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INSIGHT

Administration's Syria Policy Envisions Continued U.S. Presence

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On January 17, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out the Trump Administration's policy for U.S. involvement in Syria. The Secretary's remarks built upon previous testimony by Acting Assistant Secretary David Satterfield and were further elaborated in a briefing by a senior State Department official.

U.S. Goals for Syria

According to Secretary Tillerson, "the United States desires five key end states for Syria":

- **The enduring defeat of the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) and Al Qaeda**. This includes ensuring that the groups do not present a threat to the United States, and do not resurface in another form. According to Secretary Tillerson it also includes ensuring that Syria "never again serves as a platform or safe haven for terrorists to organize, recruit, finance, train and carry out attacks on American citizens at home or abroad or against our allies."
- **A political settlement to the civil war**. The Trump Administration seeks a resolution of the conflict between the Syrian government and opposition forces via a United Nations (U.N.)-mediated political process, as prescribed in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which calls for the drafting of a new constitution and the administration of U.N.-supervised elections.
- **Diminished Iranian influence in Syria**. The Administration seeks to deny Iran its attributed goal of establishing a "northern arch" stretching from Iran, through Syria and Lebanon, to the Mediterranean Sea. The Administration also seeks to ensure that Syria's neighbors are "secure from all threats emanating from Syria."
- **Return of refugees and IDPs**. The Administration seeks to create the conditions for the safe and voluntary return of Syrians who have fled violence.
- **A Syria "free of weapons of mass destruction."**

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Planned U.S. Steps in Syria

In his remarks Secretary Tillerson emphasized "the United States will maintain a military presence in Syria focused on ensuring ISIS cannot re-emerge." He did not describe the intended size of the planned U.S. presence or indicate benchmarks for evaluating its effectiveness. More broadly, he laid out the steps that the Administration plans to take to bring stability and peace to Syria:

- **Stabilization initiatives in liberated areas**. These include clearing unexploded ordinance and restoring basic services such as water, electricity, and health and education infrastructure.
- **De-escalation of the conflict**. Secretary Tillerson described the reduction of violence, through initiatives such as the southwest de-escalation area, as a critical step toward creating the conditions for a political settlement.
- **Counterterrorism**. This includes working with U.S. allies such as Turkey to address ongoing terrorism threats, including Al Qaeda efforts to establish a base in Syria's Idlib province as well as "Turkey's concern with PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] terrorists elsewhere."
- **Geneva Process**. The United States will continue to work through U.N.-mediated talks at Geneva, although Tillerson stated that Russia must put "new levels of pressure" on the Syrian government to engage in meaningful negotiations.
- **Targeted reconstruction**. Tillerson stated that "the United States, the EU, and regional partners will not provide international reconstruction assistance to any area under control of [Syrian President Bashar al Asad's] regime." However, the United States would encourage aid to areas liberated from the Islamic State by coalition and local partners.

Tillerson emphasized the U.S. commitment to "maintaining an American military presence in Syria until the full and complete defeat of ISIS." However, military officials have reported that IS members have fled to Syrian-government-controlled areas. Members of the anti-IS coalition have stated that the coalition does not intend to operate in areas controlled by the Syrian government. This has raised the question of how the coalition intends to fully defeat the Islamic State or prevent its return if it does not plan to operate outside of areas controlled by coalition partner forces.

Related Authorities

The Obama and Trump Administrations have cited the Syria Train and Equip Authority (Section 1209 of P.L. 113-291, as amended) and the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40; 50 U.S.C. §1541 note) as the legal authorities for U.S. military operations in Syria, including the provision of support to Syrian partner forces. Such assistance activities are authorized for select purposes, including supporting U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria; protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria; and promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to Syria's civil war. Congress has authorized activities pursuant to the train and equip authority through December 31, 2018. Some Members of Congress have raised questions about whether the Administration's vision for an enduring, multipurpose presence in Syria is consistent with existing authorities.

With regard to international law, the Trump and Obama Administrations have stated that the United States is conducting military operations in Syria "in the collective self-defense of Iraq (and other States) and in U.S. national self-defense." Both Administrations refer to the Iraqi government's 2014 request for defense assistance against the Islamic State. Nevertheless, some have argued that extended U.S. military

operations in a sovereign state absent an agreement with the host government or a U.N. Security Council resolution would be on uncertain legal footing.

Possible Issues and Questions for Congress

Secretary Tillerson's stated policy objectives for Syria may raise a number of questions, which Members may consider whether to explore in discussions with the executive branch. These include:

- What financial and manpower resources will be required to achieve U.S. goals in Syria?
- What is the expected duration of the U.S. military presence? What indicators will determine when U.S. forces are able to withdraw and how will these be measured?
- Which existing authorities authorize a long-term U.S. deployment in Syria, particularly with regard to activities relative to Iran and Syrian government forces?
- How likely is the voluntary departure of the Asad government via the Geneva process, and how will its continued presence affect U.S. operations? Would the departure of the Asad government bring greater stability or intensify local power struggles?
- How will the military presence in Syria of foreign actors with differing policy objectives (such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran) affect the ability of the United States to achieve its goals?
- Can Iranian influence in Syria be meaningfully countered without operating in areas held by the Syrian military? Will any reduction of Iranian influence hold once U.S. forces withdraw from Syria?
- Will the withholding of U.S. investment and reconstruction aid be sufficient leverage to force a political settlement? What alternatives to U.S.-supported reconstruction exist for Asad-held Syria?
- How might a confrontational approach by the United States in Syria toward Iran affect U.S. priorities in other places, such as Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon?
- What assumptions about the conflict underlie stated U.S. policy?

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