

**U.S. SYRIA WITHDRAWAL COULD CREATE IRAN- & I.S.-
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Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019
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[In Syria, Iran Sees a New Opportunity to Build a War Machine: Yaakov Lappin, IPT News, Dec. 31, 2018](#)— If it goes ahead, Iran likely will view President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw American forces from eastern Syria as a green light to build a new war machine in the region.

[Let’s Make Sure ISIS Fighters Stay Locked Up - Even After Our Syria Pullout: Marc Thiessen, New York Post, Dec. 28, 2018](#)— President Trump’s decision to withdraw all US forces from Syria is already having unintended consequences.

[The US Withdrawal from Syria: A Blessing in Disguise?: Maj. Gen. \(res.\) Gershon Hacoheh, BESA, Dec. 30, 2018](#)— The Oslo process took place under unique global circumstances.

[America’s Loyal Syrian Kurdish Allies Evade Annihilation: Malcolm Lowe, Gatestone Institute, Dec. 31, 2018](#)— In April 2018, we warned that President Trump’s decision to withdraw US forces from Syria would be a repetition of President Obama’s worst mistake, the precipitate withdrawal from Iraq that facilitated the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State (ISIS).

[On Topic Links](#)

[The U.S. Withdrawal from Syria: Implications for Israel \(Video\): Amb. Dore Gold, JCPA, Jan. 1, 2019](#)

[Donald Trump is Right to Pull U.S. Troops out of Syria: Andrew Preston, Globe and Mail, Dec. 31, 2018](#)

[Syria’s Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection: Ben Hubbard, New York Times, Dec. 28, 2018](#)

[House of Assad: Inside Syria’s Dangerous Dynasty: Nick Green, Telegraph, Oct. 9, 2018](#)

IN SYRIA, IRAN SEES A NEW

OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A WAR MACHINE

Yaakov Lappin

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FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**

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***[IPT News](#)*, Dec. 31, 2018**

If it goes ahead, Iran likely will view President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw American forces from eastern Syria as a green light to build a new war machine in the region. But Iran also received a red light recently, apparently reminding it that Israel is standing guard against Tehran's takeover plans. That red light came Dec. 25 in the form of an alleged Israeli air strike on an Iranian weapons depot in Syria. The strike looks like the latest signal of Israel's determination to block Iran's path into Syria, with or without an American ground presence.

According to media reports, including a report by the Israeli satellite image company ISI, the strike destroyed a warehouse that contained Iranian Fajr-5 rockets. The warehouse was just 40 kilometers - about 25 miles - away from Israel. Israel's military says Fajr 5 rockets are produced in Iranian weapons factories and have a range of 75 kilometers, or just under 50 miles. In past years, Iran smuggled these types of rockets to terrorist organizations that are ideologically committed to attacking Israel, including Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Now, Iran is trying to flood Syria with them.

So far, the Fajr 5s that have been in the inventory of Israel's enemies were unguided rockets. That does not stop them from posing a serious threat. Hamas fired a Fajr 5 rocket in November 2012 in the midst of an eight-day conflict, severely damaging an apartment building in Rishon Lezion, south of Tel Aviv. Residents survived due to an air raid siren, which sent them scurrying into a safe room before the rocket struck. In February 2017, reports emerged saying that Iran's defense industry has begun manufacturing a new, guided version of the Fajr 5. These can be fired quickly and in succession from a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS). The arrival of such weapons would present terrorists in Syria seeking to attack Israel with new precision abilities.

It remains unclear whether the Fajr 5 rockets destroyed in the alleged Israeli strike were guided, but Israel has drawn a clear red line that forbids the arrival of Iranian guided projectiles in the area. Once in Syria, precision weapons can be given to Shi'ite militias under Iran's command, or be used by Iranian military forces themselves, which are operating on Syrian soil. That's what happened last May, when Islamic Republican Guards Corps (IRGC) used a truck-mounted rocket launcher to fire on the Golan Heights. In other cases, batches of Iranian weapons

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isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

that have made their way into Syria are subsequently smuggled into neighboring Lebanon, where Hizballah has built up one of the world's largest arsenals of surface-to-surface projectiles. Hizballah's estimated 130,000 rockets and missiles are pointed at Israeli cities, power plants, ports, airports, and military installations.

Thus, Iran has already turned Lebanon into a forward military post against Israel. Its goal now is to do the same in Syria. Although the U.S. forces stationed in Syria are there exclusively to combat Salafi-jihadist Sunni ISIS terrorists, their presence in the strategically important Al-Tanf region, on the Syria-Iraq border, also helps block the expansion of the radical Iranian-Shi'ite axis. The U.S. presence has helped stop Iran from trying to use the Al-Tanf border crossing as a gateway for land convoys carrying Iranian weapons and Shi'ite militias, from Iraq into Syria. The Al-Tanf border area is one of two ground corridors that Iran is hoping to use in its Syrian expansion project.

The second main land 'entrance' to Syria is located further north, at the Albu Kamal border crossing. This area has been the scene of repeated Iranian and Hizballah-controlled traffic of militias and weapons. But this site also drew at least one major alleged Israeli strike in June, resulting in dozens of casualties, including Iranian military officers and Iraqi Shi'ite militia members. Currently, Israel and Iran remain locked in a shadow war over Syria's future. Israel is employing preventative force to stop Iran from converting Syria into second front, alongside Lebanon. Tehran's takeover efforts are being led by the IRGC, which acts as the 'long arm' of Iran across the region, particularly through the overseas expeditionary elite unit, the Quds Force, commanded by the notorious General Qassem Soleimani.

With Israel 'covering' the northern Albu Kamal crossing, the U.S. had been 'covering' the southern Al-Tanf crossing, meaning that Iran's ground expansion scheme had run into some difficulties. Iran was forced to rely on its more traditional trafficking method - cargo flights - though this too had become increasingly difficult, with Israel monitoring suspicious flights around the clock, and reportedly taking action when intelligence called for it...*[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]*

[Contents](#)

**LET'S MAKE SURE ISIS FIGHTERS STAY LOCKED UP -
EVEN AFTER OUR SYRIA PULLOUT**

Marc Thiessen

[*New York Post*](#), Dec. 28, 2018

President Trump's decision to withdraw all US forces from Syria is already having unintended consequences. The American departure could lead to the release of 1,100 Islamic State fighters now held in detention camps in northeastern Syria, creating a dangerous new terrorist threat to the West.

The Syrian Democratic Forces — the Kurdish and Arab proxy forces whom the US armed and trained to fight the Islamic State — don't have the capacity to guard and feed so many terrorists without American support. And *The Washington Post* reports that their home countries "are refusing to repatriate their citizens, citing the risk that they would spread radical ideology or perhaps carry out attacks back home." If Washington abandons the SDF, the group might have no choice but to release the Islamists.

How much damage could these terrorists cause? To put it in perspective, the Islamic State had only about 700 fighters left when President Barack Obama withdrew US forces from Iraq in 2011 — yet from that tiny nucleus, the group grew into the world's largest, most powerful terrorist network, until Trump unleashed our military to beat the fanatics back. Now imagine what destruction 1,100 terrorists could wreak across the globe. The Islamic State detainees hail from 32 countries, including many believed to be from Europe. As a Syrian Kurdish foreign affairs official noted, the US withdrawal would create "a security vacuum that these criminals could exploit to escape and pose a danger to all of us," adding that "they could make their way back to their home countries and carry out bombings."

The optimal solution would be for Trump to reconsider his withdrawal plan so that we can keep these detainees in Syria under the watchful eye of US intelligence and Special Operations forces. But there is also another possible solution — one that would help the president keep another campaign promise: Send them to Guantanamo Bay. In January, Trump issued an executive order that authorized the

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FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**
isranet-publications
Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019
<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

US military and intelligence community to “transport additional detainees to US Naval Station Guantanamo Bay when lawful and necessary to protect the Nation.”

During his State of the Union address, Trump asked Congress “to ensure that, in the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda, we continue to have all the necessary power to detain terrorists. . . . And in many cases for them it will now be Guantanamo Bay.” In March, Congress responded by approving more than \$200 million in new construction for Guantanamo Bay as part of the omnibus spending bill. The Pentagon followed up by formally authorizing the station to receive new detainees who pose a “continuing, significant threat.”

There is little doubt that a number of the Islamic State fighters now held in Syria would make excellent candidates for detention at Guantanamo Bay. Trump should order the intelligence community to conduct a threat assessment for each of the detainees, to see which ones would qualify for transfer. No doubt, a decision to move some of the prisoners from Syria to Guantanamo would create an uproar in Europe. These would be the very same countries currently refusing to take custody of their citizens who went to fight for the Islamic State.

Trump should give any complaining countries an ultimatum: Either take your nationals back, or they are headed to Guantanamo. Transfer to Guantanamo is a less than optimal solution, because right now high-value detainees held on the battlefield in Syria don’t have access to lawyers and can’t challenge their detentions in court – which means they can be effectively interrogated for intelligence purposes. But once transferred to Guantanamo, they would immediately get lawyers and the right of habeas corpus – which dramatically - reduces their intelligence value.

Instead of transferring these terrorists, we should keep them where they are – and continue supporting the SDF until the estimated 30,000 Islamic State fighters still at large in Iraq or Syria are all killed or captured. The Islamic State is not defeated – not even by a long shot. But this much is clear: We can’t allow more than a thousand dangerous terrorists to be released into the world so that they can return to the fight.

[Contents](#)

THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE?

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

[BESA](#), Dec. 30, 2018

The Oslo process took place under unique global circumstances. The Soviet Union had just collapsed and the Cold War had come to an abrupt end with the West's clear victory. The US became "the only remaining superpower" and the "End of History" loomed over the horizon.

Since then, far-reaching changes have taken place. Russia has reemerged as a major global force and has reassumed its great-power status through direct military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. The US, by contrast, has substantially reduced its global involvement over the past decade and has lost its hegemonic position in the Middle East. In this respect, President Trump's recent decision to withdraw US troops from Syria is but the continuation of the disengagement policy begun by his immediate predecessor. It is arguable, of course, that the withdrawal casts serious doubt on the credibility of the US as a strategic ally. Yet for all its attendant flaws, this step gives Israel a chance to reconsider its longstanding belief in seemingly unshakable US backing.

For quite some time, the Jewish state has found itself in a strategic quandary. On the one hand, the more omnipotent the American image, the stronger Israel's reputation as a major military and political player. On the other hand, the widespread belief in Washington's ostensible ability to guarantee any Arab-Israeli peace agreement has placed Jerusalem under constant pressure to take the risks associated with withdrawal from areas vital to its national security. Thus, for example, by way of paving the way for the IDF's total withdrawal from the West Bank as part of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, the Obama administration proposed a complex security package that substituted the deployment of US forces in the Jordan Valley for Israel's longstanding demand for defensible borders (accepted by Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967).

But to what extent can foreign military forces operating in a wholly alien environment provide an adequate substitute for the IDF in enforcing the West Bank's demilitarization? Judging by the experience of international forces in the

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FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

Middle East in recent decades, the answer is far from satisfactory. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), deployed along the Israeli-Lebanese border since 1978, for example, has miserably failed to prevent the transformation of the area under its jurisdiction into an unreconstructed terrorist entity - first by the PLO (until 1982), then by successive Shiite terrorist organizations. As starkly demonstrated by the recent exposure of Hezbollah's attack tunnels penetrating Israel's territory, UNIFIL has totally failed to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of August 11, 2006, at the end of the Second Lebanon War, which stipulated the disbanding of all armed militias in Lebanon and prohibited arms supplies to any group without government authorization, as well as the presence of armed forces south of the Litani River. Nor does the West's experience in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past decades inspire much confidence in the ability of external powers to cope effectively with sustained subversive, terrorist, and jihadist insurgencies.

These operational constraints notwithstanding, the idea of international supervision suffers from an inherent political-constitutional flaw, namely its total dependence on the consent of the host government, which can demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces from its territory (as happened with the removal of UN forces from Egypt in May 1967). To this must be added the numerous instances where international supervisory and/or intervention forces were withdrawn from countries they were supposed to protect as a result of unilateral decisions by the sending governments: from the evacuation of the American-French-British-Italian force from Lebanon following Hezbollah's bombing of its Beirut headquarters in October 1983, to the hasty withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011 with the attendant rise of ISIS and its takeover of large swaths of Iraq and Syria, to President Trump's latest decision.

According to Israeli security experts, the US withdrawal has left Israel alone in the battle against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. True enough, but this setback can potentially entail an important silver lining. For the sooner Israel recognizes the precariousness of a regional "Pax Americana," the sooner it will grasp the futility of "painful territorial concessions" in the West Bank, let alone on the Golan Heights.

What Israel needs most from the US at the present time is political and diplomatic backing in support of its vital national interests, primarily 1) support for its continued hold of the Golan as a vital condition for its defense; and 2) cessation of

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FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**
isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

pressure for further territorial withdrawals in the West Bank. With luck, Trump's Syria turnaround might catalyze a shift in US regional strategy in this direction.

[Contents](#)

AMERICA'S LOYAL SYRIAN KURDISH ALLIES EVADE ANNIHILATION

Malcolm Lowe

[Gatestone Institute](#), Dec. 31, 2018

In April 2018, we warned that President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria would be a repetition of President Obama's worst mistake, the precipitate withdrawal from Iraq that facilitated the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State (ISIS). We perceived that the immediate consequence of abandoning Syria would be a Turkish-led campaign to annihilate America's Syrian Kurdish allies, who heroically bore the brunt of defeating the ISIS in Syria and capturing its capital, Raqqa.

The conclusion drawn was that the Syrian Kurds would have no choice but to appeal to Iran for help. For it was only Iran's foreign ministry spokesman who had protested vehemently against the Turkish-facilitated capture of Afrin, a Kurdish town in northwest Syria, in March by an Islamist militia. In the meantime, Turkey has sent many thousands of Kurds fleeing, who have been replaced with "displaced Syrian Arabs from East Ghouta." The Islamist militia has subjected Christians to Sharia-style dhimmitude and forced Yazidis to convert to Islam on pain of death. Amnesty International has also reported on rampant offences against property and individuals; it mentions the thousands of refugees who have fled from Afrin.

In these recent December days, the scenario then foreseen has been playing itself out rapidly. On December 14, in a telephone conversation with Turkey's President Erdogan, President Trump not merely made a final decision to remove US forces from Syria but invited Erdogan to replace them with Turkish forces. The invitation has terrified not just the Syrian Kurds but also other militias in the Syrian Democratic Forces that fight alongside them against ISIS. An example is the Syriac

**U.S. SYRIA WITHDRAWAL COULD CREATE IRAN- & I.S.-
FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**
isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

Military Council, a Christian militia that has issued its own appeal to Trump to reconsider: “The outcome of the invasion of Afrin makes visible what will happen to us. Churches will be destroyed. Christians and Yazidis, designated ‘infidels’ by Turkey’s mercenaries, will be killed and massacred ... Women of all ethnicities, now free, will be raped, enslaved and veiled.”

Trump overruled the objections of all his advisors, generals and supporters in Congress, assuring them that Erdogan had promised to deal with any remnants of ISIS in the area. Apparently, Trump is the only person among them all who ignored – or maybe does not even understand – that Erdogan had eagerly accepted Trump’s invitation not on account of ISIS but in order to inflict his Afrin operation upon the entire population of America’s loyal allies in Syria. The prospect of such a US withdrawal from Syria – and such a betrayal – has even provoked articles with almost the same title as ours, such as Mark A. Thiessen in the Washington Post and Boston Herald on December 23: “Trump repeating Obama’s mistake in the Middle East.” Search for those words on internet and you will now find others coming to the same conclusion.

Events rolled on with Trump’s unannounced arrival at a US base in Iraq on December 26. Trump declined to meet first in Baghdad with Adil Abdul Mahdi, the new Prime Minister of Iraq, but invited Mahdi to join him at the base. Apparently, Trump did not realize that he had humiliated Abdul Mahdi, as if the latter were a lackey at his beck and call.

There were furious protests in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (the parliament), both from the Iran-friendly Bina Bloc - with calls for the expulsion of US forces – and from the more independent-minded Islah Bloc. The two blocs command respectively 73 and 126 seats in the 329-seat Council, thus a decisive majority. They had come together to ratify the appointment of Abdul Mahdi in October. The parliamentary leader of Islah, Sabbah al-Saadi, called for an emergency session of the Council “to discuss this blatant violation of Iraq’s sovereignty and to stop these aggressive actions by Trump who should know his limits: the US occupation of Iraq is over.” Oblivious, possibly, that he was far from welcome in Iraq, Trump told US military personnel that – as he was planning to keep them in Iraq - there was no problem in abandoning Syria: “If we see something happening with ISIS [in Syria] that we don’t like, we can hit them so fast and so hard they really won’t know what the hell happened. We’ve knocked them silly.”

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isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

Strategic wisdom would dictate the opposite. In December 2017, the then Iraqi government led by Haider al-Abadi declared ISIS defeated in Iraq. The remaining pockets of ISIS fighters are not seen by Iraqis as a serious threat. They are smaller than in Syria, while Iraq's army is now battle-hardened and will not repeat its disgraceful flight from Mosul upon the arrival of ISIS fighters in June 2014. Also, although the mainly Shiite militias that fought fiercely alongside the army have now been largely disbanded, they could be remobilized at any time. In eastern Syria, by contrast, the local Kurdish and Arab population begged the Americans to stay and help them defend themselves. The remnants of ISIS are substantial. The area also contains most of Syria's oilfields, the only major source of income left undamaged by the civil war, so a presence there would give the US a powerful card to play in determining the country's post-war future.

It would be strategic wisdom, therefore, to maintain the small US presence in Syria (about 2,000 personnel) while reducing the US profile in Iraq in order to forestall a looming demand by the Iraqi parliament for a total US withdrawal. Now it is probably too late because the Syrian Kurds have decided to abandon the US before the US abandons them. It seems that US forces will leave Syria not on American and Turkish terms but on Russian and Iranian terms. For months, Turkey has been planning to repeat its Afrin operation in Manbij, a Kurdish town further east, where Erdogan was deterred only by the US and French forces stationed inside the town. In recent weeks, thousands of Turkish-backed Islamists gathered for this purpose. Two days after Trump's confident address to US forces in Iraq, the Kurds of Manbij invited the Syrian army to deploy west and north of the town in a protective shield on December 28....

[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]

[Contents](#)

[On Topic Links](#)

[The U.S. Withdrawal from Syria: Implications for Israel \(Video\): Amb. Dore Gold, JCPA, Jan. 1, 2019](#)—There are two basic approaches for understanding the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria for Israel.

[Donald Trump is Right to Pull U.S. Troops out of Syria: Andrew Preston, *Globe and*](#)

**U.S. SYRIA WITHDRAWAL COULD CREATE IRAN- & I.S.-
FILLED SECURITY VACUUM**

isranet-publications

Isranet Daily Briefing, January 3, 2019

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/u-s-syria-withdrawal-could-create-iran-i-s-filled-security-vacuum/>

Mail, Dec. 31, 2018—On Dec. 19, Mr. Trump abruptly announced he would be withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria, where they have been fighting a slow-burning but intense war against the Islamic State.

Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection: Ben Hubbard, New York Times, Dec. 28, 2018—Feeling betrayed by the United States, its Kurdish allies in Syria asked the Syrian government on Friday to protect them from possible attack by Turkey.

House of Assad: Inside Syria's Dangerous Dynasty: Nick Green, Telegraph, Oct. 9, 2018—Many have wondered how Bashar al Assad and his British born wife, Asma, a couple once heralded as the force to modernise the Middle East, ended up running a regime accused of war crimes.