

# US WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ AND SYRIA: REALITY OR MIRAGE?

MEHMET EMIN CENGIZ

26 MARCH 2024



**EXPERT BRIEF**  
REGIONAL POLITICS

[research.sharqforum.org](https://research.sharqforum.org)

   SharqStrategic

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza  
Floor:6 No:68 Postal Code: 34197  
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
Telephone: +902126031815  
Fax: +902126031665  
Email: [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)

## Introduction

Amidst the dire Gaza crisis, which has taken center stage in Middle Eastern politics, and in the wake of dozens of Iran-backed militia attacks on US bases located in Syria and Iraq, the rumors of a US pullout from the mentioned two countries are floating once again. However, the issue is far from being clear thus far. Following the US retaliatory strikes against the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which claimed the lives of high-ranking commanders of the PMF, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani met with officials from the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to end the Coalition's mission in Iraq. Following the meeting, a statement saying the following was released by the Iraqi Prime Minister Media Office: "Military experts will oversee ending the military mission of the Global Coalition against Daesh [ISIS], a decade after its initiation and after its successful achievement of its mission in partnership with Iraqi security and military forces."<sup>1</sup>

The Iraqi officials have been consistently calling on the US to withdraw from Iraq since the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, the external wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in Baghdad at the beginning of 2020. Recently, they claimed that as ISIS does not have territorial control in the country and the threat has largely subsided, there is no need for the US to stay in the country. The USA's previous withdrawal resulted in a failure after the US troops left Iraq in 2011, ending the military presence that took place as a result of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Following the withdrawal in 2011, the security situation in the country quickly worsened, stemming from the then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian policies, leading to the rise of ISIS in the country. The group seized large swathes of territory in the country, including Iraq's second-biggest city, Mosul, in a very short period of time in June 2014. Then came the declaration of caliphate. Thereupon, the USA returned to Iraq in 2014, forming the anti-ISIS Global Coalition, and remained in the country until today, although Iraq claimed victory in the fight against ISIS and ended the group's territorial control in the country in late 2017.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the 2500 US troops stationed in Iraq are undertaking advisory and training roles. Namely, they do not have a combat<sup>3</sup> mission.

## Ramifications of a Possible US Withdrawal from Iraq

A possible US withdrawal from Iraq as a result of the pressure of Iran-backed groups' attacks on US bases will mean handing over the country to Iran entirely, given Tehran's massive influence in the Iraqi political and military scene. Such a scenario will not be welcomed either by Erbil or by neighboring Türkiye. For a long period, Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), has been under the pressure of Tehran-backed militias' attacks. Apart from this, Erbil has been suffering from economic problems and is even unable to pay public servants' salaries<sup>4</sup> due to budget disagreements with Baghdad. On top of this, the Iraqi

Federal Supreme Court is pressuring Erbil through numerous rulings on different issues ranging from economy to politics. The Federal Court is known to be under the influence of Iran and undermines the autonomous status of the KRI through its recent rulings. Due to the severe situation in the KRI, Masrour Barzani, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, wrote a letter<sup>5</sup> to Washington and called for US mediation, fearing the collapse of the KRI. Lately, the Kurdish Prime Minister has also visited<sup>6</sup> Washington with his delegation to attend meetings. The economic and judicial pressure exerted by Baghdad aims to bring Erbil to its knees and surrender to Tehran's political trajectory. The Kurdish officials in Iraq fear that a possible pullout of troops from the country would further harm the autonomous status of the KRI. Such a situation is very much against the interests of Türkiye, taking Ankara's strong relationship into account with Erbil in different files ranging from economy to security.

The geopolitical rivalry<sup>7</sup> between Ankara and Tehran in the region has also deepened over the past years. For this reason, Ankara would not want either Iraq - especially the Sunni areas where Türkiye has historically had some influence- or Erbil to come under total Iranian control. As a matter of fact, Türkiye has been meeting with the PMF leaders lately in Iraq and Ankara. The Development Road Project, which Iran is not a part of, is a primary part of the discussions between the two sides. As Tehran is capable enough to disrupt the realization of this project, Ankara is trying to strike an agreement with all sides of the Iraqi government, including the Iran-backed PMF leaders. Türkiye is very eager to keep the communication channels open with the PMF leaders as it does not want the PMF to disrupt /harm the Development Road Project, which will diversify the Iraqi economy under Iranian pressure. In this way, Türkiye is trying to preserve its interest in Iraq and presenting the PMF as an alternative, although it is almost impossible for the PMF to act out of the Iranian orbit totally.

### **The Emergence of a Multipolar World and Declining US Reliability**

Before the 7th of October, US officials were asserting that the Middle East region was quieter today than it had been in two decades.<sup>8</sup> This assessment turned out to be wrong with Hamas' Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, and the US was forced to repivot to the Middle East, although it has long prioritized the Indo-Pacific region due to great power rivalry with China. Both Russia and China are increasing their influence in the Middle East, albeit through different strategies and realms. Moreover, a multipolar world order<sup>9</sup> is looming large day by day. In such a period, the US is unlikely to embark on a withdrawal journey from Iraq, which would further harm its reliability in the eyes of its allies. The disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan is a stark reminder in this regard. Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa Region are capitalizing on the great power rivalry and establishing growing ties with Russia and China. Therefore, retrenchment does not mean a complete pullout for the US.

In other words, due to the Gaza crisis (regional conjuncture), the multipolar world emerging with the rise of Russia and China (international conjuncture), and the presidential elections in the USA (discussions on the withdrawal within the country), it does not seem very likely for President Biden to order a withdrawal from Iraq, at least in the near period. Having discussions on ending the US-led Global Coalition's mission in Iraq with Prime Minister Sudani may have aimed at giving him some room for maneuver in the face of Tehran-backed militias' pressures on the Iraqi government.

### **The Syria Scene and Probable US Withdrawal**

The situation in Syria is no less complicated. Withdrawing US troops from Syria would mean the abandonment of the Syrian Democratic Forces, whose backbone is the YPG, the PKK's Syrian offshoot. Washington has consistently and adamantly supported the group ever since 2015 within the framework of fighting against ISIS in Syria. Currently, around 900 US troops are located in Northeast Syria. Although the withdrawal of these troops may seem a positive development for neighboring Türkiye at first glance, an uncoordinated<sup>11</sup> withdrawal similar to the abrupt Afghanistan-like pullout scenario would mean opening more space for Iran and Russia in Syria. Currently, what separates the US troops and Iran-backed militias is the Euphrates River. Both sides are on the different banks of the river. As soon as US forces withdraw, Iran-backed militias will move from the western bank of the river to the eastern part to fill the vacuum. Eastern Syria has long been the weak spot of the SDF. The Arab tribes in Deir Ez-Zour, some of which have links to the regime, have clashed with the SDF for weeks starting from September 2023. The clashes resulted in dozens of casualties and many wounded from both sides. Iran is ready to exploit the withdrawal by capitalizing on these tribes as well. Reportedly, the IRGC "Commander Hajj Mahdi is in charge of Tehran's operations in Deir Ezzor and has been actively recruiting the tribes."<sup>12</sup>

Although it is claimed that the USA will withdraw from Syria after it makes sure that an agreement<sup>13</sup> is reached between the PYD/SDF and the Assad regime, the remarks of the Kurdish side show otherwise. Mazloun Abdi, commander of the SDF, claimed that the USA did not advise him to open channels with Damascus for protection in the case of a withdrawal. Moreover, he asserted that he received 'firm assurances'<sup>14</sup> from US officials that the US withdrawal from Syria was off the table. In early March, CENTCOM Commander General Michael Erik Kurilla visited northeast Syria as a part of his regional tour to directly observe the security situation in the area<sup>15</sup> and meet with his partners on the ground. He also met Al Roj and Hol camps that hold the families of ISIS inmates.

It is also worth mentioning that, to date, the USA has opposed an agreement between the SDF/PYD and the Assad regime. Moreover, the USA is officially against the legitimization of the Assad regime at domestic, regional, and international levels. For example, the US House of Representatives accepted a bill<sup>16</sup> that prevents the US from normalizing with the Assad regime. The bill also extends the Caesar sanctions<sup>17</sup> imposed on Syria.

While there is such a situation in the USA, it is not very clear whether Washington will decide to make the pullout decision, a move that will provide Assad with more legitimacy and strengthen his allies in Syria. It is still unclear whether the USA has recently decided to change its attitude towards Assad and, if so, what exactly led to this decision. In addition, changing the trajectory of its so-far Syria policy will mean the bankruptcy of Washington's Syria policy and a tacit acceptance that Russia and Iran's Syria stances are correct. For now, at least, Washington appears to avoid being dragged into such a situation.

Mazloun Abdi, commander of the SDF, which is also the primary US ally in Syria, has lately asserted that they do not want their areas to be a battlefield<sup>18</sup> between the US and Iran. Nevertheless, the SDF-controlled<sup>19</sup> areas have already become the targets of Iran-backed militias. The SDF even lost six members in an Iran-backed militia attack. Tehran has gradually increased its influence in Syria ever since the outbreak of the conflict in the country. A probable US withdrawal from Syria, in case not coordinated with Türkiye, a heavyweight in the Syrian Crisis, is highly likely to give a more significant boost to primarily Iran and then Russia to increase their influence in the country. When the USA withdraws from Syria, the balance of power is likely to tip in favor of Assad's allies and against Türkiye. Especially if, as claimed, the US forces the SDF/PYD to reconcile with the Assad regime and Damascus grants the PYD/SDF constitutional recognition, which seems highly unlikely in the current conjuncture, Ankara will be extremely disturbed by such a move. The PYD/SDF side has had many meetings<sup>20</sup> with the Assad regime in the past years.

Nevertheless, negotiations between the two sides remained inconclusive, and the situation has not improved since. What is more, Assad gained more legitimacy in the Arab World and now contemplates having the upper hand in the country in the face of any negotiations. This situation decreases the possibility of an agreement between the SDF and the regime, at least in the near future.

In a possible uncoordinated and abrupt withdrawal scenario, undoubtedly, the Assad regime and his allies would be more emboldened to attack the Syrian opposition-controlled areas.

Since early 2020, the boundaries of the zones of influence in Syria have not changed. The current balance of power on the ground makes it very costly for the actors partaking in the conflict to attack their adversaries. In case of a US withdrawal, this balance of power will be disrupted, and the Assad regime and its allies will be more emboldened to attack the Syrian opposition-controlled areas. Ankara-backed Syrian National Army-controlled areas and Idlib, which hosts more than 4 million people, will be in grave danger in this scenario. A possible onslaught on the opposition-controlled areas may lead to a new humanitarian catastrophe at a time when the Gaza tragedy is still unfolding. A new refugee influx towards Türkiye would not be a distant scenario in such a situation. Such a dire scenario will not only affect Ankara but also impact European countries.

### **Conclusion**

In short, an uncoordinated and abrupt withdrawal would undoubtedly put Ankara in a problematic situation. Thus, it is a big question whether the US would take such irrational action at a time when Ankara-Washington relations began to improve.

Recently, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited Washington with his delegation upon the invitation of the US to attend the US-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism meetings. The Turkish Intelligence Chief, İbrahim Kalın, was also in the US to meet with his counterpart William Burns.<sup>21</sup> Following the Blinken-Fidan meeting, a joint positive statement<sup>22</sup> was released. The parties emphasized their common determination in the fight against terrorism. Moreover, critical positive developments, such as resolving the F-16 issue, took place after Türkiye approved Sweden's accession to NATO. Additionally, the US has not also completely closed the door concerning Türkiye's return to the F-35 program. On top of this, the two sides want to increase the trade volume between Ankara and Washington to 100 billion dollars, which currently stands at over 30 billion dollars.<sup>23</sup>

At a time when relations are quickly improving on these crucial issues, it seems unlikely for Washington to engage in an uncoordinated and untimely withdrawal that would be harmful to both Washington and Ankara, at least in the near future. However, if the unpredictable Donald Trump wins the 2024 elections in the US, the withdrawal scenario, irrespective of coordination and time, may become a more realistic scenario. Trump can order a pullout of US troops from Iraq and/or Syria where Trump only sees 'death and sand.'<sup>24</sup> It is important to mention that Iraq is the main logistical center for the US troops in Syria. A withdrawal from Iraq, without a doubt, would impact the scene in Syria. In the face of a probable withdrawal decision from

Syria, the CENTCOM will undoubtedly try to resist. But to what extent and until when is another question. When Trump announced his intention to withdraw troops from Syria, the then-US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, resigned<sup>25</sup> from his post due to disagreeing with this decision in late 2018. The partial withdrawal of US troops from Syria paved the way for Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring in 2019.<sup>26</sup> A coordinated US withdrawal from Syria may lead to a new Turkish operation in Syria, just like in 2019. For months, Türkiye has been conducting drone attacks on the PKK/SDF-affiliated figures in Syria and targeting the infrastructure and oil fields in an attempt to drain the income-generating sites<sup>27</sup> for the PYD-controlled Autonomous Administration. Only time will tell which of the abovementioned scenarios would occur in case of a US withdrawal from Iraq and Syria. For the time being, many uncertainties lie before such a decision. The 2024 election results in the US will be decisive. However, there is almost a year to the elections in the US. This period is exceptionally long in the volatile Middle East as too many new regional and international dynamics may occur until then.

## Endnotes

- 1- See. <https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1751207722911928460>
- 2- Margaret Coker and Falih Hassan, Iraq Prime Minister Declares Victory Over ISIS, New York Times, 9 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-haider-al-abadi.html>
- 3- Americans in Iraq will continue to be attacked, despite 'non-combat' role, Concerned Veterans for America, 25 January 2022, <https://cv4a.org/the-overwatch/americans-in-iraq-continue-to-be-attacked-despite-non-combat-role/>
- 4- Delay in paying salaries takes toll on Erbil market, Rudaw, 5 October 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/051020231>
- 5- Amberin Zaman, In letter to Biden, Barzani warns of Iraqi Kurdistan's collapse, urges mediation, Al Monitor, 12 September 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/letter-biden-barzani-warns-iraqi-kurdistans-collapse-urges-mediation>
- 6- Prime Minister Masrour Barzani Embarks on Official Visit to Washington, Kurdistan Regional Government, 25 February 2024, <https://gov.krd/english/government/the-prime-minister/activities/posts/2024/february/prime-minister-masrour-barzani-embarks-on-official-visit-to-washington/>
- 7- Mehmet Emin Cengiz, The Future of the Iranian-Turkish Relationship: A Contained Geopolitical Rivalry or A Possible Escalation Between Ankara and Tehran?, Al Sharq Strategic Research, 20 September 2022, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/09/20/iranian-turkish-relationship/>
- 8- Gal Beckerman, 'The Middle East Region Is Quieter Today Than It Has Been in Two Decades', The Atlantic, 7 October 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-war-middle-east-jake-sullivan/675580/>
- 9- The Gaza Crisis and Emerging Multipolar World, Al Sharq Strategic Research, 3 November 2023, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2023/11/03/the-gaza-crisis-and-emerging-multipolar-world/>
- 10- US Troops in Middle East: What Are They Doing and Where?, Voice of America (VOA), 3 February 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-troops-in-middle-east-what-are-they-doing-and-where-/7469452.html>
- 11- Ömer Özkizilcik, Here's what an uncoordinated US withdrawal from Syria would look like. It's bad for many partners, but especially Turkey, Atlantic Council, 20 February 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-withdrawal-turkey-us-hts/>
- 12- Sean Mathews, Kurdish groups gripped by fear as they brace for a US pullout from northeast Syria, Middle East Eye, 7 March 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurds-fear-as-they-brace-us-pullout-northern-syria>
- 13- Amberin Zaman, Pentagon floats plan for its Syrian Kurd allies to partner with Assad against ISIS, Al Monitor, 22 January 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/pentagon-floats-plan-its-syrian-kurd-allies-partner-assad-against-isis>
- 14- Elie Youssef, SDF Commander: No Withdrawal of US Forces from Syria, Asharq Al-Awsat, 10 February 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4845366-sdf-commander-no-withdrawal-us-forces-syria>
- 15- CENTCOM commander visits US bases in Syria, Enab Baladi, 4 March 2024, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/03/centcom-commander-visits-us-bases-in-syria/>
- 16- US lawmakers pass anti-Assad Syria Anti-Normalisation Act, The New Arab, 15 February 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/us-lawmakers-pass-anti-assad-syria-anti-normalisation-act>
- 17- Ibid.
- 18- Syria Today – SDF Leader Says Syria Shouldn't Become US-Iran Battleground; UNGA Asks Israel to Withdraw From Golan, The Syrian Observer, 30 November 2023, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/86459/syria-today-sdf-leader-says-syria-shouldnt-become-us-iran-battleground-unga-asks-israel-to-withdraw-from-golan.html>



- 19- Beatrice Farhat, 6 Kurdish SDF forces killed in Iran-linked attack on Syria base housing US troops, Al Monitor, 5 February 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/02/6-kurdish-sdf-forces-killed-iran-linked-attack-syria-base-housing-us-troops>
- 20- Mehmet Emin Cengiz and Bedir Mulla Rashid, Thorny Challenges for the PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Al Sharq Strategic Research, 20 June 2020, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2020/06/20/north-and-east-syria/>
- 21- Aylin Dal, Turkish intelligence chief to hold talks in US, Anadolu Agency, 5 March 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/turkish-intelligence-chief-to-hold-talks-in-us/3155362>
- 22- Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism, US Embassy&Consulates in Türkiye, 9 March 2024, <https://tr.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-turkiye-strategic-mechanism-2/>
- 23- Fatma Eda Topçu, Türkiye, US have entered 'new era' in trade relations: Business council head, Anadolu Agency, 8 September 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-us-have-entered-new-era-in-trade-relations-business-council-head/2986349>
- 24- Richard Hall, Trump says Syria is 'sand and death' in defence of troop withdrawal, The Independent, 3 January 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/trump-syria-troop-withdrawal-us-sand-death-cabinet-meeting-military-a8709131.html>
- 25- Veronica Rocha and Sophie Tatum, Defense Secretary James Mattis resigns, CNN, 20 December 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/james-mattis-resigns/index.html>
- 26- Matthew Cebul, Operation "Peace Spring" and U.S. Strategy in Syria, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 11 October 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/operation-peace-spring-and-u-s-strategy-in-syria/>
- 27- Mehmet Emin Cengiz, Syria in 2024: Return to the Regional Focus, Al Sharq Strategic Research, 17 January 2024, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2024/01/17/syria-in-2024-return-to-the-regional-focus/>



AL SHARQ  
STRATEGIC  
RESEARCH

## ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

A think tank that looks to undertake impartial, rigorous research to promote the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue and social justice.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mehmet Emin Cengiz is a Research Fellow at the Istanbul-based international think tank Al Sharq Strategic Research, focusing on Syria, Turkey, and the wider Middle East. After receiving his B.A. from the Sociology Department at Ege University in 2016, Cengiz completed his master's degree at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Middle East at Marmara University in 2020. During his B.A., he also participated in the Erasmus+ Program and studied at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf as an international exchange student in Germany.

Cengiz's pieces regarding Turkish foreign policy, the Syrian war, and non-state armed actors have appeared in national and international media outlets and think tanks. His research interests are the Syrian conflict, non-state armed actors, Turkish foreign policy, volunteer foreign fighters, and regional Kurdish politics.