

Trump's Troop Withdrawal Gives Turkey Access to Syria—and ISIS Space to Rebuild

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To explain [President Donald Trump's most recent decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria](#), the [White House issued a statement](#) Monday insisting that America had defeated the “territorial Caliphate” of ISIS. But this obscures the point. While [ISIS was pushed out of the final bit of territory](#) it held in March, there is no shortage of information pointing to the fact that ISIS is not at all defeated.

Consider the following: In August, the [inspector general](#) for the U.S. military mission to defeat ISIS observed that ISIS had “carried out assassinations, suicide attacks, abductions and arson of crops” and established “resurgent cells in Syria.” Last month, the U.S. official in charge of leading the diplomatic fight to defeat ISIS, [Ambassador Jim Jeffrey](#), said ISIS “is still around, and it contributes to the insecurity and the problems in Syria in many different ways.” Most alarming, the recent report of the [Syria Study Group](#), a bipartisan task force mandated by Congress to make recommendations for U.S. policy in Syria (full disclosure: I’m a co-chair), warned of the risks to U.S. security from the premature withdrawal of U.S. forces, noting that ISIS still retains the means and the desire to “carry out attacks against the United States” and will exploit “any opening” to launch them and replenish its ranks.

Given ample evidence that ISIS still poses an urgent, deadly threat, it is clear that the military mission in Syria is not complete. In fact, if Trump insists on withdrawing U.S. forces now before conditions on the ground are sufficiently stable, he will clear the way for ISIS to rebuild and once again threaten America and its allies around the world.

This was the exact scenario that put the Pentagon and State Department into damage control mode the last time the president declared that the terror organization had been destroyed, in a [tweet in December 2018](#). And it’s what precipitated the resignation of James Mattis as defense secretary due to divergent views on how to best protect U.S. interests.

The U.S. has never fully recovered its standing since then, but U.S. military and diplomatic officials have been working exhaustively to restore enough confidence in the U.S. commitment to the mission to keep the U.S.-led [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS](#) together and continuing the fight on the ground. The critical element in this coalition is the U.S. partner fighting ISIS inside Syria—the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. The SDF include tens of thousands of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters [trained and armed](#) by the U.S. to take on ISIS.

For the past several years, the U.S. military provided air support and a limited number of U.S. forces inside Syria to combat the terror group. With the SDF in the lead on the ground and the U.S. in a supporting role, the SDF pushed ISIS out of [20,000 square miles](#) of territory in Syria—but at the cost of thousands of SDF lives.

Trump is repaying this sacrifice by withdrawing the U.S. military backup that keeps the SDF and their families safe from two equally existential threats—military action by Turkey, a more powerful neighbor that sees the Kurds as their enemy; and the Assad regime and its backers, Russia and Iran, that control the rest of Syria and aim to retake the [third of the country under SDF control](#). Trump must be aware of what surrender to Assad, Russia and Iran looks like based on their well-documented actions: chemical attacks and barrel bombs, forced disappearances and torture, property seizures and starvation.

The military did withdraw some forces last winter, but it managed to retain enough of a presence inside Syria to support the SDF as it battled ISIS, protected local communities and guarded an estimated [11,000 detained ISIS](#) fighters and 70,000 ISIS family members at about 30 camps across northeastern Syria. Now Trump wants to hand the military mission over to Turkey. But Turkey’s priority is not stamping out ISIS, nor does Turkey have the ability to do so. The Turkish government views the primary threat in Syria to be the Kurdish fighters in the SDF, which it says are the same group as the Turkey-based Kurdish terrorist organization, the PKK.

To prevent a Turkish military incursion deep into Syria against the Kurds, U.S. officials over the past several months negotiated a [“safe zone”](#) along the Turkey-Syria border in northeastern Syria. And it’s been working: The U.S. and Turkish military conduct joint patrols to ensure that Syrian Kurdish fighters and their heavy weapons

moved back from Turkey's border, while the SDF—reassured of their families' safety by the U.S.—focused on fighting ISIS. This showcases U.S. leadership at its best: diplomacy supported by military tools to prevent the worst-case scenario of giving ISIS the opportunity to rebuild and retake territory.

Yet the president's announcement makes the worst-case scenario more likely: [Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) makes good on his pledge to move into northern Syria, and the SDF shifts focus to protecting their families from Turkey. Rather than risk violence between two NATO allies, the U.S. military clears the area when Turkey begins its military operations. In other words, the military mission to defeat ISIS in Syria as we know it ends.

Part of the SDF shifting priorities away from ISIS means they [downgrade the mission to guard the tens of thousands](#) of detained ISIS fighters and their families, inviting ISIS to stage prison breaks and replenish ranks. Monday's White House statement said that it was now Turkey's responsibility to guard these detainees, but there is no indication that Turkey has accepted that role. ISIS, having retained its [command structure, access to resources and global appeal](#), will then be able to rebuild its forces and start attacking not only Syrian communities, but also targets across the border in Iraq—where much larger numbers of U.S. forces are deployed—as well as plan attacks in Europe and the United States.

Once again, the United States will find its security directly threatened. Yet this time, when the U.S. looks to its friends to rebuild the global counterterrorism coalition, governments will question America's already damaged credibility. Given its track record of surprising friends and abandoning partners, the United States will find itself at pains to secure commitments and contributions. This is America alone, not America first.

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