

Expect Assad, Iran, and Russia to Exploit Trump's Cabinet Changes

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Brief Analysis

The regime and its allies will probably try to peel away U.S. partners or take military action in vulnerable areas, so Washington should prepare to counter such efforts.

President Trump's announcement that CIA chief Mike Pompeo will replace Rex Tillerson as secretary of state has apparently caused a stir in Damascus. The Assad regime historically prefers dealing with the U.S. intelligence community instead of U.S. diplomats and then leaking the occurrence of such meetings to the Arab press in order to bolster its legitimacy, as occurred in November after U.S. officials reportedly visited Damascus. But Pompeo is well known for his hard line on both Assad's future and Washington's posture toward Iran, the regime's main benefactor. Combined with the [latest shift in U.S. Syria policy \(https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm\)](#)—which was announced by Tillerson on January 17 but signed off on by Pompeo in his capacity as intelligence chief—the cabinet change indicates that the regime's expectations of an imminent U.S. departure from Syria are unfounded.

Even so, recent rumors and reports indicate that other officials may soon be departing the administration, so Washington should expect Assad to take advantage of the transition by escalating attacks on besieged areas (including with chemical weapons) and challenging local U.S. allies. The regime's goal would be to thwart Washington's new policy toward Syria, push U.S. personnel out of the country, and deliver a major victory for Tehran just as Washington is considering a withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

For example, the regime may decide to broker a deal with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Washington's closest partner in Syria. When Tillerson launched talks with Turkey last month in order to repair the bilateral relationship, he sought to ease Ankara's offensive against the Kurdish-populated Syrian district of Afrin and

reduce its threats against Manbij, a predominantly Arab city further east. The SDF liberated Manbij from the Islamic State in 2016, and although Washington convinced the Kurds to hand political control of the city over to their local Arab partners, it remains a center for Kurdish military activity. Yet the SDF are now rumored to be in discussions with the regime about trading Syrian military support against the Turks in Afrin for regime control of Kurdish-held oil regions—specifically the Conoco fields, the country's largest source of light oil and associated gas, located near Deir al-Zour in a portion of the Euphrates Valley allocated to the U.S. coalition in the separation-of-forces agreement with Russia.

Turning those fields over to Assad would give the regime more gas for generating power and more oil for producing gasoline. Since much of the regime's fuel is currently supplied by Iran, such a development would substantially ease pressure on Tehran's bottom line in Syria.

Alternatively, Damascus may decide to retake the fields by force. The United States is working closely with the SDF in the Euphrates Valley, unlike in Afrin, where Washington has made clear that the Kurds are on their own. Yet now that Tillerson has stepped down and the SDF has reportedly transferred thousands of fighters from the east to Afrin, Assad and his allies may sense another opportunity to make a move. The last time that happened, on February 7, the United States used substantial military hardware to thwart an attack involving Russian mercenaries and Syrian National Defense Forces controlled by Iran. Going forward, Washington can expect tests in areas where its influence is weaker, most notably the southwest (where a de-escalation zone has held since last July) and around al-Tanf (the southern border zone that was assaulted by Shia militias last May, leading to multiple U.S. strikes).

Yet the regime's most likely—and effective—means of exploiting the U.S. transition is to intensify information operations promoting the idea that the administration secretly plans to depart Syria sooner than it is letting on. Recent visitors to Washington have been struck by the wide variety of views that U.S. officials tend to express on Syria policy—a perception that has surely gotten back to Damascus, and which Assad will readily use to sow uncertainty among U.S. allies and local communities.

For example, the regime recently sought to peel away settled Arab tribes from the SDF east of the Euphrates. Previously, the high proportion of Shia fighters among pro-Assad forces in the area had led many Sunni tribesmen to look more favorably on the Kurds, but Turkey's Afrin operation brought that honeymoon to an end. The tribes have since been looking to the United States for security and financial commitments, but Damascus and Iran will likely claim that Tillerson's firing shows America's lack of resolve on fulfilling its Syria strategy.

Washington can take several steps to counter this impression:

1. Emphasize that the Syria strategy announced by Tillerson in January was approved by the Pompeo-led intelligence community and will therefore continue.
2. Release information showing that Assad's forces draw heavily on Iranian and Russian elements, so any gains they make would not constitute a regime "victory."
3. Instruct all U.S. officials to stop advocating a deal between the SDF and the regime.
4. Develop clear stabilization and economic "carrots" to convince communities in eastern Syria that their best option is choosing U.S. allies over Assad's increasingly Iranian-backed forces.

Showing resolve and fleshing out the Syria strategy in this manner would help ensure U.S. interests—not only by completing the Islamic State's defeat, but also by preventing Iran's proxies from seizing energy-rich and agricultural areas, thereby driving up Tehran's costs for bailing out Assad.

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