

Alternative Security Models for Syria Amid U.S. Pullout

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Articles & Testimony

By using Syria’s newfound resources as a coalition member and negotiating military assignments at the U.S. embassy, the two governments could offset many of the concerns raised by the withdrawal of American combat units.

Syrria has managed to stay out of the limelight in the current regional conflict with Iran, another sign of its savvy diplomacy. Developments in Syria over the past six weeks give rise to hope that the country can further stabilise, but also concern about a possible waning of American attention. The rapid shift in power and limited fighting between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the central government resulted in a compromise agreement that is still holding.

That agreement could help calm relations between them and serve as a model for integrating other minorities. But the announcement that the U.S. would withdraw all troops from Syria fuels concern about overall U.S. engagement, seen as crucial for integrating the Kurds, as well as for continued suppression of the Islamic State (IS), Iran, and proxies.

The U.S. has several options for security cooperation beyond combat presence. Pursuing any one of these options could strengthen Syrian forces against IS and possibly Iran, enhancing overall American diplomacy.

A stable Syria integrated into the region and serving as a deterrent to renewed IS or Iranian proxy activity is central to long-term success in the region as a whole. The two crucial elements for such a Syria are, first, a unified state with buy-in from religious and ethnic minorities, and, second, an international approach to Syrian integration, development, and security.

Those elements are mutually supporting; a Syria that advances internal unity and tolerance will more likely garner international support and avoid outside states’ “cherry picking” favourite Syrian groups, as seen during the 2011-24

war. Conversely, a common international position with the Syrian government, linked to development assistance and diplomatic support, can incentivise responsible behaviour by both Damascus and the various minority groups.

Good Foundation

At present, the most robust effort to integrate minorities while protecting local governance and cultural rights has been the 29 January agreement between Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Syrian Democratic Forces leader Mazloum Abdi. The success or failure of that agreement will likely shape the integration of other minorities and, in turn, Syria's overall unity and stability.

Notably, the 29 January agreement was reached only after extensive intervention by American officials, both political and military, to quell fighting between them, remove some of the most dangerous imprisoned IS fighters, and, notably, improve a prior agreement between the two. (That agreement, signed on 18 January, tilted too far towards Damascus, allowing integration of SDF forces into the Syrian army only at the individual level.)

So far, implementation of the 29 January agreement, while far from complete, has been proceeding with little or no violence reported after the ceasefire. Ministry of Interior troops entered Kurdish areas of Hasakah Governorate and Kobani City as agreed at the end of January, with no notable friction with the SDF. Moreover, SDF leaders have met with Syrian army leaders to discuss the agreed-upon integration of brigades into the Syrian army, and President Sharaa appointed a high-level SDF official, Nour al-din Ahmad Issa, as governor of Hasakah.

On 22 February, the Ministry of Interior issued a decree outlining the criteria for citizenship for Kurdish Syrians, as stipulated in the agreement. And a senior Ministry of Interior official, Brigadier General Ziad al-Ayesh, has been appointed as the Damascus envoy tasked with implementing the January agreement.

Meanwhile, SDF leader Mazloum Abdi, with varying degrees of coordination with Damascus, the U.S., and the Iraqi Kurdish KDP, travelled to the Munich Security Conference to meet, among others, Secretary Rubio. Turkey, deeply involved in its own ceasefire with the PKK, has been quietly supportive of the January agreement. Despite earlier demands for no unit-by-unit integration of the SDF into the Syrian army, it appears to have turned a blind eye to that provision, and may have—accounts differ—tolerated Mazloum's visit to Germany. But perhaps most importantly, the so-far successful integration between Damascus and the Kurds could serve as an example to encourage the Druze—and potentially the Alawite Arab population—to follow suit.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops could heighten the perception of a waning U.S. commitment to Syria, which could stifle efforts to unify the country and undercut military cooperation against IS and any Iranian proxy presence. Continued, intense, high-level U.S. diplomacy, as seen in Syria since December 2024, can help make up for some of the difference, but a military/security component to U.S. diplomacy would be welcome by all sides.

Several Options

Here, Washington has several options to continue military and security cooperation, ranging from intelligence sharing and training to joint planning and operations, and potentially unilateral American missions, based on the experience of the anti-IS coalition and with Iraq when U.S. troops withdrew in 2011.

Such cooperation begins with the anti-IS coalition, both the military side coordinated by CENTCOM and the political alliance. On the military side, now that Syria is a coalition member, it has access to a range of intelligence-sharing and operational capabilities, including training and ISR assets. The coalition is also effective in coordinating international responses to terrorist recruiting, IS members' international movement, fundraising and transfer, and IS disinformation. To be sure, the coalition's capabilities are designed directly for the fight against IS forces in Iraq and especially Syria, but cooperation with the coalition offers Damascus greater security benefits.

If both Washington and Damascus are willing, the U.S. could also assign significant numbers of military personnel to

the U.S. embassy once it opens, in either the Attache Office or the Office of Security Cooperation (OSC), similar to the office attached to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. One key advantage of that arrangement is that military personnel do not need a Status of Forces Agreement, as they would have diplomatic immunity of one of several varieties. Given the difficulties in negotiating Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) in the region, this is a major plus.

The Baghdad Office of Security Cooperation (OSC), established in 2011, had significant capabilities. Led by a lieutenant general, the office had significant intelligence-sharing and other coordination functions embedded within the Iraqi security forces. It not only ran the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme, but, in agreement with the Iraqi government, placed military personnel at Iraqi bases throughout the country with a significant American FMS contractor presence. Those military personnel not only performed traditional FMS functions but also served as a “command and control” and security oversight headquarters for each FMS location, reporting to the ambassador through the OSC Chief.

As initially established, the Baghdad OCS had additional semi-operational functions. These included coordinating U.S. Coast Guard vessels securing in international waters (thus no SOFA needed) Iraqi offshore oil terminals and running a slimmed-down oversight of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi army units along the border of the Kurdistan Region.

This continued briefly the U.S. Forces Iraq (USF-I) “joint platoon” operation to calm tensions between the Kurdish and central government forces. Special Forces team deployments were planned for rotational training tours, though that initiative quickly died due to concerns in both Washington and Baghdad.

Finally, “one-off” operations related to military intelligence were quietly agreed between the embassy and the highest levels of the Iraqi government and managed by OSC Iraq. Such arrangements, or similar ones through the anti-IS coalition, could facilitate U.S. or other anti-IS countries’ direct action within Syria.

While the main purpose of U.S. military involvement, whether as part of the anti-IS operation or as an embassy OSC, would be maintaining pressure on IS and enhancing the professionalism of the Syrian security forces, secondary political benefits could be significant. Continued U.S. military contact with the SDF could reassure America’s longtime Kurdish partners of Washington’s commitment to the well-being of Syria’s Kurds and, as in Iraq, provide “eyes on” for both the integration of the SDF into the Iraqi army and tensions between the two. Likewise, a U.S. military presence could provide insight into possible clandestine Iranian efforts either to subvert the Syrian government or smuggle weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah. Finally, extensive, effective security cooperation has traditionally been an important component in Washington’s overall bilateral relations with important but imperilled states such as Syria.

Reasons for Caution

While the above scenarios would appear to be the most feasible way to continue security cooperation and deepen political ties with both the central government and the SDF, there are reasons to be cautious. The OSC wasn’t able to reach its potential as a true successor to U.S. forces in Iraq (which had ended official combat operations in 2010 and “rehabbed” as a train-and-equip force) for several reasons.

First, absent a clear U.S. military presence and combat mission in a country, attention and commitment out of Washington tend to wane. The Coast Guard vessels were reassigned to other missions, and various special forces and other initiatives were quietly scrapped in favour of higher-priority missions.

On the Iraqi side, at least with the Nouri al-Maliki government, there were mixed feelings about any U.S. military presence. On one hand, U.S. troops were viewed as an “in extremis” force to bail out the Iraqis in an emergency; on the other, it was seen as a semi-colonial occupier, with Iraqi officials often suspicious of the deep embedding of U.S. military personnel into Iraqi forces and intelligence operations, especially given the growing influence of Iran.

The large OSC presence fuelled those latter Iraqi concerns, without the in extremis combat capabilities that had previously reassured Baghdad. As a result, the Iraqi side repeatedly pressed for a reduction in OSC size and in the number of missions. Finally, neither the OSC nor the embassy fully recognised the hollowing out of Iraqi forces and particularly effective senior commanders, and deeper problems in training, equipment, and maintenance, that led to widespread failure of the Iraqi regular security forces against the IS assault in 2014. All that said, a limited security relationship with Syria along the lines above, if well managed, can help mitigate much of the loss of the combat troop presence and assist Syria towards stability.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as U.S. special representative for Syria and U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. This article was originally published on Al Majalla's website (<https://en.majalla.com/node/329975/politics/alternative-security-models-syria-amid-us-pullout>). ❖

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