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## MIDDLE EAST

# Trump Vows Quick Exit From Syria

Ahead of a meeting with advisers, president calls for U.S. troops to come home



Vehicles of U.S.-backed coalition forces driving on Tuesday near the northern Syrian town of Manbij. PHOTO: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Felicia Schwartz, Michael R. Gordon and Dion Nissenbaum*

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WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump said Tuesday he wanted the U.S. military to “bring our troops back home” from Syria, taking a position at odds with many top advisers who worry that leaving the country too soon would cede ground to Iran, Russia, their proxies and other extremist groups.

Members of Mr. Trump’s national security team hoped to persuade him at a White House meeting being held later in the day to keep troops in Syria for now and maintain funding for recovery work there, according to U.S. officials familiar with the discussions.

Mr. Trump said he soon would decide on a course of action, but was inclined to leave, saying the task of defeating the extremist group Islamic State was nearly completed.

“I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home. I want to start rebuilding our nation,” Mr. Trump said at a news conference at the White House.

There currently are about 2,000 American troops in Syria, advising and aiding local forces that have been fighting Islamic State. A small number of diplomats are also in Syria undertaking basic recovery work in war-hit areas.

Iran, which Mr. Trump and his aides have said they view as a major security threat, has extended its influence across Syria, protecting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, strengthening the hand of Lebanon-based Hezbollah and putting it in a position to threaten Israel.

Russia, too, has expanded its military footprint in the country, gaining a foothold in the Mideast unseen since the days of the Cold War, as its president, Vladimir Putin, has pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy.

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Though severely weakened in Syria, Islamic State remains a concern for many both in and outside the Trump administration. Brett McGurk, the administration's point man for the counter-Islamic State coalition, said at a public event on Tuesday that more work was needed to defeat Islamic State. "We want to keep eyes on the prize —on ISIS—because ISIS is not finished," he said at the U.S. Institute of Peace, a think tank.

The divergence of views over a major U.S. military involvement came in the midst of the Trump administration's national security shake-up that has the key posts of White House national security adviser, secretary of state and Central

Intelligence Agency director either vacant or in flux.

Earlier this year, the administration decided after a policy review to leave U.S. special operations forces in the country for 12 to 18 months while periodically reassessing conditions.

However, Mr. Trump reopened the administration debate last week, predicting that the U.S. would leave "very quickly." He also ordered the State Department to freeze more than \$200 million in funds dedicated to basic recovery efforts in Syria, such as restoring power and removing unexploded weapons, The Wall Street Journal reported Friday.

The Kremlin welcomed Mr. Trump's suggestions that U.S. forces soon would leave Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that the Kremlin had been concerned over U.S. forces becoming "deeply entrenched" in eastern Syria, but that Mr. Trump's remarks showed he was committed to removing troops from Syria following the victory over Islamic State.

Mr. Trump's statements about leaving Syria have alarmed allies such as Israel as well as Saudi Arabia, diplomats and government officials have said, who fear expanded Iranian influence in the region.

Underscoring those concerns, Mr. Trump spoke by phone Tuesday with Saudi Arabia's King Salman, touching on Iran and Syria, the White House said.

Yet Mr. Trump also reiterated his suggestion that allies pay Washington for its efforts in Syria. "Saudi Arabia is very interested in our decision, and I said, 'Well, you know, you want us to stay, maybe you're going to have to pay,'" Mr. Trump said at Tuesday's news conference. He has previously asked Gulf Arab states to contribute billions to stabilization efforts in Syria, including by requesting \$4 billion from Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Trump said Tuesday the U.S. gets "nothing out of" the funds it spends in the Middle East, citing \$7 trillion he said has been spent since the start of the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001.

But U.S. military officials are wary of a quick departure, mindful that the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq led to a security vacuum that permitted the rise of Islamic State. They also are reluctant to telegraph U.S. intentions about leaving a war zone.

Rex Tillerson, then the secretary of State, described the objective of the administration's Syria strategy in a January speech at Stanford University. "We cannot make the same mistakes that were made in 2011, when a premature departure from Iraq allowed al Qaeda in Iraq to survive and eventually morph into ISIS," he said.

On Tuesday, in a panel discussion at the Institute of Peace, senior U.S. officials previewed some of the arguments against quickly withdrawing troops. They said the mission to destroy Islamic State wasn't finished, with Syria presenting far more difficult challenges to that aim than Iraq has.

"Our goal is to continue to keep pressure on ISIS," said Gen. Joseph Votel, the head of the Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East region.

The U.S. military said Tuesday it believed Islamic State was responsible for an attack last week that killed two service members, one from the U.S. and one from the U.K.

Pushing back on any notion that the U.S. was engaged in nation-building, Mark Green, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, said U.S. efforts to stabilize Syria are very limited and focus largely on eliminating improvised explosive devices and restoring essential services so civilians could return home.

Mr. McGurk, the envoy for the counter-Islamic State coalition, said the review engendered by Mr. Trump's comments was important, and that the president's decision to freeze funds hadn't undermined U.S. efforts in Syria.

Islamic State has benefited in recent months from Turkey's intervention in Syria, which spurred thousands of Syrian Kurdish fighters to abandon their campaign against the militants and rush north to defend their Kurdish enclave.

In February U.S. intelligence agencies said Islamic State was trying to regroup and probably would maintain a "robust insurgency" in Syria and Iraq while attempting to carry out terrorist attacks abroad. U.S. officials estimate as many as 3,000 Islamic State fighters remaining in Syria.

The U.S. has more than 4,000 troops in Iraq, but they are mainly dedicated to training and aiding Iraqi forces, U.S. officials have said.

Mr. Trump previously has claimed that the U.S. has spent \$7 trillion in the Middle East since the 2001 attacks. Frequently cited figures compiled and published in November by Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs estimate that the U.S. has directly spent \$1.8 trillion since 2001 on wars overseas. Indirect costs—such as spending on homeland security, veterans' care and interest costs—increase the figure to about \$4.3 trillion.

—*Rebecca Ballhaus and Gordon Lubold contributed to this article.*

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