U.S.-SYRIA POLICY

Withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria and ending America’s direct military involvement in that conflict is the correct decision, though the implementation of this policy has been mismanaged. The administration should have held deliberate and calculated discussions with Turkey, the Kurds, Damascus, and perhaps even Moscow to mitigate the negative consequences of U.S. withdrawal prior to the president’s announcement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Understand the limitations of sanctions.** The sanctions that Congress is prepared to impose on Turkey will send an appropriate signal, but they are unlikely to dramatically alter Ankara’s behavior.

- **Use existing points of leverage.** Policymakers should make it clear that the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear forces from Turkey may be a consequence of the Turkish military incursion into Syria. They should work with other NATO nations to exert pressure on Ankara, including considering the expulsion of Turkey from the alliance.

- **Remain engaged diplomatically.** Washington should lend quiet support to the Astana process but not seek to drive the discussions. U.S. diplomats should also work with Damascus and its backers to facilitate a formal arrangement with the Kurds that would allow increased Syrian control of those territories and thus assuage Turkish concerns of a PKK safe haven over the border and deter Turkish military action.

- **Offer humanitarian aid.** The United States cannot end all the human suffering in Syria, but it can—and should—work with all relevant actors to provide food, medicine, and other necessities as well as increase the number of Syrian refugees it allows into the country.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

The strategic case for leaving troops in Syria is weak. The military should be deployed to overseas war zones only if there is a clear and present threat to U.S. national security. With ISIS largely defeated, none currently emanates from Syria.

The risk of mission creep is high. After achieving their initial objective of helping to defeat ISIS, U.S. forces started to take on new missions that were never likely to be achieved with a mere 1,000 troops. The added aims included an indefinite effort to protect Syrian Kurds, countering Russian and Iranian influence, deterring Turkish incursions, and helping to manage a transition to a post-conflict political settlement.

The Constitution gives Congress the power to determine U.S. involvement in hostilities abroad, not the executive. Congress never authorized a U.S. military presence in Syria.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT JAMES KNUPP AT JKNUPP@CATO.ORG.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Statement Regarding Trump’s Syria Announcement" by Christopher Preble, Cato at Liberty, October 7, 2019.


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