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**COSA: The Syrian Conflict—March 4, 2019**

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**(U) Syria: U.S. Withdrawal Likely to Lead to Increased  
Islamist Insurgency and Strengthened Assad Regime**



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## Overview and Key Judgments

**(U) Syria: The expected U.S. withdrawal will likely lead to an increased extremist insurgency, particularly in Deir ez-Zoir, as well as a strengthened Assad regime, therefore bolstering Iran's and Russia's influence in Syria.** On 19 December, President Trump announced his intention on withdrawing the remaining 2,000 troops in Syria. While the official withdrawal date and number of troops who will depart remains unknown, it is likely that there will be less than 500 troops by the end of the deliberations.

- **(U) *The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*.** ISIS is likely to begin reclaiming their lost “caliphate” following the United States’ withdrawal from Syria.
- **(U) *Extremist Opposition Forces*.** Extremist opposition rebel groups are likely to capitalize on the newly distracted and thinned out SDF, Regime, Turkish, Russian, and Iranian forces by expanding their sphere of influence outside of Idlib as the United States begins its disengagement.
- **(U) *Russia*.** Russia is likely to benefit following the U.S. withdrawal from Syria as it seeks to solidify its influence in the region following the war.
- **(U) *Iran*.** Iran is likely to become more aggressive, ramping up their military and intelligence presence in Syria and continue their support of the Assad regime, as the United States begins its troop withdrawal.
- **(U) *Turkey*.** Turkey is likely to increase its aggression against the SDF and YPG forces in the northern Syria following the U.S. withdrawal.
- **(U) *The Kurds*.** Kurdish forces will likely lose autonomy in northern Syria due to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, therefore giving headway to increased conflict in northern Syria.



## The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

**(U) ISIS is likely to begin reclaiming their lost “caliphate” following the United States’ withdrawal from Syria.** While ISIS’ territorial claims are relegated Baghouz, a small village outside of Deir ez-Zoir, there is still an estimated 14 to 20 thousand remaining fighters, which enhances the likelihood of their attempt to reclaim their lost caliphate.<sup>1</sup>

- (U) The Pentagon’s Inspector General reports, “ISIS is regenerating key functions and capabilities more quickly in Iraq than in Syria, but absent sustained pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria,” suggesting ISIS will reconstitute without adequate resistance from counterterrorism forces.<sup>2</sup>
- (U) Following the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, ISIS’ predecessor AQI had less than 700 members, but was capable of establishing a proto-state the size of Great Britain within three years of the withdraw.<sup>34</sup>
- (U) On 15 January 2019, four Americans, along with 15 locals, were killed in a suicide bombing in Manbij in an ISIS directed attack, according to the New York Times.<sup>5</sup> This suggests ISIS remains a lethal threat despite not possessing territory in northern Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> Callimachi, R. “A Desperate Exodus From ISIS’ Final Village.” The New York Times. February 6, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/middleeast/isis-baghouz.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Operation Inherent Resolve and other overseas contingency operations: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress.” United States Department of Defense. October 1 - December 31, 2018. Retrieved from: [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/05/2002086500/-1/-1/1/FY2019\\_LIG\\_OIRREPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/05/2002086500/-1/-1/1/FY2019_LIG_OIRREPORT.PDF)

<sup>3</sup> Abdul-Zahra, Q. “Al-Qaeda Making Comeback in Iraq, Officials Say.” USA Today. October 9, 2012. Retrieved from: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/10/09/al-qaeda-iraq/1623297/>

<sup>4</sup> “Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps.” British Broadcasting Corporation. March 28, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

<sup>5</sup> Hubbard, B. & Schmitt, E. “A Favorite Restaurant in Syria Led ISIS to Americans.” The New York Times. January 17, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/world/middleeast/syria-bombing-manbij-attack.html>



## Extremist Opposition Forces

**(U) Extremist opposition rebel groups are likely to capitalize on the newly distracted and thinned out SDF, Regime, Turkish, Russian, and Iranian forces by expanding their sphere of influence outside of Idlib as the United States begins its disengagement.** The groups, such as Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) and Hurras ad-Deen (HAD), are most likely to expand into the recently freed southeastern city of Deir ez-Zor.

- (U) In early January 2019, HAD was reported to begin expansion into Iraq, consistent with their ability to actively move troops and resources across regime controlled territory, and unique ability to conduct raids against the Assad regime.<sup>6</sup> HAD has shown both the capacity and the desire to move out of Idlib, contributing to their likelihood of expanding elsewhere when the time arises.
- (U) HTS has taken advantage of the Russian and Assad regime's focus on the Kurds and remnants of the IS caliphate, which has provided a window of opportunity to establish a new foundation outside Idlib. HTS has completely consolidated their area of control in Idlib between December 2018 and January 2019.<sup>7</sup>
- (U) As the SDF removes remaining IS cells from the area, there will be a vacuum for true power that will probably be filled by either HTS, HAD, or a combination of the two. HTS' and HAD's predecessor, the al-Nusra Front, has a long history of operations in Deir ez-Zor before being removed by IS in 2014, but these networks still exist and much of the same leadership from al-Nusra is in power with both organizations.<sup>8,9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> al-Saidi, H. "Is Iraq's 'Guardians of Religion' aiming for a 'Sunni Region'?" Al-Arabiya. January 2, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2019/01/02/Iraq-Guardians-of-Religion-seeks-to-establish-a-Sunni-region.html>

<sup>7</sup> Haid, H. "Is HTS Winning Hearts and Minds in Syria?" The Middle East Eye. February 5, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/hts-winning-hearts-and-minds-syria>

<sup>8</sup> Dziadosz, A. "Islamic State Expels Rivals from Syria's Deir al-Zor - activists." Reuters. July 14, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN0FJ1I020140714>

<sup>9</sup> Spencer, R. "Al-Qaeda's Syrian Wing Takes Over the Oilfields Once Belonging to Assad." The Telegraph. May 18, 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10065802/Al-Qaedas-Syrian-wing-takes-over-the-oilfields-once-belonging-to-Assad.html>



## Russia

**(U) Russia is likely to benefit following the U.S. withdrawal from Syria as it seeks to solidify its influence in the region following the war.** Russia probably views U.S. presence in Syria as a check to their influence on the regime as Syria has been a significant Russian ally in the Middle East since the 1950's during the Suez Crisis.

- (U) Since the beginning of the conflict, Russia has attempted to counter all Western and Israeli presence in the region, therefore the withdrawal of the United States from Syria is a victory for Russian policy.
- (U) The US-backed SDF currently controls over 25% of Syria, including key cities such as Raqqa and Manbij as well as multiple major oil wells that constitute 30% of Syria's domestic oil production which suggests Russia is likely to view this territory as a crucial part of revitalizing the Syrian economy.<sup>101112</sup>
- (U) Russia is likely to pressure the Syrian regime into working with the SDF to absorb it back into regime control. Without US support, the SDF is more likely to reach an agreement with the SAA.

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<sup>10</sup> Associated Press. "With control of 25 percent of Syria, Kurds Seek to Establish Self-Rule." Haaretz. October 8, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/with-control-of-25-percent-of-syria-kurds-seek-self-rule-1.545624>

<sup>11</sup> Chughtai, A. "Syria's War: Who Controls What?" Al-Jazeera. December 19, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html>

<sup>12</sup> "Syria Oil & Gas Map." Drilling maps. Retrieved from: <https://www.drillingmaps.com/syria.html#.XG2io1xKgvq>



## Iran

**(U) Iran is likely to become more aggressive, ramping up their military and intelligence presence in Syria and continue their support of the Assad regime, as the United States begins its troop withdrawal.** The significant drawdown of U.S. troops in the area is likely to give Iran the confidence it needs to maintain a continuous presence in the country.

- (U) Iran has almost certainly used the Syrian civil war as a tactic to gain a large military and intelligence presence in the country. They have worked to support the Assad regime, while simultaneously working to keep Syrian institutions weak.<sup>13</sup> For contextual purposes, it is important to note that Iran's strategy contrasts with Russia's tactics in Syria, which include building up and empowering Syrian state institutions.<sup>14</sup>
- (U) With the pushing out of ISIS, Assad, with the support of Iran, is likely to maintain his power and be emboldened by the withdrawal, re-imposing his jurisdiction with an unrestrained hand.<sup>15</sup>
- (U) As the United States withdraws, it is likely that Iran will continue with its "land-bridge" initiative, taking advantage of previously occupied areas by the United States to stretch their path through Syria, connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. The territorial gain could also provide Iran with routes to provide weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and set up camp near neighboring Israel's border.<sup>16</sup>
- (U) An Indicator of bolstered Iranian presence in country would likely be the creation of a Syrian-majority Hezbollah division in Syria. Iran has used this pattern successfully with Shi'a militias throughout Iraq and has supported Shi'a militias throughout the civil war with IRGC leadership.

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<sup>13</sup> Fulton, W. "Iranian Strategy in Syria." Institute For The Study of War. March 4, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>

<sup>14</sup>Khathb, L. "Trump's Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Syria Will Boost Iran's Fortune's." Time Magazine. January 4, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://time.com/5492934/us-withdraws-troops-syria-iran/>

<sup>15</sup> Alterman, J. "The Implications of The U.S. Withdrawal from Syria." Center for Strategic and International Studies. December 19, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/implications-us-withdrawal-syria>

<sup>16</sup> Badran, T. "Trump Reversal on Syria policy means big gains for Iran." USA Today. December 19, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/12/19/donald-trump-ordering-troops-syria-iran-israel-iraq-hezbollah-column/2367883002/>



## Turkey

**(U) Turkey is likely to increase its aggression against the SDF and YPG forces in the northern Syria following the U.S. withdrawal.** Turkey is likely to view the SDF and YPG as a growing threat in the area, and is likely to attack should the buffer zone discussed between the United States and Turkey in the northern Syria not be finalized before U.S. troops leave.

- (U) In early January, the Turkish military began sending hundreds of military vehicles into Syria in response to the removal of U.S. troops, in lieu of a likely increased chance for conflict with the SDF and YPG forces. Although a buffer zone has been discussed with the United States, it is unlikely that it will help in decreasing the possibility of a Turkish attack on Kurdish forces if created.
- (U) Turkey views the U.S. withdrawal as a security concern, saying the pullout of troops would give the YPG, a group deemed as a terrorist group and offshoot of the illegal PKK by Turkey, room to grow in Syria.<sup>17</sup>
- (U) In December 2018, Turkey announced plans to extend its anti-YPG offensive into territory U.S. forces would vacate in the withdrawal to combat YPG forces, including the town of Manbij. Since the announcement, Turkish president, Recep Erdogan, has “repeatedly warned America that a Turkish military operation against the US-backed YPG in Manbij is near.”<sup>18</sup> This suggests that if the United States leaves the area before Turkey feels safe, Turkey will very likely retaliate against YPG forces.

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<sup>17</sup> “US ‘actively engaging with Turkey’ on Syria Safe Zone.” Hurriyet Daily News. February 20, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-actively-engaging-with-turkey-on-syria-safe-zone-141348>

<sup>18</sup> Wintour, P. “Syrian Kurdish Leader: Border Force Needed to Protect US from Turkey.” The Guardian. February 19, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/19/syrian-kurdish-leader-ilham-ahmed-international-force-kurds-turkey-border>



## The Kurds

**(U) Kurdish forces will likely lose autonomy in northern Syria due to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, therefore giving headway to increased conflict in northern Syria.** The U.S. decision to withdraw from Syria will most likely lead to an amplified refugee crisis for Syrians and Kurds fleeing armed conflict in the region.

- (U) The removal of all but 400 U.S. troops from Syria will leave Kurdish military forces, such as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), without the military support of their most significant ally. This unexpected turn of events has left the Kurds in a vulnerable position, forcing them to prioritize their military and political goals. Both Turkey and the Assad regime wish to prevent any future Kurdish autonomy; however, Kurdish forces cannot afford to wage three wars at once. Therefore, the Kurds must finish the current task at hand of eradicating ISIS from Syria.<sup>19</sup>
- (U) The Kurds’ top priority with such limited support will likely be to retake the final ISIS stronghold in Baghouz in order to effectively end the territorial rule of ISIS.<sup>20</sup>
- (U) U.S. withdrawal from Syria will most likely lead to increased recruitment of refugees by ISIS, due to Syrian refugees’ lack of resources and U.S. protection.

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<sup>19</sup> Magid, P. “Kurdish Commander Laments American Betrayal, Urges U.S. to ‘Be Loyal.’” Foreign Policy. February 7, 2019. Retrieved From: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/07/kurdish-commander-laments-american-betrayal-urges-us-to-be-loyal/>

<sup>20</sup> Raphelson, S. “U.S.- Back Kurdish Forces Launch ‘Final Push’ Against ISIS in Syria.” NPR. February 10, 2019. Retrieved From: <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/10/693130494/u-s-backed-kurdish-forces-launch-final-push-against-isis-in-syria>