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Trump says there is no set date for Syria troop withdrawal

In a meandering and at times incoherent White House cabinet meeting held in front of the media, US President Donald Trump defended his surprise December 19 announcement of his decision to withdraw all US troops from Syria, while indicating that there is no set timetable for doing so.

Initially there were reports from within the administration that US forces—officially numbered at 2,000 but possibly consisting of as many as twice that number—would be brought out of Syria within 30 days. Subsequently, the time frame was put at 60 to 100 days. Since the beginning of the new year, it has been reported that the deadline has been extended to 120 days.

The withdrawal decision provoked the resignation of Defense Secretary General James Mattis, who penned a letter implicitly criticizing Trump for abandoning allies and failing to confront Russia, as well as that of Brett McGurk, the US envoy to the so-called war on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The announcement likewise provoked a storm of criticism from both Democratic and Republican members of Congress.

At Wednesday's cabinet meeting, Trump answered a reporter's question on the timetable for the Syria withdrawal by denying that he had signed off on a three-month period or that he had ever used the words "fast or slow." Instead, he merely reiterated, "I'm getting out—we're getting out of Syria."

CNN reported that the 120-day framework had been presented by the US military command, which claimed that it would be impossible to organize a safe and orderly

pullout any sooner. Part of the problem is the huge amounts of weaponry and ammunition that the US military has sent into Syria, which cannot be removed as quickly as the troops themselves and which the Pentagon refuses to leave behind.

Pressed on how soon US troops would pull out of Syria, Trump responded: “Over a period of time. I never said I’m getting out tomorrow. I said we’re pulling our soldiers out, and they will be pulled back in Syria, and we’re getting out of Syria. Yeah. Absolutely. But we’re getting out very powerfully.”

He justified his decision by citing his election campaign pledge to bring US troops home from “endless wars” as part of his “America First” agenda.

At the same time, he stated in virtually the same breath that it was time to withdraw from Syria because the US had “decimated ISIS” and that “Syria was lost long ago.”

He attributed this loss to the failure of the Obama administration—under which the CIA-backed war for regime change was launched in 2011—to carry through on its threat to initiate a direct US military onslaught against Syria over alleged chemical weapons attacks in 2013.

“So Syria was lost long ago,” Trump said. “It was lost long ago. And besides that, we’re talking about sand and death. That’s what we’re talking about. We’re not talking about, you know, vast wealth. We’re talking about sand and death.”

The US president’s crude and rambling remarks provide at least a glimpse into the real thinking within the US ruling class. The unending wars in the Middle East and Central Asia have not been about “weapons of mass destruction,” a “war on terror” or “human rights,” but rather about “vast wealth” in terms of energy reserves.

Syria’s oil and natural gas resources are insignificant compared to other countries in the region. The war that Washington and its allies provoked, killing hundreds of thousands and turning millions into refugees, was about denying Russia a foothold in the region and rolling back the regional influence of Iran.

Trump suggested that the withdrawal of US troops would serve to undermine Moscow and Tehran, which would be forced to confront the remnants of ISIS in Syria. “But you know where else they’re going?” Trump said in relation to ISIS. “To Iran, who hates ISIS more than we do. They’re going to Russia, who hates ISIS more than we do.”

Again, through the bravado and incoherence, a glimmer of truth. The Islamist militias in Syria, ISIS included, were armed and financed by the US and its allies for the purpose of toppling the Assad government. These same forces can and will be turned against US imperialism’s rivals and regional opponents, including Russia, China and Iran.

Trump turned to Iran in his rambling monologue, declaring, “Iran is a much different country than it was when I became President... I had a meeting at the Pentagon with lots of generals. They were like from a movie. Better looking than Tom Cruise, and stronger. And I had more generals than I’ve ever seen, and we were at the bottom of this incredible room. And I said, ‘This is the greatest room I’ve ever seen.’”

The room apparently included a “big board” showing a map of the Middle East with Iran advancing on all fronts.

“I saw more computer boards than I think that they make today,” Trump said. “And every part of the Middle East, and other places that was under attack, was under attack because of Iran. And I said to myself, ‘Wow.’ I mean, you look at Yemen, you look at Syria, you look at every place. Saudi Arabia was under siege.”

What emerged from Trump’s longwinded and disjointed presentation is that the Syria troop withdrawal, if it is executed, represents merely a tactical shift in what will be a continuation of the decades-long military campaign to assert US hegemony over the Middle East.

“We are continuing the fight,” Trump said at one point, adding that “there was a lot of misinterpretation.” He said that the US was doing “very exciting” things in the Middle East that he did not want to talk about. “A lot of great people understood it. Lindsey Graham understood it.”

The Republican Senator Graham, an influential figure on national security issues, had condemned the withdrawal decision as “a huge Obama-like mistake.” After meeting with Trump on December 30, Graham said that Trump had told him “some things that I didn’t know that make me feel a lot better about where we’re headed in Syria.”

Meanwhile, a senior congressional Democrat attacked Trump from the right for allegedly abandoning a military challenge to Russian and Iranian forces in Syria. Steny Hoyer, the new House Majority Leader, responded to Trump’s remarks by describing the withdrawal decision as “dangerous and reckless” and charging that it “creates a vacuum for Iran, Russia, and other adversaries to exploit.”

The essential component of the Democrats’ opposition to Trump is over imperialist strategy and tactics. Speaking for layers of the military and intelligence apparatus, they oppose any lessening of the confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia, particularly in the Middle East.

Trump and his supporters within the ruling establishment see domination of the Asia Pacific region as the key priority. General Mattis’ replacement as acting defense secretary,

the 30-year Boeing aircraft executive Patrick Shanahan, during his first meeting with civilian leaders at the Pentagon told them to focus on “China, China, China.”

Meanwhile, *Al Jazeera* reported Thursday that the US military has sharply escalated its bombing campaign against alleged ISIS targets in eastern Syria, including villages packed with civilians who have fled other areas that came under siege.

“The civilians in these areas have no place to go or hide from the US bombardment of their villages,” a civilian activist told *Al Jazeera*.

The bombing campaign, dubbed Operation Roundup, has struck numerous civilian targets, including the Yarmouk Hospital, the last public health facility treating civilians in the region. Striking such a facility is a war crime.

According to the report, the bombing campaign is also targeting internet cafes used by civilians, on the grounds that ISIS fighters also frequent them.

“They [the US] backstabbed all their allies and they’re killing the people here, and eventually the Islamic State will survive and spread, or it will fall,” an ISIS fighter interviewed for the report said. “But there will be people here who will remember what happened here, and they will carry on this information and it will spread throughout the Middle East.”