



# 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 ten of Wikistrat's top experts for their analysis of the decision and its impact on the Gulf States.

## THE GULF STATES:

**Dr. Theodore Karasik, Senior Advisor to Gulf State Analytics, a geo-strategic consultancy based in Washington, DC:**

"Trump's decision to 'pull' US forces and support to the Kurds and Turkey's subsequent invasion of Northern Syria in Operation Peace Spring is being sharply condemned by Gulf states except Qatar. For KSA and UAE, these events are throwing the region into a new shift where America is shrinking and Russia is rising, fast, at this particular time. With the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the second visit since 2007, there is no doubt that Turkey will be discussed by the Russians with the Saudis and Emiratis besides other security issues unlikely to be in the public eye. And all three countries – Russia, Saudi, and UAE – will be looking at Trump's move in Syria and how best to take advantage, because of their mutual interests that have been driving the three countries together

over the past six years. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi know that Putin can influence Erdogan, and Putin knows the Gulf states need Russia involved in Syria deeply but also in other theaters. The results from Putin's trip to the lower Gulf will be seen in the coming days and weeks in terms of coordination on what comes next in Syria, with or without Trump's input."

**Dr. Mitchell Belfer, President of the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (Rome, Italy) and Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Terrorism and Security at the Metropolitan University, Prague:**

"Policymakers in Riyadh, Manama, and Abu Dhabi are worried that the US is leaving Turkey a free hand in the region and this will come to, eventually, affect a variety of intra-Gulf relations including with Iran and Qatar.

Turkey's gains in the Levant will likely empower Turkey — via its Qatar ally — in the Gulf. In August 2019, Turkey and Qatar announced the expansion of the Turkish military facility outside of Doha. Together with their support of Muslim Brotherhood groups, ideology and strategic awareness, it seems that once Turkey is done consolidating its position in Syria, it will turn more attention to the Gulf. Looking ahead, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE are loath to see Turkey succeed in Syria.

Oman shares the concerns of KSA, Bahrain, and the UAE regarding the use of military force in an already troubled area of the world. However, Muscat's official statement stopped short of condemning the Turkish offensive specifically. Oman has, traditionally, adopted a very careful diplomatic approach, particularly now due to the looming problem of the succession to Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said. That said, it certainly does not see any positive developments from this latest chapter of Turkey's adventurism."

**Dr. Thomas W. O'Donnell, academic and analyst of the global energy system:**

"While this Trump decision has long been anticipated by all observers in the Gulf and elsewhere across the region, that does not diminish its worrisome implications. The impact on the Gulf states — Riyadh and other Gulf capitals, as well as US allies in Cairo and Tel Aviv or, for that matter, on its adversaries in Tehran — of this latest, confused and impulsive, unilateral decision by the US Commander-in-Chief, apparently uncoordinated with his own national-security inner circle or his Pentagon leaderships, to withdraw US forces and abandon the USA's steadfast allies in the fight against ISIS in Syria (the Kurdish 'People's Protection Units' (YPG) or 'Syrian Democratic Forces') is, in its major aspect uniformly the same for all in the Region: The USA under the mercurial Trump can neither be relied upon nor can its policy machinations be predicted with accuracy.

On the other hand, it remains perfectly clear to everyone in the region, whatever their interests, that the USA hyper-power has a deeply bi-partisan, geostrategic interest to diminish and disengage its armed forces from ground-combat commitments across the region, dating back to the Iraq Study Group-era re-appraisal of the ill-considered and ill-executed Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld invasion of Iraq, an assessment which now extends to US forces in Syria."

**Dr. Neil Quilliam, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House:**

"The medium- and long-term geopolitical implications of Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from northeast Syria on the Gulf states' foreign policy and security considerations can best be summarized as:

Reinforcing the lessons learned from the US' apparent limited response to the strikes against Saudi Arabia's 'crown jewels;' Gulf Arab leaders are likely to better understand the limits of US security guarantees. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, placed considerable confidence in the Trump administration following the Obama years, but have come to learn – with all of us – that the US appetite for intervention and projecting its military into the Gulf has come to an end. Neither Trump nor his successors are likely to spend 'blood and treasure' securing the Gulf and will increasingly call upon other powers to burden share. As such, Trump's decision can really be seen as an extension of policies already set in place of the US – not disengaging, but reassigning priorities and accepting that powers, such as China and Russia, and India, need to play their part in providing security. Whilst critics of the policy point to it as evidence that US influence has passed its nadir, which may be true, it appears to be a deliberate policy supported by a US electorate tired from wars. In response, the Gulf Arab states are likely to pursue at least two courses of action: they will continue to work very closely with the US, as they still consider it to be their main security guarantor and global partner, but will reach out to both Republicans and Democrats and try to deepen once again relations with key US

institutions rather than focusing solely on the Trump White House. Second, they will further court closer relations with other external powers, namely, Russia and China, though still with a deep suspicion toward the former – irrespective of the Putin-Salman meeting – and a little desperation toward Beijing, which remains intent on deepening engagement, but not at the expense of its other relations in the Gulf.”

**Dr. Li-Chen Sim, Assistant Professor, Zayed University:**

“Implication #1: For the Gulf, America’s withdrawal from northeast Syria reinforces the perception that the US is an increasingly unreliable ally. Coming on top of Putin’s state visit to the Gulf and considering that Putin has steadfastly stood by Assad and Iran, Gulf leaders will be even more receptive to Russia’s outreach, including its collective security plan for the Gulf. There is no danger of Russia replacing the US in terms of a military role, but the US has certainly opened the door wider for Russia, China, and other actors to be more involved in the region.

Implication #2: Turkey’s consequent offensive against the Kurds in Syria will give it a far larger role in any settlement of the Syria debacle, much to the chagrin of the Gulf states. The UAE, for instance, has insisted that the debacle in Syria must be resolved by Arab actors only and has decried Turkey ‘neo-Ottoman’ muscular foreign policy in the region, including its support of Qatar. Consequently, the UAE/Saudi Arabia may look to Russia – and its ‘friends with everyone’ approach – to moderate Turkey’s (and Iran’s) behavior; on its part, Russia has little appetite for an escalation of instability in Syria and so the two sides may find common ground on this.”

**Cinzia Bianco, Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR):**

“For the GCC states, Trump’s Syria policy has really crystallized their distrust of the US’ reliability as an ally, revitalizing their interest in Russia. On the ground, GCC influence is minimal but they have leverage in their decision to re-engage (or not) with the Assad regime. This is the leverage they are using with Moscow to solicit their intervention into managing Turkish ambitions.”