

#### Add New Section: "The American Position"

The United States military currently deploys about two thousand personnel in an advisory role. Force protection for these elements is provided especially by air and fire support. Such support recently allowed a small contingent of American forces to wipe out a large Russian mercenary element. Nevertheless, the strength of the position should not be overestimated.

American personnel are spread out and isolated from one another in many places. They are advising, and are thus co-located with, irregular forces that could not have themselves withstood the Russian mercenaries. The Turkish military, which is likely to aim at America's Kurdish allies, is far more powerful and has integrated air support, fire support, and the capacity to contest control of the air with fighters and anti-aircraft defenses. Russian technology limiting America's air support advantage will only grow with time, and the Russians have reportedly deployed advanced Su-57 stealth fighters in theater.

Additionally, American elements in Iraq are co-located with Iraqi units that feature Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as skirmishers. These PMF are loyal to Iran, and could be turned against scattered Americans or even headquarters elements at a moment's notice.

#### Add New Section: Contrast with Obama-era Withdrawal

The President has faced some criticism that suggests that a withdrawal from Syria repeats the Obama-era error that led to the rise of ISIS. There are significant differences between the circumstances of that era and the present one. *Politically*, the Obama administration inherited a political settlement that only had to be kept stable. The purpose of American troops in Iraq was merely to ensure that the Iraqi government, though divided along sectarian lines, kept to the negotiated agreements that brought especially Sunni tribes into the fold. There is no danger of destabilizing a political settlement in Syria because there is no political settlement in Syria to jeopardize.

*Strategically*, the present situation is much more dangerous for American forces. The 2011 presence in Iraq involved large scale conventional maneuver units that had organic combined arms capabilities. They operated from defensible Forward Operating Bases containing American field artillery, surrounded by Combat Outposts that provided a flanking capacity combined with overlapping fields of mortar fire. Even if one of the regional conventional militaries had openly joined the war against the 2011 American military position, they would have found the American position unassailable.

That is not the case today. It may be that the Turkish military can be convinced to accept an American plan that does not bring them into conflict with the Kurdish units we are supporting, but at this time there is no guarantee of that. Iranian or even Iraqi conventional units may turn against us if the Iranian regime makes the calculation that the time is right to expel US forces. An American decision simply to *remain in place* could lead to battlefield reverses including potentially significant casualties. Some of those casualties could be among hard-to-replace SOF units that represent strategic American assets.

The choice before the Obama administration was simply to stay, or to go. The Trump administration must choose between withdrawing from an untenable position, or reinforcing that position so that it becomes tenable. Otherwise, the deployed American forces are at risk of becoming hostages to the enemy at best. At worst, they are at risk of being destroyed.

#### Add New Section: The GCC Opportunity is Now or Never

The window for the GCC to establish a protectorate in Syria is short unless America does the unexpected and chooses to reinforce its position there. Otherwise, the GCC is looking at a brief opportunity. Once the American forces begin to withdraw, there will be substantially less protection for their deployment. The Jordanian military can offset this to some degree if the King of Jordan agrees to participate, and the Saudis especially should be asked to encourage Jordanian support for the mission.

Even so, the Iranian interest in controlling these regions through their proxy forces will mean that the opportunity to stand up a protectorate will be limited. Delays will be costly as the Iranians move to assist Assad's regime in consolidating control. What could be done rapidly and cheaply in the next few weeks will be expensive and difficult if the moment is missed.