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Post-Conflict Stabilization in Syria and the Potential Impact of U.S. Military Withdrawal

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Introduction

President Donald Trump wants to pull US troops out of Syria, and he recently froze \$200 million in stabilization funds for the country. Though this appeals to his domestic political base and is in keeping with his campaign promises to avoid doling out American taxpayers' money for unnecessary wars reconstruction in the Middle East, many in his administration and beyond harbor reservations about a too-hasty withdrawal.

First of all, the military job of defeating ISIS is not over. Turkey's incursion from the north has made the endgame harder because many of the Syrian Kurdish SDF forces, who had fought ISIS valiantly, have redeployed there. And in the long run, both allies and US civilian advisors need the US military umbrella to continue the stabilization work.

Trump insists that allies and partners should pay more. But the much-touted Saudi Arabian-led forces and funding for Syria have not materialized. The UN could gradually do more, but it needs the consent of Assad and Russia. And although European allies have stepped up contributions, it will not alleviate the shortfall if the US continues the freeze on stabilization.

It seemed that a Trumpian equilibrium had been reached in Iraq, where a distinction was made between stabilization, which is not considered nation-building, and reconstruction, which is. Trump has abandoned that distinction in Syria by freezing the stabilization funds, which are also used for demining Raqqa, the former ISIS capital, to make it somewhat safe for refugees to return to.

Stabilization in Syria is not only a necessity for refugees returning home, it is also viewed as a bulwark against a quick return of ISIS. By pulling out too soon, the US would lose options to curb Iran and to influence a political solution in Syria. There are longer-term consequences to watch out for, as there were for Obama when he pulled out of Iraq. There is much at stake around Trump's decision in the coming months.

Trump's Syria Strategy in the Making

On April 3, Donald Trump surprised many — including his military leaders — when he announced a new Syria policy, stating “I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home.” He added that the US had gotten “nothing out of \$7 trillion [spent] in the Middle East over the last 17 years.”¹ And he had already put the brakes on \$200 million US stabilization funding in Syria.

On that same day, at the United States Institute of Peace, CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel (responsible for the military campaign against ISIS), State Department envoy to the coalition Brett McGurk, and USAID administrator Mark Green were describing plans for a continued US presence in Syria both to finish the job militarily and to build resilience against ISIS resurgence through post-conflict stabilization.² Votel told the audience that “the hard part, I think, is in front of us...and that is stabilizing these areas, consolidating our gains, getting people back to their homes...There is a military role in this.”³⁴ The divergence in views between Trump and the Trump Administration was glaring.

Trump's approach to Syria is consistent with his world view. He thinks the US has wasted money in the Middle East on unsuccessful nation-building, and that regional partners do and pay too little. As early as 2013, during the heated discussion about the then-expected Obama military retaliation for Assad's use of chemical weapons, Trump tweeted “Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A.” Trump knows his political constituency does not want to see the US in another ground war in the Middle East. Trump wants to fix US infrastructure, not pay for other countries' reconstruction with American taxpayers' money. Likewise, Trump's insistence on burden-sharing remains a consistent theme. Foreshadowing the current debate, back in 2013, Trump tweeted about Syria, “Why are these rich Arab countries not paying us...?”⁵

Fast forward to 2018, and Trump is announcing plans for troop withdrawal and arguing that Saudi Arabia and others should pick up the tab in Syria. In short, Trump's statements ought not to have come as a total surprise to the main players at DoD, State, and USAID who support a continued US military and stabilization role in Syria.

In Iraq, Trump enforced a no-nation-building approach. But though the US did not provide public money for Iraqi reconstruction at the Iraqi reconstruction conference in February, the US has contributed generously to humanitarian aid and stabilization.

Inside the administration, there has been an effort to fence off stabilization from reconstruction to move it away from Trump's no-nation-building restriction. That distinction was evident, as Mark Green said at USIP that “...stabilization programs are more than just manifestations of American generosity. They are, instead, key components of our national security planning.” Trump seems not to care much about that distinction, given that he froze the stabilization funding.

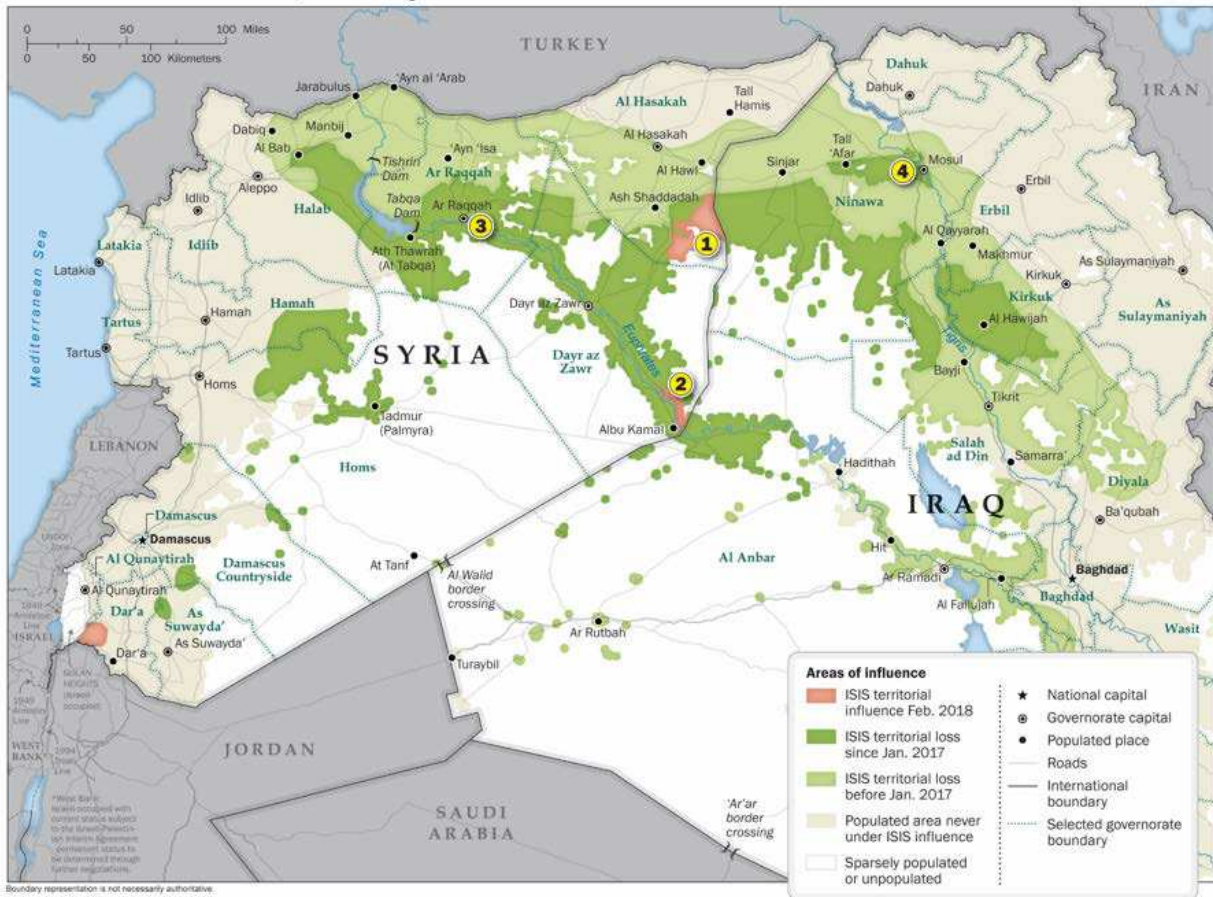
And in mid-April, Trump reengaged in Syria — although briefly — by carrying out a retaliatory strike with France and the UK for Assad's use of chemical weapons in Douma. Once again as in 2017, Trump wanted to demonstrate that, in contrast to Obama's 2013 vacillations on his chemical red line, the use of chemical weapons — which breaches an international norm — would drive the Trump administration to act. But Trump's retaliatory targeted strikes in 2017 and 2018 were not part of a broader strategy to take the US further into Syria's war against Assad. That explains why Trump in good faith tweeted out afterward “mission accomplished.”

The question of when and how the US leaves Syria remains an open one. After meeting with Trump in Washington in late April, French President Macron boasted that “We convinced him it was necessary to stay for the long term.” But such optimism could prove short-lived.⁶

Currently, the administration’s debate on departure is safely ensconced in the internal bureaucratic process. But it is more than likely that once the US military can report success against ISIS in its two remaining pockets in eastern Syria, Trump will again raise the prospect of pulling the military out.

The campaign against ISIS in Syria has slowed down considerably because the Kurdish elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are redeploying to counter Turkey in the north. During the Turkish incursion into Afrin, the Kurds felt abandoned by the U.S. Adding to that, the top-level public message about US military withdrawal has a chilling effect on the SDF’s willingness to return to continue the fight against ISIS. As a substitute, the US and allies have begun a targeted air campaign against the last two areas under ISIS control, as illustrated by the pink areas on the map below.

ISIS Areas of Influence, February 2018



Map illustrating areas of ISIS territorial influence. Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

At the same time, the US military has continuously nudged the SDF to return and finish the fight which the SDF announced in early May. Indeed, given the current situation, The SDF could have a strategic self-interest in slowing down the fight against ISIS to delay the expected US withdrawal. This could explain a recent statement by Saleh Muslim, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD): the fight against ISIS, he said, “will take a long time, maybe years and years... Daesh can move between Iraq and Syria. They are not going to be finished so easily.”⁷

Impact of a US Withdrawal on Stabilization and Other Consequences

A US withdrawal from Syria would clearly have serious consequences. A diminished, or non-existent US role on the ground in Syria would enable the expansion of Iran's fast-pass access through Syria, to the detriment of the security of Israel.

Withdrawal would be equally detrimental to American leverage in the quest for a political solution to Syria's war, where Assad is sustained by Russia and Iran. Macron pushed for a continued US presence in Syria as a component in curbing Iran's regional influence. Granted, US bargaining power is already somewhat reduced. The bargaining table over Syria's future is increasingly populated by Russia and Iran via the Astana format, bypassing the UN-led and the US-preferred Geneva format for a political solution.

For the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have valiantly led the local battles against ISIS in Syria, a withdrawal would mean an even more uncertain future. In event of full abandonment, the Syrian Kurds could likely reorient themselves toward accommodation with Russia and the Assad regime, further reinforcing Russian and Iranian chokeholds on Syria's future. For deployed American military advisors who have been working alongside SDF for years it would feel like a betrayal of a trusted and capable partner.

If the US withdraws, the Assad regime, aided by Iran and Russia, would undoubtedly test the resolve of the US's local partners. In fact, this already happened in Deir e Zour in February, when pro-Assad forces tried to retake ground previously captured by SDF forces. The US responded militarily, killing hundreds of Russian military contractors, so-called "little green men,"⁸ which Secretary of State-designate Pompeo confirmed publicly in his Congressional hearing.⁹ Without a US presence, the "green men" and Iranian militia would seize the day.

On the flip side, for the US, abandoning SDF and the Syrian Kurds might lead to an improvement in relations with Turkey, which has perceived the US collaboration with the Syrian Kurds as support for the terrorist-designated PKK. But there's no assurance that such a move would be sufficient to placate Turkey and restore US-Turkey relations to the status quo ante. Generally, Turkey has become a much more recalcitrant ally inside and outside of NATO. And Russia stands ready to play the Kurdish card to gain leverage over Ankara, to the long-term detriment of the US in the region.

As for stabilization efforts in the SDF-liberated areas, a military withdrawal would create difficulties. It is possible that existing partners would increase burden-sharing, or that new partners would step up. But the US presence has impact beyond just handing out stabilization money. Without the US military presence, stabilization efforts would be hard to sustain, for both US civilian agencies and partners. The US civilians, and others, depend heavily on the military presence for protection.

The Stabilization Freeze, the “Saudi Deal” and Options for Passing the US Stabilization Baton on to Others

The current hold on the \$200 million for stabilization in Syria combined with a voluntary freeze on other State Department’ programs awaiting guidance from the White House, is having an impact: Some programs are already running out of funding. In the short term, less stabilization on the ground makes it even harder to convince the SDF to fight ISIS as the US footprint diminishes. It also makes it harder for refugees to return home if mines are not removed and water and electricity are not running again.

Trump has emphasized a greater contribution from Saudi Arabia. According to a Washington Post article, Trump said after a phone call with King Salman that he had struck a deal securing \$ 4 billion, which could make it possible for the US to pull out of Syria.¹⁰ In the same spirit, there are stories about a possible multi-national Arab military presence sponsored by Saudi. None of this has come to fruition yet. Tellingly, at the EU Syria donor conference, Saudi Arabia contributed one-tenth of Germany’s contribution (\$1 billion versus \$100 mill), raising further doubts about the possible level of generosity. The idea of a stronger Saudi presence, including militarily, has floated around for a long time without materializing. As one administration official put it to me, “Let us see it, before we believe it,” Furthermore, a Saudi presence in Syria is not the same as an American one. Saudi or Egyptian military presence could enflame rather than calm already strong sectarian tensions among Syria’s warring factions. In contrast, the US current military presence benefits from a friendly and welcoming local attitude in the SDF-controlled areas. As Votel cautioned, “It would be difficult for someone to immediately step in and replace us,” although he added that given time, the US military could hand the baton to other forces.¹¹

Another way forward would be to push other allies and D-ISIS Coalition members to step up their contributions. This is already underway. France has increased stabilization in Raqqa and SDF-areas, to the point that Erdogan has harshly objected. When France hosted an SDF delegation for conversations about stabilization, Erdogan asserted that France was “abetting terrorism,” warning that France “will not be able to rid [itself] of this terror burden...As long as the West nurtures these terrorists, [it] will sink”¹² The UK contributes directly to civil society organizations and early recovery efforts in the Raqqa area; in this manner it deftly dodges the thorny issue of direct support to the Raqqa Civilian Council, which Turkey has singled out as an illegitimate Kurdish front organization.

Additionally, Europeans contribute to the current essential demining in Raqqa. The EU contributed \$12 mill to Mines Advisory Group; Germany provided \$12 mill and Denmark \$ 7.5 mill to Tetra Tech, and there were smaller contributions from Latvia and Kosovo. . The Syria Recovery and Trust Fund (SRTF) is also expected to start operating soon in northeastern Syria and which counts members such as Germany, France, UAE, Saudi Arabia, UK, Denmark, Kuwait, and Italy. All these efforts are examples of burden-sharing at its best.

Still, the current fast-paced demining effort by Tetra Tech is estimated to cost \$ 5 million a month. If US funding grinds to an early halt, then there is a risk that partner pledges will not fill the gap quickly enough to continue the operation. And as the late Omar Alloush, a member of the Raqqa Civil Council, said, “The people will choose the person that will fix their house for them,” warning of US loss of influence.¹³

What about the UN? The UN has recently gotten Damascus’s approval to access Raqqa and has started delivering humanitarian assistance passing through Jordan. The UN estimates that around 98,000, a third of the pre-war population level, have returned to Raqqa, although many returnees are injured or die from uncleared mines.¹⁴ Bringing the UN in with full-scale UNDP-style stabilization would require the consent of the Assad-regime and Russia. Thus, letting the UN take over would undoubtedly facilitate a return of authority to Assad in the ISIS-liberated areas. Besides, the current UN-appeal for solely humanitarian

assistance in Syria is under-funded, suggesting that donors would be unlikely to step up for a more political stabilization effort.

Another, more speculative, option, is using oil revenues for stabilization, since the current SDF-controlled territories hold the main bulk of Syria's oil. Potentially, a revenue-sharing mechanism could be established to transfer a certain amount to stabilization efforts. The morally ambiguous issue with the oil revenues is that the Kurds sell mainly to the Assad regime, although some barrels find their way to the black market in Turkey.

Bottom line: Trumpian burden-sharing is happening and increasingly so, but not fast enough or on a large enough scale (the Saudi-option) that the US stabilization freeze and possible quick withdrawal would not keep important towns such as Raqqa as nothing more than testimonies of rubble.

Stabilization as a Bargaining Chip for Syria's Future

“Stabilization is political,” according to the newly-minted Stabilization Assistance Review, which the State Department, DoD, and USAID jointly published in April.¹⁵ True, and even more true in Syria, where the American-led stabilization efforts serve as a bulwark against IS returning; making cities livable again for refugees; and as a US bid - although timid - for a future Syria outside of Assad's control. In other words, stabilization is political leverage for Syria's future. Then-Secretary of State Tillerson made that link in his January strategy for Syria, stating that “Our diplomatic efforts will be characterized by stabilization initiatives and a new emphasis on the political solution to the Syrian conflict.”¹⁶

How his successor, Mike Pompeo, will connect these dots remains to be seen. Pompeo has been tough on Iran, but to what degree that could impact Syria strategy is still unknown. Any change in military mission must initially pass through Secretary Mattis — who although tough on Iran, is unlikely to see an expansion of the military mission as desirable. Such an expansion also runs counter to Trump's priority of bringing troops home and not into another Middle Eastern conflict - even with Iran. Congress is also increasingly set to rein in any expansion of military goals in Syria possibly through a re-vamped Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF), which Senators Corker and Kaine have been working on.¹⁷

Yet it is important to recognize that other actors in Syria also use post-conflict stabilization as a tool for political leverage. Turkey's mission Euphrates Shield is one example. Turkey's incursion into Afrin mirrored US efforts with stabilization funding and setting up local councils. In reality, these missions are cover for an ethnic dislocation program, with Kurds fleeing the area and local militia loyal to Turkey taking over. The result will be a Turkish-style safe zone -- and Turkey's bargaining chip to ensure that Syria's future does not include an autonomous Kurdish region.

Next Steps?

National Security Advisor John Bolton, Secretary of State Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mattis will be the team to bring this issue forward. The new arrivals are both finely attuned to the Trumpian logic and will carry out the balancing act of translating his instincts into policy.

Likely the strongest argument for staying on aligned with Trumpian logic would be to avoid repeating Obama's errors. Trump faulted Obama for leaving Iraq in 2011 too hastily, leading to instability and the subsequent growth of ISIS. Trump has clearly stated that he does not want to make the same mistake. With this line of reasoning that Trump can probably be convinced to stay on a bit longer in Syria, bolstered by the facts on the ground, where the military battle is not over — as ISIS demonstrated with its latest message bolstering its followers and fighters.

The next best argument would be Iran. Without a US military presence in Syria, Iran would have an even greater opportunity to expand its influence. As Trump said during Macron's visit, "we don't want to give Iran open season to the Mediterranean."¹⁸

If such calculations convinced Trump to stay on for a time, and unfreeze the stabilization funds, there would be some breathing room for further stabilization work, and for a gradual increase in contributions from other donors. Still, the question remains whether such stabilization work would be futile if the US pulls out militarily and Assad/Russia takes over control of the ISIS-liberated areas, by force or through a deal with the Kurds. Unfortunately, the current signals from Trump about withdrawing are already having a chilling effect on local partners on the ground, which will be difficult to reverse. Withdrawing too soon could lead to a worst-case scenario where the US is continuously held responsible for Syria's never-ending civil war but does not have enough investment to influence outcomes.

¹ Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "As Trump talks of leaving Syria, his top commander in the Middle East emphasizes the need to stay," *Washington Post*, Apr. 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-trump-talks-of-leaving-syria-his-top-commander-in-the-middle-east-emphasizes-the-need-to-stay/2018/04/03/2ccdcff8-3753-11e8-8fd2-49fe3c675a89_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9fda3902e276.

² A term used about the quick fixes after conflict such as demining, rubble removal and getting electricity and water flowing again. For an ISIS ghost town such as Raqqa, the former capital of the terror regime, such stabilization is essential for refugees to return.

³ Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "As Trump talks of leaving Syria, his top commander in the Middle East emphasizes the need to stay," *Washington Post*, Apr. 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-trump-talks-of-leaving-syria-his-top-commander-in-the-middle-east-emphasizes-the-need-to-stay/2018/04/03/2ccdcff8-3753-11e8-8fd2-49fe3c675a89_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9fda3902e276.

⁴ Kyle Rempfer, "Trump wants troops out of Syria, but his generals may resist," *Military Times*, Apr. 4, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2018/04/04/trump-wants-troops-out-of-syria-but-his-generals-may-resist/>.

⁵ Nicholas Fandos, "Trump's View of Syria: How It Evolved, in 19 Tweets," Apr. 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/us/politics/donald-trump-syria-twitter.html>.

⁶ "France's Macron says he persuaded Trump to keep troops in Syria," *Reuters*, Apr. 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-macron/frances-macron-says-he-persuaded-trump-to-keep-troops-in-syria-idUSKBN1HM0X4>.

⁷ Liz Sly and Zakaria Zakaria, "With ISIS striking back in Syria, a U.S. withdrawal would be a 'disaster,' Kurds warn," *Washington Post*, Apr. 5, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-kurds-warn-of-a-disaster-if-us-troops-leave/2018/04/05/0b5619e0-386e-11e8-af3c-2123715f78df_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4cade19dfd7b.

⁸ Tod Lindberg, "A U.S. Battlefield Victory Against Russia's 'Little Green Men,'" *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 3, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-u-s-battlefield-victory-against-russias-little-green-men-1522792572>.

⁹ Michael R. Gordon and Nancy A. Youssef, “Mike Pompeo Promises Not to Be a ‘Yes Man,’ *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 12, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lawmakers-to-hear-from-pompeo-mattis-in-midst-of-syria-crisis-1523525400>.

¹⁰ In the same article, the US \$200 million stabilization funding is referred to as a donation. Background talks with people in the administration reveal that the donation term used might have been the spark which made Trump put a hold on the stabilization funding. Paul Sonne, and Karen DeYoung, “Trump wants to get the U.S. out of Syria’s war, so he asked the Saudi king for \$4 billion,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-wants-to-get-the-us-out-of-syrias-war-so-he-asked-the-saudi-king-for-4billion/2018/03/16/756bac90-2870-11e8-bc72-077aa4dab9ef_story.html?utm_term=.ae91e4870bc7

¹¹ Paul Sonne and Missy Ryan, “Mattis: U.S. would regret delegating security in Syria to a force with no American involvement,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 26, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/mattis-us-would-regret-delegating-security-in-syria-to-a-force-with-no-american-involvement/2018/04/26/527a3b86-4966-11e8-ad53-d5751c8f243f_story.html?utm_term=.8fd4feda1e67.

¹² “Turkey’s Erdogan says France is abetting terrorists,” *Reuters*, Apr. 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-france/turkeys-erdogan-says-france-is-abetting-terrorists-idUSKBN1HE0KP>.

¹³ Tamer El-Ghobashy, “How American neglect imperils the victory over ISIS,” *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/syria/raqqa-residents-abandoned-and-forgotten/?utm_term=.fc52699ec394.

¹⁴ UNOCHA, “Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 23,” UNOCHA, Apr. 15, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-northeast-syria-situation-report-no-23-15-march-15-april>.

¹⁵ US Government, Stabilization Assistance Review, 2018.

¹⁶ Secretary of State Rex Tillerson remarks, Jan. 17, 2018, <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-way-forward-united-states-regarding-syria-2/>

¹⁷ Karoun Demirjian, “Senators release bipartisan proposal to reauthorize use of force against non-state groups,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/senators-release-bipartisan-proposal-to-reauthorize-use-of-force-against-non-state-groups/2018/04/16/31396e64-41ce-11e8-bba2-0976a82b05a2_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b55f02853f64.

¹⁸ Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, “As Trump talks of leaving Syria, his top commander in the Middle East emphasizes the need to stay,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-trump-talks-of-leaving-syria-his-top-commander-in-the-middle-east-emphasizes-the-need-to-stay/2018/04/03/2ccdcff8-3753-11e8-8fd2-49fe3c675a89_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9fda3902e276.

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