



THE UNITED STATES' WITHDRAWAL FROM NORTHEAST SYRIA

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BACKGROUND

On October 6, the White House announced that President Trump had given his endorsement for a Turkish military operation in northeast Syria that would withdraw American-backed Kurdish forces near the border between Syria and Turkey. The decision marked a major shift in US policy in Syria and in the United States' anti-ISIS fight. To better understand the implications of this decision, we asked Wikistrat's experts for their analysis of the decision and its impact on Jordan and the regional dynamics.

JORDAN:

Osama al-Sharif, journalist and political commentator based in Amman:

"Jordan, like other US allies in the region, was taken aback by Trump's surprise decision to pull American troops from northern Syria and allow a controversial Turkish military operation to proceed almost immediately. Jordan is a member of the US-led multinational coalition fighting Daesh in Syria and stands to suffer if thousands of foreign jihadists, including Jordanians, in Kurdish-run detention centers manage to escape and regroup. Trump's statements that the US involvement in the Middle East was wrong, costly, and useless turned heads here and raised questions about the reliability of the US as an ally and major financial and military donor.

In addition, the Turkish intervention complicates further the Syrian situation and hampers the reaching of a political and peaceful settlement to the crisis in Syria; something that Jordan backs. It was not surprising that King Abdullah was quick to reiterate the need to preserve Syria's territorial unity and sovereignty in an apparent criticism of the Turkish invasion."

Dr. Saud al-Sharafat, founder and chairman of the Shorufat Center and a former Brig. Gen in the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate:

"It's unclear how deeply to estimate the implications of the US withdrawal on Jordan's security and foreign policy calculations. But, given the reality that there are many Jordanian fighters in Syria (2000-3000) and some of them are in custody, of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) this may be led to some kind of implications in the long run. These implications will come about if Turkey manages to control all the FTF (foreign terrorist fighters) issues; at this point it may put Jordan under heat and pressure in many political issues concerning the many Middle East conflicts."

Ruba Zeidan, freelance analyst based in Amman, Jordan:

"I believe Jordan, once the buffer zone is created, will be less inclined to feel ethically and politically responsible for the safeguard and hosting of the remaining number of Syrian refugees the country has been shouldering since the war started. This might alleviate the pressure on the Jordanian foreign front to keep the refugees, and might actually encourage them to start deporting them into the supposedly 'safe zone.' This might reflect positively, not instantly though, on the budget deficiency, especially in the absence of international aid that was repeatedly promised but has never being fully extended. Deporting the refugees (or encouraging them to go back, in case the Jordanian government chooses to adopt the soft approach) would also release some local and national tension which has been arising in the last

year or so, sensed more clearly in the host communities, and sometimes leaking into the media, in the form of what some might describe it as hate speech.”

Victoria Silva Sánchez, independent journalist and researcher based in Amman, Jordan:

“The impact of this intervention on Jordan security is clearly related to the destiny of ISIS prisoners currently being held by the SDF. Arab states do not believe that Turkey will take care of the situation since the country is perceived as the one which allowed, in a big deal, the concentration of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, allowing them to enter these countries through its territory. Even Jordanian fighters entered Syria through Turkey. Besides, the fact that the Turkish army cooperates with local Islamist and Jihadist organizations to fight the Kurds is also a fact that makes Arab states very suspicious of Turkish intentions. Despite the need to cooperate with the country, its hegemonic intentions in the region are not welcome by Arab countries, including Jordan. ISIS prisoners and the many refugees from their territories being held currently by SDF forces are a clear threat to the Kingdom since recent reports informed of regrouping of ISIS forces in northern Iraq, in areas close to Deir ez-Zor, which threatens Jordanian borders. It is also clear that there is growing damage to the Trump administration, which has sent a message to its allies in the Arab World that it cannot be trusted. This adds to the already low image that the Jordanian regime has about the Americans due to its policies in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the feeling of having been left apart and not caring about Jordanian interests. This decision also shows the lack of care about allies’ interests with regard to Syria and the threat posed to them, including Israel and Jordan.”

Dr. Rebecca Molloy, Senior Analyst, Wikistrat:

“Beyond the general implication of significantly crippling the USG’s reliability in the region as a stabilizing force, King Abdullah II will have to take into consideration the following regarding the kingdom’s security:

1. Additional displacement in Syria and possible increased pressure on its borders as large swaths of population attempt to reach safety. Jordan will be on the front line of this trend.
2. The American withdrawal from al-Tanf outpost - only miles from the Jordanian border. The American outpost sits on the strategically significant Baghdad-Damascus highway. Several incidents in recent months underscore al-Tanf’s potential as a flashpoint between US and Iranian and/or Iran-backed forces. A withdrawal from this particular outpost could prove perilous to Jordan’s security with ‘pro-regime’ or ‘Iran-backed’ forces that have set up checkpoints in the area.
3. Regionally, the development reflects the continued decline of American interest and, consequently, of its influence. To Abdullah, this has meant cautiously moving toward Russia and Iran. It also seems that the Sunni alliance that tried to push Washington into taking more aggressive moves against Iran is weakening. If Abdullah sees the Sunni alliance as too weak to continue as a stabilizing force, drawing closer to the Shi’i crescent will be a real calculation.”

Dr. Allison Hodgkins, Assistant Professor of International Security and Conflict Management at the American University of Cairo:

“From Amman’s vantage point, the Trump administration’s precipitous abandonment of its Kurdish allies in northeastern Syria is only further confirmation of US unreliability and the necessity of continuing its efforts to diversify its foreign relations. It is wholly unsurprising, therefore, that HM King Abdullah II has spent recent days working the phones and paying visits to key regional partners, including Egypt, and pressing for a unified Arab response to the crisis. The move also makes the Hashemite Monarch’s effusive praise for Russia’s role in the region during his October 3, 2019 visit to Moscow appear downright prophetic. Trump’s determination to fulfill his campaign promises vis-à-vis the region is arguably the greatest threat to Jordan’s national interest, and it will react accordingly — even if that means increased cooperation with US adversaries.

As Jordanian officials are all too aware, this was not the first time the Trump administration abruptly revoked its protection from local militias serving as proxy forces in the Syrian conflict. In June 2018, it was reported that the US embassy used social media to notify New Syrian army forces in southern Syria they should no longer make decisions with the expectation of US support. However, Jordan had already laid the diplomatic and security groundwork to minimize the impact of that decision on its northern border, in particular its efforts to re-establish relations with the Assad regime. It is notable that Jordan and Syria reached a bilateral agreement to re-open the Jaber-Nasib Border Crossing a few months later. None of this, however, should be interpreted as an impending rupture with the United States. US economic and military assistance remains essential to the kingdom, which continues to struggle with crippling budget deficits, high unemployment, and simmering discontent. Ironically, the greater Jordanian doubts the reliability of the United States, the more likely it is to double down on the importance of maintaining its historic peace agreement with Israel. Although most see the treaty as a symbol of Jordan’s dependence on the United States, the 1994 agreement codifies what is essentially a non-aggression pact and limited security alliance with its vastly more powerful western neighbor.