

# U.S. Withdrawal in Syria: Tracking Israeli and Iranian Media Responses

by [Tamuz Avivi \(/experts/tamuz-avivi\)](#), [Arjan Ganji \(/experts/arjan-ganji\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Tamuz Avivi \(/experts/tamuz-avivi\)](#)

Tamuz Avivi is a former research assistant at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and an incoming JD candidate at Columbia Law School.

[Arjan Ganji \(/experts/arjan-ganji\)](#)

Arjan Ganji, a native Persian-speaker and graduate of George Washington University's Elliott School, is a research assistant for the Iran Security Initiative at the Washington Institute.



## Brief Analysis

Just as President Trump's announced decision to withdraw troops from Syria has garnered intense analysis from American media, the media outlets of regional actors involved in Syria are similarly occupied discussing likely scenarios for the country's future. In surveying the media responses of Iran and Israel—countries who have indirectly clashed within Syria itself—reports reflect both official and in some cases popular views of how the new U.S. strategy will shape regional politics.

In the weeks since President Trump's decision, Iranian press has expressed skepticism with the plan while sticking to traditional talking points. Initially, media focused on foreign reactions. In referencing a senior official in Damascus, *Press TV*—an English and French-language outlet directed at an international audience—claimed that the U.S. withdrawal comes in response to the Assad regime's "[steadfastness](#) (<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/12/20/583480/US-withdrawal-from-Syria-result-of-government-public-steadfastness-Official>)," while also declaring that the United States and its partners "will have no bargaining chip" in talks on Syria's future.

IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News* similarly stated that the U.S. withdrawal demonstrates its inability to "exercise power" in either Syria or Iraq—an example of the provocative rhetoric often heard from [IRGC officials](#) (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2018/12/21/1904330/us-admits-inability-to-exercise-power-over-region-irgc-commander>). Moreover, multiple outlets argued that Washington's withdrawal would not affect the equation in Syria. Amongst them, *Fars News* published an article on its Persian site by an international affairs analyst, who claimed the way forward in Syria would be [unchanged](#) (<https://www.farsnews.com/news/13970929000430/%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AB%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87>). And *IRNA*, the Islamic Republic's official news agency, published

remarks by the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces on its English-language site, who said the change in U.S. policy is not notable given the large number of U.S. forces (<http://www.irna.ir/en/News/83152394>) elsewhere in the region. Altogether, skepticism still abounds regarding the administration's announcement as evidenced by a *Press TV* op-ed entitled "US Withdrawing Forces from Syria? Hold the Cheers" (<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/12/19/583429/US-withdrawing-forces-from-Syria-Hold-the-cheers>)."

Yet *Fararu*, an IRGC-linked media outlet, published an article tracking U.S. considerations leading up to the decision, demonstrating that analysis in Tehran is ongoing. The author asserts that President Trump's declaration of victory (<https://fararu.com/fa/news/384524/%D9%88%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D9%86%D8%A7%DA%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87>) against the Islamic State was likely not a main factor in the decision—the terror group still holds positions east of the Euphrates, and thus has not been fully eradicated. Rather, in the author's view, the administration wants to avoid running into issues with NATO ally Turkey in the Syrian theater. On the administration's stated goal to roll back Iran's influence in the region, the publication concludes that the Trump administration either has shifted its focus to pressuring Iran internally or is not sufficiently interested in preventing Iran's entrenchment in Syria.

On the other hand, reactions in Israel have predictably been expressly negative. Media outlets have mostly responded to the announcement with remarked pessimism, putting out headlines such as "Bad for Israel: Trump Gives Putin and Iran a Gift in Syria" (<https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5429304,00.html>). Publications across the political and religious spectrum, from the left-leaning *Haaretz* to the Sheldon Adelson-affiliated *Israel Hayom*, warned that the withdrawal could put Israel's interest at risk, framing the decision as a victory for Iran. Lamenting the negative impact Trump's decision could have on the maneuverability of the Israeli Defense Forces in Syria, the pro-government website *Walla* expressed concern (<https://news.walla.co.il/item/3208480>) that a U.S. withdrawal would make it easier for Iran to transfer weapons to Hezbollah, while according to the Centrist *Maariv* *on-line*, Washington can no longer be regarded as a reliable ally (<https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/Article-676249>).

In covering the announcement, many Israeli news outlets have also focused on the decision's implications for Syria's Kurds. Writing for *Israel Hayom*, Vice President of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies Eran Lerman argues that a U.S. withdrawal will result in the "collapse" (<https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/617391>) of local Kurdish forces. In his op-ed, titled "Abandoning Syria Could Turn Out Be a Tragic Mistake," Lerman unequivocally condemns the United States' willingness to "desert" its Kurdish allies, claiming that Trump's decision sends a "highly problematic message to anyone who in the future might have to choose whether to assist the United States and the West in bloody confrontations." Likewise, in a *Haaretz* piece titled "'People are Scared to Death': Syria's Kurds Feel Trapped Between Threats from Assad and Erdogan" (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-scared-to-death-kurds-in-syria-trapped-between-threat-from-assad-and-erdogan-1.6765949>), author Elizabeth Tsurkov analyzes the fears Trump's announcement has sparked among Syria's Kurds at length. *Israel Hayom* and *Haaretz* are hardly the only outlets looking into the meaning of Trump's announcement for Syria's Kurds. In an interview (<https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemId=44467>) for the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, Minister of Transportation Israel Katz addressed concerns for the Kurds in Syria, stating that while the Kurds will likely be hurt by Trump's decision, "luckily Israel is not the Kurds."

Nonetheless, amidst the flurry of negative coverage, some in the media industry have argued that the impact of

Trump's decision on Israel will be negligible or even positive. A day after the announcement, the popular website *Mako*, owned by the Keshet Media Group, published an article titled "[The United States is Leaving Syria but is not abandoning Israel \(https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-f48388dd07bc761006.htm\)](https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-f48388dd07bc761006.htm)." The author of the article, Shay Levy, argues that the media's criticism towards Trump's announcement is hypocritical and that the decision to withdraw from Syria aligns with the Washington's interest. According to Levy, U.S. and Israeli decision makers "are well aware of the fact that Iranian and Russian interests do not converge." Moscow, Levy claims, would like the fighting in Syria to subside, and, accordingly, will undoubtedly stop Iran from acting aggressively toward Israel.

Moreover, the controversial scholar Mordechai Kedar, writing for the conservative online magazine *Mida*, contends that a U.S. withdrawal from Syria "[is not a tragedy \(https://mida.org.il/2018/12/30/%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%90%D7%AA-%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%9B%D7%9A-%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%94-%D7%9C%D7%94%D7%92%D7%99%D7%91-%D7%9C%D7%A0%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%92/\)](https://mida.org.il/2018/12/30/%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%90%D7%AA-%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%9B%D7%9A-%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%94-%D7%9C%D7%94%D7%92%D7%99%D7%91-%D7%9C%D7%A0%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%92/)" and could very well benefit Israel, asserting that as a result of Trump's decision the United States will be more willing to sell weapons to and share intelligence about Iran's activities in Syria with Israel. Similarly, [Nitzan Fouks \(https://www.themarker.com/blogs/nitzan-fouks/BLOG-1.6785047\)](https://www.themarker.com/blogs/nitzan-fouks/BLOG-1.6785047), a blogger at *Haaretz*-affiliate *The Marker*, believes that the state of uncertainty that will follow the withdrawal could work in Israel's favor by driving a wedge between Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

Religious media outlets such as *Arutz Sheva* (<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/256721>) (<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/256721>) and *Kikar HaShabat* (<https://www.kikar.co.il/abroad/301599.html>) have also covered the surprising [Christmas Day tweet \(https://twitter.com/JakeTurx/status/1077707913576235008\)](https://twitter.com/JakeTurx/status/1077707913576235008) of Jake Turx, an Orthodox Jew who serves as White House Correspondent for the Jewish, US-based *Ami* Magazine. The unusual tweet stated that "the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria "came [mostly] at the request of Israel." While the Trump Administration did not comment on Turx's claim, in recent days US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has assured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Washington's "[obligations to Israel remain unchanged \(https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Pompeo-meets-Netanyahu-Our-obligations-to-Israel-remain-unchanged-576042\)](https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Pompeo-meets-Netanyahu-Our-obligations-to-Israel-remain-unchanged-576042)," a statement more widely reported on in Israeli media.

With the timeline for withdrawal now unclear and with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton both traveling in the region, these visits are likely to shape future analysis of Trump's initial announcement. And while the two states' media responses are relatively in-line with their country's position on U.S. involvement in the region, the future actions of these respective states in light of a shifting dynamic in Syria remain less clear-cut. ❖

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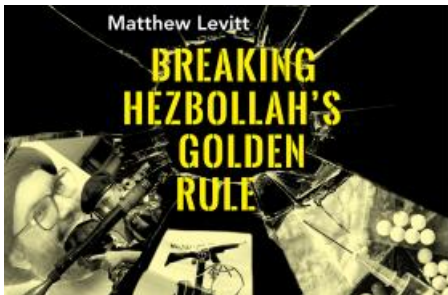
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