Arab Media Outlets on Withdrawal of US Forces from Syria: What is Next?

“Trump’s Syrian bomb”. “Washington reshuffled the deck with its sudden departure”. “Trump throws a wrench in allies’ plans”.

These headlines in response to Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria fill the media space in the Middle East. The outlets are boiling over with contrasting assessments and opinions. A number of experts were dumbfounded by this move. And now they are trying to figure out its subtext, and are turning to speculation about the motives behind this decision, and, most importantly, consequences for the situation in the region.

Some discern signs of a deal between the United States and Ankara behind this move, meant to prevent a mutual confrontation stemming from the threats by Ankara to attack the Syrian Democratic Forces. At their heart and foundation are the Kurdish People's Protection Units. Turkey perceives their actions as terrorist activity, and as an extension of operations by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, banned in this nation.

Analysts affirm that Kurdish forces have been sustaining the biggest losses. In their opinion, these troops have two options, but neither is particularly appealing. The first is a confrontation once the Turks attack, with Americans and Europeans attempting to limit the fighting to the region of Mandjib and several other locations.

The second option involves negotiations with Damascus on coordinated actions against Turkish expansionism. This will be equivalent to their effective surrender on conditions offered by Bashar al-Assad’s government and Moscow, and will mean few available options in the future and lack of prospects for their demands for independence.

There is talk of Turkey winning in such conditions. Nevertheless, the Kuwaiti newspaper Al Qabas has expressed its skepticism on the latest developments. According to the publication, President Donald Trump is not the type of
A politician whose first and foremost concerns are other people’s plans. It is clear that behind the decision to withdraw troops lie U.S. domestic interests, which have little to do with Turkey. This move fits well into the context of Trump fulfilling his election campaign promises and is aimed at garnering points towards his re-election campaign for the second term.

Al Qabas’ analysts believe that the decision was taken without prior consultation with the Turks.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops will not only provide opportunities for Ankara but also pose challenges. The current situation may prompt Turkey, Iran and Russia to compete in future developments.

A Saudi newspaper discerns in Washington’s latest move, a U.S. desire to exert influence on the Moscow-Ankara-Tehran triangle, which could jeopardize the process that had begun in Astana. Donald Trump’s démarche will put the burden of resolving the situation in the north of Syria squarely on the shoulders of Russia and Turkey. This may lead to fractures in their alliance as they start taking action once the U.S. departs.

Representatives of the Syrian opposition labelled Trump’s move as unexpected, “thus far unresearched”, but, at the same time, influential, as it could create a vacuum, which will be filled by various factions including DAESH (a terrorist organization banned in Russia), the Damascus authorities and Iranian militia.

Risks associated with such a vacuum are being reported on by the media of the Persian Gulf nations, who are Washington’s allies. Some are really annoyed by contradictory statements made by the U.S. military command and the President in the last few days. They point to attempts at commercializing U.S. policies in the region, which is rich in oil, and label Trump’s decision as a “present to Russia”.

According to the TV channel Al Jazeera, irrespective of whether Donald Trump’s decision is carried out in full, it is obvious that the reputation of his administration will sustain damage. The U.S. allies from all over the world increasingly view the United States as unreliable and eccentric.

The fact that the U.S. has undermined Kurdish efforts will prompt others in the Middle East to distrust the United States.

At such a time, reports in the Middle Eastern press about Russia becoming the biggest beneficiary of the decision are especially noteworthy. In the absence of an opponent, Russia will try to promote certain political processes in Syria with a greater intensity. It is worth taking into account the fact that all of this is happening at a time when Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations’ Syria envoy, left his post and is yet to be replaced. It is highly likely that, in the future, Moscow will rely on scenarios that will ensure different sides of the conflict, such as Iran, Turkey and Israel, take on separate roles. And this will be done in such a way that all of them will require the Russian Federation as an arbiter.

Still, it is not befitting to naively believe that the U.S. political strategy in the region will change radically. Authors note that 2,000 Americans in Syria are not directly involved in fighting and their withdrawal does not mean that the United States will lack capabilities to carry out air strikes if necessary.

In addition, more than 5,000 American soldiers are still stationed in the vicinity, in the neighboring Iraq. And most air strikes against Syria are conducted by U.S. warplanes based in Qatar and other parts of the Middle East.

**Yury Zinin, Leading Research Fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”**