandonment of U.S. partners there. Accordingly, one or more of the above options should be exercised to sustain fire support in Syria, destroy IS targets, and protect partner forces.

The decision to sustain 200 U.S. troops in Syria is an important first step. The main impediment to effective airstrikes is lack of persistent intelligence and comprehensive understanding of the situation on the ground, which risks degrading target development. Moving to an entirely remote model managed by strike cells outside Syria would significantly increase that risk. Some degree of targeting intelligence and fine-grain understanding of friendly and enemy movements would be lost, compelling forces to either reduce the number of strikes they approve or lower their standards of collateral damage mitigation—a scenario that should be avoided at all costs.

In addition, a remote model would signal local partners that the coalition is less committed because it no longer has skin in the game. Such an approach might also convince Iran, the Assad regime, and other enemies that they are freer to act, knowing there is no U.S. or NATO presence on the ground to trigger large-scale retaliation.

To mitigate some of these problems, the United States should consider recruiting trusted allies such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to shuttle special forces into Syria as American forces shuffle out. The request could be backed by U.S. commitments to provide operational support and protection to these forces, along with intensified training and equipping of Syrian partners to identify targets for coalition airstrikes or artillery fire missions. If continuing the anti-IS fight is truly important to other nations, they should be ready to help carry more of the weight for the United States, especially at a time when the withdrawal decision has contributed to acute political-military strain in Washington. The long-term presence of 200 U.S. advisors could make these nations more willing, and even small coalition contingents inside Syria may be sufficient to constrain Russian, Iranian, and Turkish freedom of maneuver, so long as the United States robustly supports them.

Finally, all of the options outlined above are heavily reliant on maintaining coalition basing in Iraq. This places a major premium on restoring trust that the U.S. component is deployed there purely to defeat IS. By repeatedly enunciating this principle via direct communications and popular local media outlets, senior U.S. civilian and military leaders have a better chance of convincing Iraqi leaders to take a firm line on **preserving the coalition presence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/international-engagement-in-iraq-is-tied-to-military-presence>)**.

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