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Trump and the Middle East: the role of the US revisited in the light of the withdrawal of American forces from Syria

Peter Seeberg

News
US President Donald Trump announced 19 December 2018, that the American forces in Syria will be withdrawn soon. As a result of this announcement the last weeks of 2018 have been dominated by predominantly critical comments to Trump’s latest foreign policy initiative, like for instance New York Times columnist Bret Stephens, who argued that the controversial decision once again made his predecessors look better (Stephens, 2018). The decision adds to the complexity of the situation in the Mashreq region in the sense that it comes at a time when most actors involved in the Syrian crisis have started preparing for a post-conflict scenario in Syria. At the same time the decision has initiated changes of the more or less stable alliances in the Syrian quagmire and reignited discussions about the recent role of the US in an unstable Middle East.

Summary
The article analyzes the consequences of the recent announcement by Trump to withdraw the US troops from Syria within the next month. It is discussed how the US move is being perceived in the Middle East and to what extent the signals coming from the US President have contributed to skepticism concerning the role of the USA in the conflicts in the Mashreq – and in the Middle East broadly speaking. Based on short analyzes of four Middle Eastern states (Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi-Arabia) and their relations with the US it is argued that the withdrawal announcement and the way it has been understood in the Middle East indicate negative shifts in the sentiments in the region concerning the role of the US. Not as clear-cut anti-Americanism, but in the sense that signals from Washington create uncertainty about US policies regarding future challenges in the Middle East.

Key Words
US Middle East policy, Trump, withdrawal of troops, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi-Arabia.

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Analysis:

Introduction – Trump in the Middle East

On the 19th of December 2018 Trump declared in a tweet, that “we have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency” (Board, 2018). He therefore ordered the withdrawal of all 2,000 American ground troops from Syria within 30 days. It was expected, and also officially stated two days earlier by US State Department’s Syria envoy, James Jeffrey, that the United States’ forces would stay in Syria until ISIS was finally defeated, Iranian influence curbed and a political solution was found to the Syrian civil war. However, Trump undercut his advisers and decided to terminate the American involvement in Syria.

The criticism in the US has been harsh. Commentators as well as former and recent members of the Trump administration have argued that this will allow the IS to regroup and thereby prolong the time before solutions can be found to all the items on the post-war agenda in Syria. Furthermore, the strategic aspects of the decision have been discussed intensely. It seems obvious that both Russian and Iranian interests will become strengthened by an early withdrawal of the US troops. And in addition to that there is hardly doubt that the Kurdish troops, which have fought in Iraq and Syria against the IS alongside the Americans, stand out as losers following the withdrawal decision. Apparently, Trump, before he decided to issue the order of withdrawal, discussed the question in a telephone call with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and obviously Erdogan sees the US decision as a significant step forward in its ongoing conflict with the Kurdish militias in northern Syria.

The question of how the role of the US in the Middle East-region is being perceived by the Middle Eastern states and the populations of Turkey, Iran and the Arab states constitute an important and interesting aspect of the regional and international repercussions of the Syrian conflict. It is the idea of this article to analyze if and/or to what extent the confusing signals coming from the American President over the last two years and in particular the recent decision to withdraw US troops from Syria have added to skepticism regarding the role of the USA in the Middle East.

Shifts in Turkey-US relations

Despite the fact that Turkey and the USA are NATO-partners, their political cooperation has not always been stable and unproblematic. And over the last years anti-American sentiments have grown stronger both in the AKP-Government and among the Turks in general. Erdogan has blamed Washington for the recent decline of the Turkish
economy, and his viewpoint has been supported by a Turkish population, among which a strong anti-Americanism has existed for some years (Jones, 2018). Within the last years – after a period, where the PKK was on its way into mainstream Turkish politics – the American support for the Kurdish militias has been extremely unpopular in Ankara and in the Turkish population as well.

The withdrawal of troops from Syria will hardly make anti-Americanism disappear in Turkey, but maybe the diplomatic tension between Trump and Erdogan will calm down a bit. On the Syrian battlefield the Kurds – hoping to maintain a relative autonomy in northern Syrian – might attempt to get closer to the Syrian regime. All things being equal the new situation leaves the Iran-Syria axis and its strong non-state allies (first of all the Hezbollah) strengthened vis-à-vis what might be left of the Syrian opposition.

**Iran and its indirectly strengthened alliance**

The Islamic Republic of Iran was born anti-American. And a hostile sentiment is still the official Iranian policy towards the US, frequently, in the official Friday Prayers from Teheran, dubbed “The Great Satan”. But since the revolution in 1978-79 a significant and increasing opposition to the highly critical regime-based US-policy has appeared in the Iranian population, not least during the Obama Presidency, where the 2015 Nuclear Agreement with Iran was very popular. This changed with the election of Trump, who “re-oriented US foreign policy along a traditional pattern of intransigent antagonism towards Iran” (Alcaro, 2018). As shown by Riccardo Alcaro the main components of Trump’s Iran-approach are delegitimization, sanctions, and containment, hoping to outmaneuver and isolate Iran in the Middle East region.

Internally in Iran the shift in the US Iran-policies have led to a higher level of compliance between the regime and the Iranian population, and thereby weakened the opposition against the religious leadership. In a regional perspective the Trump decision seems to reinforce the Iranian alliance with Syria, but also – at least potentially – to enhance Iranian relations with Russia and Turkey. Summing up: strategically the consequences of the US withdrawal from Syria seem to counteract certain aspects of US’ foreign and security policy interests in the Middle East region.

**Israel and Saudi-Arabia – skepticism over Trump’s decision**

Trump gained popularity in Israel when he 17 December 2017 announced that the US Embassy in Israel would be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and according to a Pew poll in 2018, Israel showcase the highest favourability rating of the US under Trump, with 83% saying they have a favourable view of the US now, compared to 81% at the
end of the Obama presidency” (Keinon, 2018). The closest ally of the US in the Middle East, Israel, also became somewhat worried by the potential relatively strengthening of Iran resulting from the announced US withdrawal from Syria. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the day after Trump had tweeted his decision, consequently announced, that “Israel would escalate its fight against Iranian-aligned forces in Syria after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country” (Williams, 2018). In the long run some skepticism towards the inconsistent foreign policies of Trump might appear in Israel, but so far it hasn’t been documented in opinion polls.

Contrary to Barack Obama, whose viewpoints concerning human rights and political freedom caused some friction in his relationship with the GCC states and in particular Saudi-Arabia, Trump “dropped these sources of tension” (Lesch and Haas, 2018: 435). An obvious example of this could be seen, when Trump made it clear, that he would not impose sanctions against Saudi Arabia in protest over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi – this despite the fact that the Saudi crown prince probably knew that the murder took place (Guardian, 2018). The Saudi-Arabian regime as well as the Saudi population have appreciated the shifts in approach from Obama to Trump concerning Iran, but the recent decision of leaving Syria will probably be met with some skepticism from Riyadh, who sees its strongest ally abandon a regional hotspot – and let the Iranian influence in the Mashreq prevail.

Conclusions

It is hardly meaningful to speak of a one-dimensional pattern in the reactions to Trump’s policies in the Middle East. Taking US-Turkey relations as a starting point the somewhat burdensome relation between Erdogan and Trump might experience an improvement following the US departure from its recent alliance with Kurdish militias in northern Syria. In the case of Iran, it seems likely that the decision by Trump will lead to a higher level of compliance between the regime and the Iranian population and to a strengthening of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. Furthermore, the new situation opens for a possible rapprochement between Iran, Russia and Turkey. Trump’s ambition of isolating Iran seems not to be fulfilled with the withdrawal initiative. For the traditional allies of the USA, first of all Israel and Saudi-Arabia, the recent situation is likely to add to a feeling of inconsistency and lack of clarity in US policies. Saudi-Arabia maybe in the first place felt confident, that under Trump they would not be bothered with hints regarding human rights, rule of law and political reforms. However, if the US cuts down on their presence in the Mashreq, the Saudis might feel that they have lost regional leverage vis-à-vis Iran.
A recent Pew poll on how the world views the US and its President indicates that a widespread frustration with the role of the US seems to be a reality, partly because some of the political initiatives by Trump lead to confusion and lack of confidence (Pew, 2018). In this news analysis the recent announcement that the US troops in Syria will be withdrawn soon is seen as an example of this, and furthermore it has been discussed if the policies and practices of the recent US President add to an unclear picture of the US among friends and foes in the Middle East. The withdrawal announcement and the way it has been perceived in the Middle East indicate interesting shifts in the sentiments in the region concerning the role of the US. Not as a new wave of clear-cut anti-Americanism, but in the sense that confusing signals from Washington create skepticism about the role of the USA regarding future challenges in the Middle East.

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