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The Impact of the American Military Presence in Syria on the Political and Security Situation

Introduction:

Recently, there has been ongoing debate about the scope and benefits of maintaining the presence of U.S. military forces in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. The exposure of American troops abroad to attacks has sparked controversy within the United States about the rationale behind their presence in the first place. This has led to growing calls for withdrawal, both domestically and in the countries where U.S. military bases are located.

The attacks by five resistance factions on unauthorized American bases in Syria during August, and Washington's acknowledgment of injuries resulting from the targeting of "Kharab al-Jir" airport, were not the only reasons that prompted Washington to bring in military reinforcements. Rather, it reflects Washington's desire to affirm that it has no intention of withdrawing from Syria. In fact, the United States significantly increased the transportation of weapons and military equipment including defensive systems to Syria in August and early September. This was an attempt to prevent repeated resistance attacks on its bases and troops, while also reportedly delaying discussions about a phased withdrawal from Iraq.

It appears that, in light of the ongoing aggression on Gaza, persistent tensions in southern Lebanon, and fears of a broader regional conflict, Washington has decided to suspend its plans for withdrawal from Iraq while simultaneously boosting its military presence in Syria. This direction was evident in the dispatch of reinforcements to both countries⁽¹⁾.

Hence, a key question arises: What is the value of maintaining military forces in the region, and do the risks of preserving this presence outweigh its remaining benefits especially following the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Research Problem:

The bolstering of Washington's military presence in Syria must be understood within the broader context of the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the United States and Russia in the region. The recent deployment of additional U.S. forces appears to reflect Washington's strategic intent to exert pressure on Moscow. This development necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of the current configuration of the U.S. military presence in Syria, particularly in light of potential post-Assad political and strategic scenarios. Such an evaluation should also consider the implications of this presence and the contours of a new regional order one in which regional or international rivals of the United States may be invited, or positioned, to fill the emerging power vacuum in a more assertive and structured manner.



Significance of the Study:

The removal of Bashar al-Assad carries major implications for other regional conflicts especially in light of Russia and Iran's failure or unwillingness to support Assad, which weakens Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq. This could lead to shifts in the balance of power across these areas.

The issue of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in early 2024 raised many questions about its impact on the American presence in Syria. Some assessments even suggested that withdrawal from Iraq would inevitably be followed by withdrawal from Syria.

Despite the importance of this issue, U.S. interests in the region are incompatible with the vacuum that would result from its departure, particularly given the presence of regional and international actors eager to fill that vacuum to serve their own national and regional interests especially after Russia's relative retreat from its policy of unconditional support for Syria.

Therefore, this study gains importance from its focus on the future and prospects of U.S. military withdrawal from Syria and the status of the unauthorized U.S. bases there.

Research Questions:

To clarify the study's parameters and reach sound conclusions, the following questions are posed:

- 1- What are the extent and nature of U.S. military deployment in Syria?
- 2- What are the implications of the U.S. military presence in Syria?
- 3- What is the impact of the U.S. military presence on the political and security situation in Syria?
- 4- What is the future of the U.S. presence in Syria under the current circumstances?

Research Methodology:

This study relies on the "descriptive analytical method," through which the dimensions, characteristics, and implications of the U.S. military presence in Syria are objectively identified and described. This method involves collecting data and facts using scientific research tools and

techniques. It has been employed to describe and analyze knowledge sources related to the study's problem, aiming to provide a scientific and objective analysis of its dimensions, in light of the study's objectives to understand the political and security impacts of the U.S. military presence in Syria today.

Contents of the Study:

- 1- U.S. Military Forces Stationed in Syria
- 2- Implications of the U.S. Military Presence in Syria
- 3- Study Findings

First: U.S. Military Forces Stationed in Syria

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were established in northeastern Syria in October 2015 as a military alliance of various groups, primarily Kurdish. The United States supported the SDF in its war against the Islamic State (ISIS). In its first statement on October 11, 2015, the SDF described itself as "a unified national military force for all Syrians Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, and others working together for a democratic Syria where all citizens enjoy freedom, justice, and dignity without exclusion from their legitimate rights"⁽²⁾.

The SDF controls the largest share of Syrian territory⁽³⁾ among opposition factions approximately 25.6% by the end of 2019 spanning parts of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Hasakah, and Aleppo. Its control is supported by U.S.-led international coalition bases distributed across Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah.

On February 9, 2016, U.S. State Department spokesperson John Kirby stated that "the United States supports these units and does not share Turkey's view of them." ⁽⁴⁾ In contrast, Turkey opposes the SDF, viewing it as an extension of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which it labels a terrorist organization.

The international coalition's presence in Syria is part of the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, headquartered in Baghdad. Its current mission involves advising, assisting, and enabling local partners such as the SDF and the Free Syrian Army. This includes training, equipping them with armored vehicles, weapons, ammunition, and logistical support to

counter threats from ISIS and Iranian militias, as well as conducting combat and security operations like airborne raids in support of the SDF against ISIS cells⁽⁵⁾.

Officially, the coalition's military presence in Syria aims to ensure the defeat of ISIS and prevent its resurgence. However, in practice, these forces have also worked directly or indirectly to prevent the Syrian regime and its allies (especially Iran) from regaining control of SDF areas, where most coalition bases are located. This is partly due to the fear that regime and militia control could destabilize the relatively secure areas and allow them to dominate the region's vital oil and gas resources⁽⁶⁾.

Foreign military bases in Syria vary in number, armament, and assigned tasks. Coalition bases primarily aim to track ISIS elements and deter other actors especially Russia and Iran. Turkish forces focus on securing their national borders and confronting the threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern and northeastern Syria. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to consolidate its control over a corridor stretching from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut.

Between mid-2023 and 2024, the U.S.-led coalition increased its number of sites in Syria from 30 to 32 consisting of 17 bases and 15 military points. These are spread across 17 in Hasakah, 9 in Deir ez-Zor, 3 in Raqqa, and one each in Homs, Damascus countryside, and Aleppo ⁽⁷⁾. In August 2024, the coalition brought in 150 trucks, 10 aircraft carrying military equipment, and conducted 10 military drills as part of heightened alert against Iranian-affiliated militias⁽⁸⁾.

Although the number of coalition military sites in Syria is the smallest among foreign forces Russia has 114, and Iran has 529 they are the most influential in terms of firepower and operational reach⁽⁹⁾.

Second: The Implications of the American Military Presence in Syria

On December 15, 2024, U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finan emphasized that "U.S. forces will remain in Syria after the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, as part of a counter-

terrorism mission focused on destroying ISIS."⁽¹⁰⁾ On December 20, 2024, the U.S. Department of Defense (the Pentagon) revealed that "there are 2,000 American soldiers in Syria," which is a higher figure than the previously stated number of 900 soldiers. Pentagon spokesman Patrick Ryder said: "As you know, we have always said that there are around 900 American soldiers present in Syria. Today, I learned that there are actually about 2,000 American soldiers in Syria" ⁽¹¹⁾.

On April 18, 2025, Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell stated in a statement that "the Secretary of Defense has instructed the integration of U.S. forces in Syria by selecting specific sites, and that this deliberate and conditional process is expected to reduce the number of U.S. forces in Syria to fewer than 1,000 soldiers over the coming months." ⁽¹²⁾ Two senior American officials stated that the U.S. military will shut down three out of eight small operational bases in northeastern Syria, including the Green Village and Euphrates sites, along with a smaller facility⁽¹³⁾.

As a result, Israel is trying to exert pressure upon Washington to delay the withdrawal, especially since it fears that Turkey will seize more strategic assets in Syria after the U.S. withdrawal⁽¹⁴⁾ It is noteworthy in this context that the United States is hesitant to proceed with the withdrawal, as it would affect Israeli military dynamics in Syria. This is because the American presence has constituted an effective political cover for Israeli military operations in the country in recent years operations that Russia has often turned a blind eye to. Additionally, the American presence served as a deterrent against broader and deeper Turkish military expansion in Syrian territory, which may now require new understandings between Ankara and Washington to ensure Israeli interests.

The reinforcement of the American military presence in Syria is associated with several causes and carries multiple implications, including:

1- Filling the vacuum after Syria's allies retreat: Russia has abandoned its support for the Assad regime, leading to its downfall. It is evident that Russia has no plans to rescue the situation in Syria if the Syrian army continues to abandon its positions. Moreover, Russia has withdrawn its



forces from frontlines in northern Syria and from sites in the Alawite Mountains, although it will not leave its two main bases in the country⁽¹⁵⁾. Hezbollah has also declared that “it currently does not intend to send fighters to support the Syrian army, and that the party has not been asked to intervene, nor is it ready to take such a step after the ceasefire with Israel”⁽¹⁶⁾. Likewise, Iran does not plan to intervene militarily in the current battle in Syria, especially after its capabilities in Lebanon have deteriorated.

2- Monitoring Iran in the Strait of Hormuz and surrounding waters, and deterring Iran and its allies from carrying out direct or indirect attacks in Syria against American interests and military bases. This is especially relevant given the recent escalation in tensions between American, Iranian, and Russian forces, after Iran-affiliated militias targeted American bases with rocket and drone attacks, and after continuous flights of Russian fighter jets over an American military garrison in Syria. Washington thus believes that both Russia and Iran are attempting to establish a new approach of provocative policies to push U.S. forces either to fully evacuate their bases or to face the risk of escalation⁽¹⁷⁾.

3- Providing necessary support to Israel: It remains unclear how far Israel’s operational goals in Syria may extend following the regime’s fall. It is likely that Israel itself has a flexible plan, with its goals expanding or contracting according to field and political developments. What is certain, however, is that Israel’s current incursions into Syrian territory cannot be trusted to be “temporary,” particularly as the Israeli government seeks any sign of victory, exploiting Syria’s state of confusion. Given Israel’s well-known appetite for seizing more land from its neighbors, the U.S. presence in Syria supports its ally Israel under these critical conditions.

4- The ongoing developments of the Ukraine crisis and its growing impact on NATO and the United States, which compel a repositioning and the imposition of new balances in U.S. foreign policy towards Russia. This means exerting pressure on Russia in its areas of influence in the Middle East to increase the strategic costs for Russia in both Ukraine and Syria.

5- Fear of the resurgence of the ISIS threat:

There are concerns following the fall of the Syrian regime that ISIS could reactivate in northern Syria, which is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), where there are nine prisons holding tens of thousands of ISIS detainees. With the SDF forces busy fighting opposition factions, this may provide an opportunity for many ISIS prisoners to escape and cause security breaches within SDF ranks, exhausting their manpower. If a second Trump administration withdraws from Syria, the Kurdish forces will be left without a key international ally, which prompts Washington to undertake a special mission in Syria after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime to counter the renewed growth of ISIS⁽¹⁸⁾.

Third: Study Results

The U.S. strategy in Syria is based on the premise that American presence in eastern Syria is open-ended, with its goal being to counter Iranian influence, prevent the establishment of a land corridor linking Iran to Lebanon via Syria, prevent the resurgence of extremist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda, and to achieve a political settlement to the Syrian crisis⁽¹⁹⁾.

1- Impact of the U.S. Military Presence in Syria on the Political and Security Situation

In parallel with renewed discussions about reorganizing the U.S. position in Iraq especially after the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on August 15, 2024, the postponement of the termination of the international coalition’s military mission in Iraq, limiting its current presence to a number of military advisers under the coalition framework and tied to the outcomes of the High Military Committee between Washington and Baghdad there are several negative indicators for the security situation in Syria in the event of a U.S. withdrawal. These indicators may prompt the United States to delay its withdrawal from Syria, whether fully or gradually. The key points can be summarized as follows:

A- Turbulent Security Situation: The decision to delay ending the international coalition’s mission in Syria may be linked to current regional tensions, particularly the war in Gaza and the ongoing

deterrence posture between Israel and Iran and its proxies. In August 2024, the U.S. National Guard in Oregon announced that approximately 230 troops were preparing for artillery service deployments in support of the U.S. and its partners in Syria and Iraq due to growing threats to forces and bases in those countries⁽²⁰⁾. Consequently, the region is experiencing heightened security volatility, especially amid the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad.

B- Kurdish Support: Washington is keen to maintain its policy of support for its Kurdish allies for several reasons. First, to balance Iranian influence. Second, American support ensures the continuation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)'s efforts to combat ISIS. It should be noted that Kurdish autonomous regions in Syria have become a key theater for ISIS operations in recent months. Additionally, the SDF serves as the main implementing force for Washington's ground-level approach to countering the group⁽²¹⁾.

C- Monitoring Local and Regional Power Struggles Over Resources: Redistribution of oil revenues among the three zones of control (northeast, northwest, and regime-held areas) is expected to be readdressed, alongside discussions on the future management of international border crossings such as Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salama on the Turkish border, and "Semalka" and "Al-Yarubiyah" on the Iraqi border. The reopening of international roads under opposition control (e.g., M4) will also resurface as an issue, and competition between Russia and Iran for control of Mediterranean ports in Latakia and Tartus is likely to intensify. Turkey may also use the water issue involving the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as leverage to negotiate its interests in Syria⁽²²⁾.

D- Regional Host Environments for the U.S.: A partial withdrawal from Iraq would leave the U.S. with two main routes to reinforce its presence in Syria if desired. The U.S. may choose to reinforce or relocate its bases and advisers from Iraq to the Kurdistan Regional Government (its strongest regional ally), which provides a pathway into northeastern Syria. The Jordanian corridor also offers logistical support for U.S. forces in the Syrian desert.

E- Impact of U.S. Withdrawal on Counterterrorism Efforts: The U.S. intervention in Syria in 2015 and the formation of the international coalition against terrorism significantly weakened ISIS and led to the loss of much of its territory. A withdrawal could enable a resurgence of the group, which had been weakened by concentrated U.S. airstrikes. Other countries lack the advanced technology needed to effectively confront the group, which means ISIS may attempt to shift from guerrilla warfare to re-establishing territorial control and restructuring as a proto-state. This would leave regional countries to bear the brunt of renewed counterterrorism operations.

F- Possibility of New Regional Conflicts to Fill the Power Vacuum: Should the U.S. carry out a structured or unstructured withdrawal, rival parties within Syria could clash over resources such as oil, water, and key international roadways. Turkey may seize the opportunity to eliminate the SDF. Iran may seek to use the SDF and its militias to target Turkish forces in the north. Armed Syrian factions may aim to expand their territorial control in northeastern Syria, exploit its resources, and pressure Turkey to withdraw based on the Adana Agreement. ISIS may also exploit the chaos to strike all parties and reconstitute itself.

G- Spillover of Terrorist Threats to Neighboring Countries: Increased ISIS activity in Syria following the regime's collapse could spread to Iraq, especially as the group might exploit the distraction of Iraqi forces and Popular Mobilization Units due to developments in Syria. ISIS may expand in areas like Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and the Baghdad belt. Additionally, it may move fighters across the Syrian-Iraqi border using smuggling networks under its control. There are also concerns about the threat spilling into Jordan due to security instability along its border with Syria.

2- Scenarios for U.S. Military Presence in Syria:

First Scenario: No Immediate Withdrawal: This is the most likely scenario. U.S. withdrawal from Syria appears unlikely, especially after the fall of Bashar al-Assad and amid current regional dynamics. U.S. presence at unofficial bases in Syria is expected to continue. This is supported by the increase in U.S. troop numbers from 900 to 2,000, along with shifts in the balance of power



The Impact of the American Military Presence in Syria on the Political and Security Situation

Dr. Shereen Gaber

among international actors in Syria following Operation “Deterring Aggression.” This has direct implications for the future of international involvement in the crisis. U.S. officials have indicated that President “Joe Biden” discussed the possibility of direct engagement with “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” and the use of the group as a framework for a broader opposition coalition aligned with U.S. national security interests. The U.S. also sent warnings to HTS via Turkey, urging them not to cooperate with ISIS; HTS responded by affirming it had no intention of allowing ISIS to operate within its ranks⁽²³⁾. Realistically, the U.S. is unlikely to leave the Middle East in the near future due to several reasons: (1) containing ongoing regional threats, (2) maintaining vital oil interests, and (3) avoiding weakening the SDF’s position against Damascus and Ankara.

Second Scenario: Coordinated Withdrawal with a Regional or International Actor: While coordination with Russia or Iran is unlikely, partial coordination with Turkey could take place to secure the transfer of U.S. troops to the Incirlik base in Turkey and to prevent a full-scale Turkish assault on the SDF. There may also be arrangements with the SDF to reach understandings with the regime and Russia that guarantee protection from Turkish operations. Israel may also be notified to take precautions against any moves by Iranian proxies. Nonetheless, a fully coordinated U.S. exit is highly unlikely.

In light of the above scenarios, it can be concluded that a U.S. withdrawal from Syria is not anticipated in the near term, as it would benefit Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah an outcome the potential second Trump administration will likely seek to avoid.

Conclusion:

Syria has entered a new era following the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime an era characterized by uncertainty, especially amid the current fluid situation and the multitude of local, regional, and international actors involved in shaping this new landscape. The consequences and implications will not be limited to Syria’s internal affairs but will extend to affect the entire regional system.

The announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria aligns with the patterns of American strategic maneuvers, which have been repeated multiple times. Therefore, it can be said that this move is merely a tactical ploy to ease pressure on Israel on one hand, and to pursue a new strategy for rebalancing power in the Middle East on the other. The United States is fully aware that this withdrawal will lead to a decline in its influence not only in Syria but across the region. This will, in turn, provide greater opportunities for China and Russia to expand their influence and share roles, with Russia advancing militarily and China economically.

Given the significance of the U.S. military presence in Syria and its key role in distributing influence among the parties involved, the withdrawal will have far-reaching repercussions on issues such as terrorism, the coordination needed to fill the resulting power vacuum, the potential for new conflicts to emerge, and how regional countries perceive the role of the United States.

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Abstract:

The enhancement of the American military presence in Syria comes in response to rising American concerns about the current situation in Syria following the potential collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the security vacuum that may lead to chaos. Washington is attempting to fill the Russian void in Syria, taking advantage of the regional instability, especially amid fears of the growing activities of terrorist organizations, particularly ISIS, which is striving to exploit the current security vacuum in Syria.

Thus, the current structure of the main American military presence in Syria requires a careful reassessment to analyze the political and strategic landscape following any potential adjustments to the American military presence. This includes understanding the implications of such a presence and what the new normal will look like, inviting regional or international competitors of the United States to effectively fill this vacuum.

Despite the importance of the issue, American interests in the region do not align with the potential vacuum that would occur with an American withdrawal, especially with regional and international actors eager to fill it according to their national and regional interests, chief among them being Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Therefore, the study aims to address the future of American withdrawal from Syria and its possibilities, as well as the future of the illegitimate American bases in Syria.

Keywords: United States, Syria, Syrian Democratic Forces, international coalition, fall of the Syrian regime..

تأثير الوجود العسكري الأمريكي في سوريا على الوضع السياسي والأمني

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المستخلص:

إن تعزيز الوجود الأمريكي العسكري في سوريا يأتي في إطار تصاعد المخاوف الأمريكية من الوضع الراهن في سوريا عقب سقوط نظام بشار الأسد وحالة الفراغ الأمني التي ربما ستسفر عن فوضى، ومن ثم تحاول واشنطن ملء الفراغ الروسي في سوريا مستغلة حالة عدم الاستقرار الإقليمي في المنطقة، خاصة في ظل التخوفات من تنامي نشاط التنظيمات الإرهابية خاصة تنظيم «داعش» الذي يحاول جاهداً استغلال الفراغ الأمني الذي تشهده سوريا في الوقت الراهن.

ومن ثم، يحتاج التشكيل الحالي للوجود العسكري الأمريكي الرئيسي في سوريا، إلى إعادة تقييم دقيق لدراسة المشهد السياسي والاستراتيجي بعد أي تعديلات محتملة في الوجود العسكري الأمريكي في سوريا، ودلالات هذا الوجود، وما هو الوضع الطبيعي الجديد الذي تتم فيه دعوة المنافسين الإقليميين أو الدوليين للولايات المتحدة، لملء هذا الفراغ بشكل فعال.

وعلى الرغم من أهمية المسألة، فإن المصالح الأمريكية في المنطقة، لا تتفق مع مسألة الفراغ الذي سيحدثه خروجها منها في ظل وجود فواعل إقليمية ودولية ساعية إلى ملئه بما يتفق ومصالحها الوطنية والإقليمية، وعلى رأسها روسيا وإيران وتركيا.

لذا، جاءت أهمية هذه الدراسة لتناول مستقبل الانسحاب الأمريكي من سوريا واحتمالاته، ومستقبل وجود القواعد الأمريكية غير الشرعية في سوريا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الولايات المتحدة، سوريا، قوات سوريا الديمقراطية، التحالف الدولي، سقوط النظام السوري.