

Trump Departs Syria: An Israeli Perspective

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Jerusalem seeks to mitigate the potential risks of the president's decision by shaping its implementation and obtaining U.S. security guarantees, though long-term concerns still loom.

Israeli officials have been careful not to publicly criticize President Trump's recent announcement that all U.S. military forces will be pulled out of Syria. Below the surface, however, they have exuded dissatisfaction, concern, and a desire to make the best out of the situation.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's initial public response was lukewarm, stating that Israel will continue to take care of its security and "will not abide Iranian entrenchment in Syria." He followed those remarks with hectic bilateral discussions on the matter, holding a phone call with President Trump, meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the sidelines of a gathering in Brazil, and hosting National Security Advisor John Bolton in Jerusalem. These discussions elicited U.S. public assurances about Israel's security and, so it appears, opened opportunities to affect the manner in which Trump's decision is implemented.

Some current and former Israeli officials have played down Trump's announcement, emphasizing that the U.S. contingent in Syria is small and passive in the face of Iran's military thrusts, that Israel alone has shouldered the burden of pushing back against these thrusts, and that Washington will support Israel even if U.S. forces are in fact withdrawn. Correct as they are, these statements do not tell the whole story.

ISRAEL'S CONCERNS CENTER ON IRAN

Israeli decisionmaking circles tend to contextualize Trump's decision as part of a perceived American trajectory of retreat from the Middle East, with Washington apparently resolved to reduce its military footprint due to various factors: fatigue following years of costly wars in the region, decreased dependency on Middle Eastern energy resources, and a desire to turn inward while shifting its focus toward the Far East. President Obama seemed to draw

on this deep sentiment as well, albeit in different ways. Consequently, Israelis are concerned about the potential weakening of an important complement to their strategic deterrence and an anchor of regional stability.

For the most part, Israel looks at the U.S. decision through the prism of the biggest threats to its national security—namely, Iran’s nuclear and regional ambitions, and its army of proxies building up their capabilities in Israel’s immediate neighborhood. Viewed through this prism, the bottom line is negative.

Iran has clear designs to turn war-torn Syria into a formidable military front against Israel, merging it with the front in Lebanon as part of a strategic plan to encircle Israel and establish a contiguous corridor of de facto Iranian control stretching to the Mediterranean Sea. In recent years, Israel has defined its redlines on Iranian involvement in Syria and enforced them through consistent military action—a campaign that has been relatively successful but runs the risk of wider Israeli-Iranian conflict. In this sense, Jerusalem has correctly read the Trump administration’s attitude as a division of labor: the United States applies heavy pressure on Iran, but mainly in the nuclear context, and limited to economic and political tools; meanwhile, the role of confronting Iran’s regional ambitions militarily has been left to local forces, first among them Israel.

Given Israel’s guiding principle of independent self-defense and the fact that Washington does not see Syria as critical to its own national security interests, Israelis never expected U.S. forces to play an active role in the campaign to counter Iran militarily there. Nevertheless, they did hope that the administration would incorporate its existing military assets and activities in Syria into a coherent strategy for blocking Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region. These hopes were kindled by senior members of Trump’s national security team, who in recent months repeatedly and clearly linked the continued U.S. military presence in Syria with Iran’s presence.

Yet Trump abruptly snuffed out these hopes, tying his withdrawal decision to the fight against the Islamic State and thereby underscoring that America’s presence in Syria was not part of a wider counter-Iran strategy. The United States definitely supports Israel and other regional stakeholders in that strategy, and its recent economic sanctions have pressured Iran’s foreign investments, but it is apparently unwilling to assume a proactive, leading role in this regional campaign.

Israeli defense officials are concerned because a U.S. withdrawal would affect two key areas: (1) al-Tanf base and the fifty-five-kilometer buffer zone surrounding it in southeast Syria, which sits on the strategic route between Baghdad and Damascus, and (2) the semiautonomous Kurdish region in northeast Syria. These areas (especially al-Tanf) have stunted branches of Iran’s planned corridor to the Mediterranean. Jordan is likewise worried about the evacuation of al-Tanf because it may allow for the deployment of Iranian proxies near its border—a significant concern for Israel, which regards the kingdom’s stability as crucial.

If these key roadblocks are removed, Iran and its proxies could quickly step up their efforts to complete the corridor and use it to move forces and weapons to and through Syria by land, lessening their heavy reliance on problematic air routes and further developing their military infrastructure inside Syria and Lebanon. Israel would have no choice but to respond to this challenge forcefully. The Israeli-Iranian showdown in Syria has lessened in recent months, mainly due to Moscow’s strong intervention with both parties following the September downing of a Russian military plane there. The focus of the showdown subsequently switched to Lebanon

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon>), where Iran’s client Hezbollah has sought to produce high-precision rockets and dig attack tunnels into Israel. Yet hostilities could easily re-erupt in Syria, particularly if Iran steps up its activity there after U.S. withdrawal.

From Jerusalem’s perspective, even a modest U.S. troop presence that remains passive against Iran adds value to the goal of deterring Moscow and Tehran, underlining U.S. support for Israel at a time when it has been risking war with Iran and potential conflict with Russia. The Kremlin has already sought to limit Israel’s freedom of action in

Syria since the September shutdown crisis, blaming Israeli forces for a deadly blunder committed by the Assad regime's air defenses. Bilateral relations have yet to fully recover.

Israeli defense officials believe that directing this blame at Israel was one of Russia's tactics for pushing toward possible understandings with Washington regarding withdrawal from Syria, among other issues. According to recent media reports, Moscow approached Israeli officials in September about opening a dialogue with the United States, partly to convey its willingness to push Iranian and proxy forces out of Syria. In return, Washington would have been asked to freeze or relax economic sanctions on Iran and remove its forces from Syria. Israeli officials turned down the proposal mainly because they did not want to encourage any relaxation of sanctions on Iran, yet some believe that the Trump administration could have leveraged Russia's interest as a bargaining chip to extricate concessions before pulling out troops. Unfortunately, Trump's announcement gave Moscow and Tehran what they wanted for free.

Looking ahead, some Israeli officials are quietly concerned about the fact that Washington keeps demonstrating its reluctance to apply military force in the region, basing its coercive policies on economic pressure. They wonder what the administration will do if Iran regenerates its nuclear program and approaches a dangerous breakout potential. Would Washington regard this as a redline compelling a U.S. military option, or would it expect Israel to take care of the problem?

Aside from Iranian concerns, the U.S. withdrawal announcement has troubled Israeli officials in the broader regional context. By strengthening perceptions of U.S. retreat, the move signals to regional players that they must deal with Russia in order to safeguard their interests. Moreover, the decision was made in concert with Turkey, a country whose anti-Israel rhetoric has spiked of late. Other key U.S. allies are likewise unhappy about Washington's apparent deference to Ankara, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Yet one silver lining in this problematic turn of events is that it may motivate key Arab states to deepen their cooperation with Israel, whom they regard as a reliable partner in the struggle against Islamist threats, Sunni or Shia.

CONCLUSION

Israel will necessarily adjust to the new situation and continue to take action against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, as it has already done in the three weeks since Trump's announcement. In particular, it seeks to reshape understandings with Moscow regarding Syria, influence how the U.S. withdrawal is implemented (e.g., drawn out timetables, leaving the U.S. contingent at al-Tanf, continued air operations, etc.), and obtain additional U.S. security guarantees and assistance, including recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. While the administration appears attentive to some of these requests and is exerting significant effort to mitigate the negative regional impression of President Trump's decision, the situation's broader, long-term implications are still looming in Jerusalem and cannot be ignored.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Ret.), is the Milton Fine International Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as head of strategic planning for the IDF and chief of staff to Israeli ministers of defense. ❖

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