

Trump reverses himself on Syria pullout order

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6 April 2018

After a reportedly heated meeting of the US National Security Council on Wednesday, the Trump White House announced that there was no change in US policy toward Syria, despite a volley of comments and tweets by President Trump demanding an immediate pullout of the 2,000 US troops now deployed in the country.

The meeting with the National Security Council was essentially a conference between Trump and his generals, since he has no current top-level civilian foreign policy advisers.

Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson last month, and his successor, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, has not yet been confirmed. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, an Army general, is a lame duck, and his replacement, former Bush administration UN Ambassador John Bolton, does not begin work until next week.

As a consequence, the meeting Wednesday involved Trump and Secretary of Defense James Mattis (a retired Marine Corps general); the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunsford; and the head of the Pentagon's Central Command, General Joseph Votel, to discuss Syria policy.

The White House issued a brief statement after the meeting, declaring, "The military mission to eradicate ISIS in Syria is coming to a rapid end," but adding that it would continue. At the same time, Washington appealed to "countries in the region and beyond, plus the United Nations, to work toward peace and ensure that ISIS never re-emerges."

Press reports suggested that Trump had told the military brass that he wanted a complete pullout within six months, an indication that the wrangling over Syria is largely motivated by domestic political considerations. Trump wants to have the option of

announcing a supposedly triumphant end to the Syrian intervention on the eve of the November 6 congressional election, now seven months away.

The Republican Party is trailing badly in the polls and has suffered a series of recent reverses in key industrial states, including Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Significantly, Trump made his initial announcement about withdrawing all US troops from Syria at a campaign-style rally in Ohio, another key industrial state in the Midwest. He is acutely aware—and the audience response at the rally demonstrated it—that the American public is deeply hostile to military interventions in the Middle East.

There is an enormous gulf between this popular antiwar sentiment and the demands of the military-intelligence apparatus, the Democratic and Republican parties, and the corporate media, where there has been near-universal denunciation of Trump's suggestion of a pullout from Syria.

Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who plays a major role on national security policy in the Republican caucus, warned on Fox News Sunday that a withdrawal from Syria was the worst decision Trump could make.

On Tuesday, there was a revealing split-screen moment, when Trump was declaring his support for withdrawal from Syria at a White House press briefing, at the very time that two top US officials, General Votel of Central Command, and Brett McGurk, the State Department coordinator of the campaign against ISIS, were a few blocks away addressing the US Institute for Peace, a think tank devoted, of course, to imperialist war, about the necessity to stay the course.

"We are in Syria to fight ISIS. That is our mission, and our mission isn't over," McGurk told the audience, citing two large pockets of ISIS fighters numbering

several thousand men, and including ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. “We have to work through some very difficult issues as we speak,” he said. “We are going to complete that mission.”

General Votel was even more categorical, saying, “The hard part, I think, is in front of us, and that is stabilizing these areas, consolidating our gains, getting people back into their homes.” He added, “There is a military role in this, certainly in the stabilization phase.”

Wednesday’s NSC meeting was only the latest demonstration of the sway that the generals exercise in all Trump administration policy matters. Besides the generals on the other side of the table, briefing Trump, his own chief of staff, John Kelly, is a retired Marine Corps general implacably opposed to any “premature” withdrawal of US forces from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

The NSC meeting coincided with the meeting in the Turkish capital of Ankara between Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the political situation in Syria in the wake of the destruction of ISIS and the military advances of forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The three presidents agreed on maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, an implicit rejection of Kurdish aspirations in the region.

At the same time, the Associated Press reported Wednesday that United States troops were building new positions near the front line close to the Syrian-Turkish border, with outposts flying the American flag. According to this report, “The structures look much like the fighting positions once seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, which projected a clear message: ‘We’re here for a while.’”

A top US general Thursday emphasized that Trump had not set a deadline for withdrawing US troops from Syria, despite his statement to that effect at a campaign rally last week, several tweets, and his comments to the press Tuesday during an appearance with visiting leaders of the three Baltic states.

Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the director of the Joint Staff, told a Pentagon press briefing, “One of the things that we haven’t been given is a timeline,” and he went on to praise Trump, saying, “The President has actually been very good in not giving us a specific timeline.”

In a transparent effort to flatter Trump, General McKenzie contrasted the current posture in Syria with timelines like those set by the Obama administration in Afghanistan, where, he said, US forces “operated against a timeline that was known to the enemy.”

The real attitude towards Trump’s vacillations about Syria was spelled out in a scathing editorial published Thursday night by the *Washington Post*, which has been aligned with the Democratic Party efforts to push Trump towards a more confrontational policy against Russia.

Under the headline, “Trump’s mind-boggling gift to America’s enemies,” the *Post* took note of Trump’s belated climb-down before the demands of his “national security team,” and then warned of the devastating consequences that a pullout from Syria would have for the interests of US imperialism.

Brushing aside the question of ISIS, which has always been a pretext, calling it “only one of the major US interests at stake,” the *Post* spelled out the main US war aims: “preventing Iran and Russia from entrenching in the country at the expense of U.S. allies including Israel and Jordan;” as well as “preserving Turkey’s place as a NATO ally” and preventing “destabilizing waves of refugees headed for Europe.”

The editorial continued, making a sinister connection between US policy in Syria and the ongoing anti-Russian campaign by the Democrats and their media mouthpieces like the *Post* and the *New York Times*: “That Mr. Trump’s intended retreat is a gift to Vladimir Putin perhaps should not be surprising, given Mr. Trump’s curious eagerness to accommodate the Russian ruler.”



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