



## Iranian Responses to Trump's Statement and Initial Assessment of the Statement's Effect on Iranian Policy in Syria

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### Main Argument

The decision of United States (U.S.) President Donald Trump to withdraw American forces from Syria was **met in Iran with surprise and satisfaction** by most senior officials and commentators. **The drawdown of American troops from Syria is being presented as proof of the failure of U.S. strategy in the region, particularly in Syria, and another achievement of the "Resistance Front" led by the Islamic Republic.**

► Iranian officials did not rush to respond to the statement of the American president, likely due to the current ambiguity regarding the implementation of the decision on the ground. **The only official Iranian response, thus far, came from the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, who stated in a press conference that U.S. presence in Syria was "illogical" from the start and only caused instability in the region. Most of the comments made regarding the U.S. decision were of **analysts featured on Iranian media**, the majority of whom presented it as American acknowledgment of the failure of the regional policy adopted by the U.S. in recent years.



On the right: “Another sign of the sinking of the American superpower” (Tasnim, December 23, 2018). On the left: the exit of U.S. forces from Syria and concern of Israel and ISIS (Telegram channel @fars\_plus, December 22, 2018)

- ▶ The rejoicing in Iran in the initial response to the decision of President Trump to withdraw American forces from Syria is unsurprising. **Uprooting the United States from the region is one of the central goals of Iranian foreign policy**, which sees U.S. presence as a central threat to its national security and vital interests. The U.S. withdrawal from Syria **is an important propaganda coup for Iran**, which will likely be used by Iran to bolster the message that **the United States is growing weak while the Resistance Front, led by Iran, is gaining strength and achieving successes**.
- ▶ However, **over the past year Iran has been facing internal and external challenges that undermine its stability**, which may counterbalance its desire to exploit the opportunities emerging once U.S. forces pull out of Syria. **The deteriorating economic crisis due to the re-imposition of sanctions is exacerbating internal disagreements among Iran’s leadership concerning the importance of Iran’s presence in Syria**, and is emboldening **public criticism regarding the regime’s policy of continuing to spend resources overseas**. In addition, Tehran is under growing pressure in the international arena concerning the fate of the nuclear agreement and the its interventionist regional policy.

In summary, **the U.S. withdrawal is perceived by Iran as a propaganda victory that serves its interests** as an actor that has for years attempted to reduce U.S. presence in the region. The drawdown provides Iran with an opportunity to **cement its influence in Syria and greater room to maneuver there**. However, Tehran’s ability to exploit the opportunities that emerged for its entrenchment in Syria, particularly in the military sphere, **depend on additional factors and the Iranian regime’s assessment regarding the opportunities and risks involved**. We assess that at least in the short-term, Iran will continue to maintain a careful policy that entails largely relying on foreign Shi’ite fighters and local Syrian forces to entrench its hold in Syria, in line with Iran’s preferred strategy of utilizing proxies, local and regional alike.

### Reinforcing Ground Lines of Supply from Iraq to Syria

**Iran sees great importance in establishing a ground lines of supply (a “land bridge”) between Iraq and Syria**, through which it can ferry weaponry, materiel and Shi’ite fighters. Transferring materiel and militants serves Iran’s efforts to cement its presence in Syria as well as the ongoing armament of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

► **Iraq and Syria are connected through two main ground axes**. The shorter one passes through al-Tanf (near the Iraq-Jordan-Syria border triangle); the longer axis passes through the Albu Kamal border crossing. **Thus far, Iran could not use the shorter ground line because the al-Tanf region was controlled by the United States and rebels operating under its protection**. Therefore, Iran prioritized consolidating its control over the Albu Kamal crossing between Syria and Iraq by deploying Shi’ite Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah, which are operating under its command in the region. Commanders with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) maintain a regular presence in the area and assist the Shi’ite forces by overseeing them and providing them with professional guidance. **Iranian forces encounter significant security challenges when utilizing the Albu Kamal region for movement from Iraq due to ISIS guerilla attacks, but thus far, Iran was unable to use the shorter ground line through al-Tanf, which remained under U.S. control.**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more see the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center: “Increasing Iranian control of the Albukamal border crossing area – part of Iran’s strategy of establishing an overland supply route connecting Iran with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon,” July 19, 2018. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/increasing-iranian-control-albukamal-border-crossing-area-part-irans-strategy-establishing-overland-supply-route-connecting-iran-iraq-syria-lebanon-col/>



**The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and fighters with the Harakat Nujaba' militia in the Albu Kamal region. (Arabi21, November 16, 2017).**

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from the al-Tanf region will presumably lead to the removal of the rebel groups operating in the region under American protection. The vacuum that will emerge will likely be exploited by the Syrian Army and forces supporting it, which may **allow Iran to use this axis as well, in line with Iranian desire to avoid relying on a single (and dangerous) supply line.** Increasing the volume of traffic along the ground lines of supply between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon **will allow Iran to decrease Iranian dependence on the aerial route between Tehran and Damascus, making it easier to move personnel and weaponry to Syria and Lebanon.**

► A statement made by **Jaafar al-Husseini, the Military Spokesman of Kataeb Hezbollah,** an Iraqi Shi'ite militia **backed by Iran, which maintains a presence in the Albu Kamal region,** serves as an indication for Iran's intention to exploit the U.S. withdrawal to advance its interests. Following President Trump's announcement regarding the withdrawal, the spokesman stated that **Kataeb Hezbollah is ready to take part, together with the Syrian Army, in defending Syrian Kurdish civilians in the Syria-Iraq border region.** According to him "we have an ongoing and highly active relationship with Kurdish commands in northern Syria. We have the full picture regarding what is happening in northern Syria, including the movement of the American [forces]." (Al-Mayadin, Lebanon, December 22, 2018).



The Military Spokesman of Kataeb Hezbollah: “Kataeb Hezbollah is willing to take part, along with the Syrian Army, in protecting the Syrian Kurds along the border with Iraq” (YouTube channel of al-Mayadeen TV, a Lebanese channel affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah, December 22, 2018).

## Constrains and Challenges

- ▶ **Iran’s efforts to establish a sphere of influence in western Iraq and eastern Syria and create a “land bridge” from Iran toward the Mediterranean may encounter challenges and face constrains**, not necessarily coming from the United States. The American presence in the Syria was perceived as a manifestation of Washington’s intention to stymie Iranian efforts to cement its hold in the Syria-Iraq border region, **but in reality, American forces operating in Syria focused on the campaign against ISIS in eastern Syria, while avoiding military action against Iran’s military buildup in the area.** Despite the vows of the Trump administration to block Iranian influence in the region **U.S. forces in Syria did not display willingness to confront Iranian forces on the ground or the Shi’ite militias operating under its patronage.**
- ▶ The challenges facing Tehran when attempting to operate the “land bridge” to Syria and entrench Iranian presence in Syria, **may arise from other actors, whose interests diverge with Iran’s in the Syrian arena, including:**
  - ◆ **Iraq (with U.S. encouragement)** may hinder the transfer of weapons through ground lines of supply passing through its territory. In addition, security challenges may emerge in areas controlled by **Kurdish militias** (although their influence will likely be reduced due to withdrawal of U.S. support) **and by Sunni communities** (in which ISIS continues to operate). **ISIS**, which remains active in eastern Syria and across several provinces in Iraq, **may carry out hit-and-run attacks against the movement of Iranian vehicles along the ground line of supply, in particularly along the**

**lengthy axis passing through Albu Kamal** (which increases the importance of the short ground line passing through al-Tanf).

◆ Another potential challenge is **Israeli disruption of the ground line of supply**. A ground axis provides the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) with longer preparation time to disrupt the movement compared to shipments arriving by air. In addition, the strikes attributed to Israel in Syria over the past year have demonstrated the limitation on Iran's freedom to operate in Syria, and forced Iran to reconsider aspects of its presence in Syria. Iran was forced to divert some of the resources to Lebanon and increase its reliance on foreign Shi'ite militias operating on its behalf in Syria and on local Syrian forces.

◆ **Constraints placed by Russia may also affect Iranian calculations concerning its entrenchment in Syria**. At this stage, Russia still needs Iranian presence and that of its proxies in Syria to secure the military gains of the Assad regime, it appears that **Russia still does not have a clear interest in the removal of Iranian and Shi'ite forces from Syria**. On the other hand, the presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria is a **destabilizing factor that may lead to tensions with Israel**, which will impede the political settlement of the war. Therefore, we assess that Russia will present Israel and Iran with **"red lines" concerning the IDF's and Iran's freedom to operate in Syria**. **In our assessment, Iran will have to take into account these "red lines" established by Russia, which is set to become the sole dominant power in Syria following U.S. withdrawal from the country.**

## Appendix

### Responses by Senior Iranian Officials to President Trump's Decision

► **The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Barham Qasemi**, addressed the decision of President Trump by saying that the entry and presence of American forces in the region was a wrong-headed and illogical step in the first place, and a central factor contributing to the region's instability and lack of security. He added that a close examination of developments in the Middle East in the past decades proves that the presence of foreign forces under different pretexts in such an important and sensitive region only leads to greater tensions, insecurity and disagreements (IRNA, December 22, 2018).



**The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Barham Qasemi**  
(Mehr, December 22, 2018)

► **The head of the Judiciary Branch, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani**, claimed that U.S. forces are “fleeing” Syria. He added that despite the claims of the United States, ISIS was not defeated thanks to American forces, but due to the resistance of the people and the government in Syria, with the support of Iran and the “Resistance Axis.” (Tasnim, December 24, 2018).

► **The hardline cleric and leader of Friday prayers in Tehran, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani**, stated in his weekly sermon that the self-sacrifice and bravery of Iranian martyrs killed in the campaign in Syria and Iraq are what led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. He added that the Americans were defeated in Syria and with God's help, they will be defeated in Yemen and Palestine as well (Tasnim, December 21, 2018).

► **The Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Araqchi**, mentioned during his visit to Moscow the announcement made by President Trump. In response to a question

raised by reporters, Araqchi argued that before commenting on the effect of the American decision on the situation in Syria and the region, one must wait to see whether it is actually implemented (Sputnik, December 21, 2018).

## Responses by Iranian Commentators to President Trump's Decision

► **The journalist and commentator Mehdi Mohammadi, associated with radical circles in Iran**, published an opinion article on his Telegram channel (December 19, 2018). He argued in the column that President Trump's decision to suddenly withdraw from Syria **proves who is the victor and who is the defeated in the region**. He asserted that the American decision means that the United States is incapable of altering or defeating the Iranian strategy in the region. This decision attests to the domestic political challenges President Trump is facing, forcing him to use "new cards" to rally the support of American voters. Whatever is behind the decision of the president, it is clear that the United States failed to develop a comprehensive strategy for Syria in the past seven years. The withdrawal of American forces from Syria, more than a strategic decision, is an acknowledgment of the inability of the U.S. administration to craft a consistent strategy.

► **In a commentary published in the Vatan Emrooz newspaper (December 23, 2018), Mehdi Mohammadi argued** that the U.S. withdrawal from Syria is the result of American acknowledgment of the failure of its policy in Syria and recognition of the fact the President Assad is the only one capable of providing some stability to Syria. He argued that the United States failed to find even one dependable ally on which it could rely in Syria, finding itself in diplomatic isolation, after all the countries that supported the toppling of the Assad regime rekindled the relationship with Damascus, overtly or covertly. Russia and Iran managed to initiate a political process in opposition to U.S.' desires, which led to the complete marginalization of Washington from the negotiations concerning Syria's future. The most important point is that the United States failed to achieve its central goals: preventing the complete integration of post-ISIS Syria into the "Resistance Axis"; the removal of Iran and Hezbollah from Syria; and guaranteeing the security of Israel, which now faces a new Resistance Axis in Syria that now controls a ground axis to Lebanon and Palestine and possesses missiles that can strike any location within Israel's territory.

Mohammadi claimed that President Trump understands that the United States is no longer the superpower that can control the entire world. In this state, The U.S. should be expected to betray its allies and flee the battlefield, leaving them on their own. This is true not only for



Syria, but also for Afghanistan and Yemen. In the conclusion of the article, Mohammadi mentioned the internal debate in Iran concerning its regional policy. He argued that in recent month, some in Iran claimed that Tehran needs to place limits on its political plans. Now it is apparent that Iran won the geopolitical game in the region, and President Trump realized this earlier than others.

► **The website Fararu** (December 20, 2018) ruled out the possibility, raised by some commentators, that President Trump's decision to pull out U.S. forces in Syria was intended to prevent possible harm to them ahead of a military confrontation between the United States and Iran. The website offered two possible explanations to the president's decision: an American plan to focus the pressure on Iran within Iran itself, while discounting the importance of battling Iranian influence in Syria. The website did not rule out the possibility that the Trump administration reached an agreement with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates to send their military forces to Syria, to replace the American troops stationed there. The website assessed that the Kurdish militias in Syria are in a precarious position as Turkey may soon launch a large-scale offensive against them.

► **Iranian commentator Sa'adollah Zaeri** played down the importance of President Trump's decision to remove U.S. forces from Syria. In a commentary published by the Fars News Agency (December 20, 2018), Zaeri argued that U.S. presence in Syria was quite limited. American forces in Syria are under threat from multiple groups and the determination of the Syrian Army to clear Aleppo governorate constrains the operations of U.S. forces and encouraged them to leave Syria. Zaeri opined that the exit of U.S. forces from Syria will not have any effect on the military balance in the country, and since the United States is not party to the negotiations concerning the political settlement, its exit will not affect the political power balance in the country either. He assessed that the withdrawal of U.S. troops places Turkey in a more uncomfortable position, since it is now the only country left that maintains an illegal presence in Syria, which may lead to Turkey's withdrawal in the coming months as well.

► **Abdollah Ganji, the Editor-in-Chief of the conservative newspaper Javan** welcomed in a tweet on his account (December 19, 2018) the American withdrawal, writing that first ISIS was removed from Syria, and now their "masters" as well.

► **Farshad Mehdipour, the founder of the conservative newspaper Sobh-e No**, tweeted (December 19, 2018) that the withdrawal of American forces is "a new victory for the

Resistance Front,” but recommended to be on the lookout for secret understandings between the United States and Turkey.

► **The hardline commentator and journalist Mohammad Imani** defined the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria as “strategic defeat for the United States.” In the commentary, published on his Telegram channel (December 21, 2018), Imani linked the decision on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria to the victory of the Resistance Front against Israel. The Trump administration was forced to announce the withdrawal from Syria shortly after Israel’s defeat in Gaza, while the Zionists themselves acknowledge that the central security and economic installations are within the rocket range of the Resistance Front. Eight years after the war in Syria erupted, the American administration officially surrendered and the Resistance Front secured a great victory thanks to the thousands of martyrs from Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

► **A commentary published in the hardline daily Kayhan** (December 22, 2018) under the title “The Exit of the United States from Syria and Afghanistan: Deceit or Escape?” labeled Trump’s decision as a great victory for the Resistance Front. Assuming that Trump’s decision is indeed implemented, his advisors will seek to define and implement a new strategy in the region, the article argued. They may try to again empower ISIS in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan, but they will likely fail at these endeavors. The immediate outcome of the decision is that the United States will lose its direct influence in the region, which will jeopardize its allies in the Middle East; place a blockade on Israel by the forces of Resistance; lead to the establishment of a new regional order led by the axis of Iran, the Resistance, Syria and Turkey; and may result in the historic withdrawal of the West from west Asia.

► **The Editor of the reformist Shargh newspaper, Ahmad Gholami,** warned of Russia becoming the sole hegemon in Syria following the expected U.S. withdrawal. In a commentary published by his newspaper (December 22, 2018) under the headline “Will Russian become the property owner?” Gholami assessed that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria will engender a fundamental change in the military and political balance of power in Syria. Israel and the Arab allies of the United States can not longer rely on American protection, and may shift even closer to Russia, as Turkey has already done. In this sense, Iran is in a tougher position. The American withdrawal does provide the opportunity for Iran to reestablish the land bridge from Iraq to Syria, but it also destabilizes the balance of power in Syria, which serves Iran, and greatly boosts the power of Russia, Iran’s adversary. There are

no longer any significant opponents to Russia's enduring presence in Syria, although Putin entered Syria based on the initiative and invitation of Iran. The guest may now become property owner, Gholami concludes.