

Briefing Memo

Changes in the Balance of Power in the Middle East —The Meaning of the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Syria—

Ikuya Kozuka

Defense Policy Research Office, Policy Research Department

On December 19, 2018, President Trump declared victory over the Islamic State (IS) through his Twitter account and abruptly announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. The detailed timeline of this withdrawal remains unclear at the present, but this abrupt statement was not coordinated with the U.S. Senate or allies in advance. Former Secretary of Defense Mattis, who has continued to assert that the U.S. will value allies in security issues as someone with good sense and well-versed in the Middle East situation, resigned on January 1, 2019 in protest against President Trump's sudden change in Syria strategy, following the dismissal of former Secretary of State Tillerson and National Security Advisor McMaster in March of last year. White House Chief of Staff Kelley, who was said to have not gotten along with President Trump and disapproved of the politics of close personal ties to the president, also stepped down on January 2. As a result, the future of U.S. Middle East policy will be left to those even closer to the president. It is believed that Senior Advisor and President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who maintains close ties with Israel and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman, will see his influence grow.

There are believed to be several thousand U.S. troops deployed inside Syria as of the end of last year. Their main mission is to train and support the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), who cooperated as ground forces in the search and destroy operation against IS. U.S. troops are mainly active in northern and northeast Syria (the three governorates of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Al-Hasakah) along the banks of the Euphrates River forming the Rojava Kurdish region of Syria (western Kurdistan), which is now under the control of the Kurds after being seized from IS. Consequently, the declaration of the withdrawal of U.S. troops was perceived as a sudden betrayal of the Kurdish people of Rojava because the Trump administration abandoned their protection, causing shock and backlash. Turkey's President Erdogan, who claimed the Kurdish people of Syria are terrorists, welcomed the decision to withdraw U.S. troops. There is a possibility that he and President Trump reached a secret agreement in advance for Turkey to take charge of the ongoing search and destroy operation against IS and for the stability of Rojava (in other words, military intervention inside Syria). For the Erdogan administration, the risk of a collision with U.S. troops deployed to Syria was the greatest hurdle to military action against YPG.

For President Trump, the withdrawal could signal a deal to pacify President Erdogan, who is

tightening pressure in an attempt to drive a wedge in U.S.-Saudi relations by looking into the involvement of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, an anti-establishment Saudi national assassinated at the Saudi Arabian Consulate General in Istanbul last October. It is also believed the move was to quickly realize his own election promise of withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria to appease his base of support in the U.S. with a diplomatic victory.

Actually, U.S. troops stationed in Syria were active not just in Rojava. They have established a frontline base near the Tanf quarantine station (Homs Governorate) in the desert region of the southeast close to the border between Syria and Iraq. However, plans call for this base to be closed. This deployment of U.S. troops is intended to secure a strategic transportation hub for the principal border-crossing route from Iraq to Syria. Of course, it is a certainty this base also had the operational purpose for sweeping up IS which had easily traveled between both countries and expanded its control across Syria and Iraq, but it is also believed the base was intended to shut off a supply route from Tehran for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its enlisted soldiers deployed simultaneously to Syria.

Since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, Iran's influence has expanded to Iraq's Shia administration and fighting against IS in Iraq, and today it is in the process of building a so-called "Shia corridor" stretching from the capital of Tehran to Iraq, Syria, southern Lebanon up to the Mediterranean Sea including the Golan Heights. This region is known as the "fertile crescent." The role of U.S. troops stationed in Syria can be viewed as twofold: for the search and destroy operation against IS and shutting off Iran's military support route to the Mediterranean Coast and Golan Heights through this Shia corridor. In other words, the presence of U.S. troops stationed in Syria can be viewed as contributing to the balance of power between Saudi Arabia, Israel, which strongly opposes Iran and are two major U.S. allies in the Middle East, and Iran, by directly preventing Iran's expansion of influence in the region with U.S. troops on the frontlines. Consequently, the resignation of former Secretary of Defense Mattis, who valued stable relationships with allies sharing America's interests, in protest of the Trump administration's arbitrary decision to withdraw from Syria, is likely complete affirmation of this strategy. Regarding this point, below, the author would like to add his explanation to the outlook for changes in the Middle East situation in the future, from the standpoint of a balance of power with enemy states through deterrence and relations with allies.

First, looking at the current strategic environment concerning the Syrian civil war, general deterrence, where there is concern of potential military action such that there is a threat of military force or no clear use of military action, has already collapsed, because the situation has already fallen into the situation where immediate deterrence, in which there are heightening military tensions over imminent military action by an enemy state, must be used to stop military conflict. Here, deterrence means deterring actions that change the current status quo disliked by an enemy state using the threat of physical force including military action. General deterrence and immediate deterrence are components of deterrence.

Based on the dimension of another target country of threat separate from the strategic environment, deterrence can be broken down into direct deterrence, where the threat is directly combated, and expanded deterrence, where third countries such as allies become involved or they work together for deterrence (Huth, 1991, p. 17.).

Today, Israel, which occupies the Golan Heights, an important strategic location over the Syrian Civil War, likely recognizes the construction of Iranian military facilities by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the outskirts of Damascus (for example, Damascus International Airport, etc.), the capital of Syria, near the Golan Heights, as an imminent threat. This is because if the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps can establish a weapons cache in Syria, Israel can easily foresee that weapons will be supplied to Shia-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon fighting against Israel as well as Hamas, the Islamic resistance force operating in Israel's occupied Gaza strip. Both groups have a history of attacking Israel with the military aid of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

To combat this imminent threat, Israel has bombed Iranian facilities in Syria on several hundred occasions in the past. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu officially announced bombings targeting Iranian and Hezbollah facilities within the past 36 hours during a cabinet meeting on January 13, 2019 (Asahi Shimbun Digital; January 14, 2019). Consequently, looking at this situation, military conflict between Israel and Iran in Syria is already happening, indicating deterrence has failed and the crisis is escalating. If it can be determined that the expanded immediate deterrence provided by U.S. troops in Syria is no longer functioning, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria carries with it certain justification from the interests of America, as President Trump asserts.

In this manner, generally speaking, based on the results of empirical research, the presence of a military alliance is effective for general deterrence toward stopping changes in the status quo by sending the signal of increased costs at the time of an attack by a potential enemy state, but in case of immediate deterrence in escalating international conflict, it is believed that an alliance will not necessarily be a successful deterrent. This is because, in the case of immediate deterrence where tensions are rising since there is already a military threat posed by the enemy state, there is a high probability that the leaders have already developed hawkish intent to use force in a contingency regardless of the presence of the other country's allies from the stage of provocations into general deterrence. Therefore, also considering the high audience costs in international politics, the selection effects will have an effect of stopping armed confrontations without concern of the presence of the other country's allies (Fearon, 2002, pp. 13-14).

In other words, the results of empirical research likely indicate that the expanded immediate deterrence provided to Israel and Saudi Arabia, who are currently U.S. allies in the Middle East, may not necessarily stop changes in the current status quo by enemy states such as Iran. In this case, the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria announced by President Trump may be validated as an America First decision, where the expanded immediate deterrence of Iran's attack is not possible (the

most assumed attack being the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria working with the Assad regime's military and Hezbollah to attack and attempt to occupy the Golan Heights [Syrian territory] occupied by Israel), making it reasonable to withdraw, even when abandoning allies and the Kurds.

However, let's look at an example where expanded deterrence failed—the Korean War, which began on June 25, 1950 when North Korea suddenly moved south across the 38th parallel into South Korea because the U.S. abruptly abandoned its responsibility for South Korea's defense citing the high costs (Noguchi, 2005; p.174). Commonsense suggests that since America's military power is now overwhelming, as long as U.S. troops are in the region, the military balance between U.S. allies and enemy states should favor the allies' side. If there is no problem in America's ability to intervene, as pointed out by Kazuhiko Noguchi, the dependent variable of the results of expanded deterrence is the credibility of America's commitment, even in situations of immediate deterrence such as that in Syria. Using the example of the Korean War, because the United States eliminated its credibility of commitment to South Korea's defense, this caused Kim Il-sung to order a military incursion into the south resulting in the failure of expanded deterrence. The determining factor for credibility of a campaign promise as an independent variable is without a doubt the presence of interests with allies, if not considering that America has adequate military power.

Regarding this point, in terms of endangered interests with America, the ally with the fear of being abandoned by America in the Middle East is not Israel, but rather Saudi Arabia. This is because Saudi Arabia is moving toward centralization of power and dictatorship by Crown Prince Mohammad under the strong support of King Salman, and as a result, there is always the risk of potential opposition between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. over human rights violations or democratization, as evidenced by growing criticism of Crown Prince Mohammad inside the U.S. following the Khashoggi assassination.

In addition, Saudi Arabia is an archetypical rentier state that relies excessively on the production and exports of crude oil from its wealth of proven reserves for national revenue. However, since breaking below the 100-US dollar-per-barrel mark in August 2014, crude oil prices have remained at low levels, constricting the financial resources of Saudi Arabia and causing its foreign currency reserves to decline. Now, the country is expected to post fiscal deficits until 2023. Amidst this, Saudi Arabia is spending between six and seven billion US dollars every month for its intervention in Yemen, which has continued since March 2015 (Muasher, 2018). Given this situation, the social promise of the rentier model, which involves eliminating dissatisfaction in political participation by distributing its wealth of oil revenue (rent) as subsidies to the people, is no longer viable. Saudi Arabia today requires urgent reforms politically, economically, and socially. The series of reforms lead by Crown Prince Mohammad focused on consolidation of authority since 2015 have been compelled out of this necessity.

However, recent political trends in Saudi Arabia suggest a move in the direction of dictatorship and rising public dissatisfaction similar to Venezuela known as the so-called "curse of resources," which

deviates from the established theory that democratization does not take hold in rentier states because rent can be used to ease public dissatisfaction without the need for tax collection. The Trump administration has levied economic sanctions against the anti-American administration of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, but if people's dissatisfaction explodes in Saudi Arabia in the future because of dictatorship and growing power of Crown Prince Mohammad, this could lead to a collapse in the rentier model similar to Venezuela and worsening relations with the U.S. Herein lies the author's concern over the Middle East situation.

The alliance relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. has continued since February 1945 during World War II when President Franklin Roosevelt met with Saudi King Ibn. Saud aboard the U.S. cruiser USS Quincy in the Suez Canal. However, this relationship relied upon the common interest of America providing security guarantees in exchange for the stable supply of crude oil from Saudi Arabia. However, the U.S. today has experienced the shale revolution, becoming the second largest oil producing country after Russia (2018), with Saudi Arabia's output behind this by a small margin. Saudi Arabia's breakeven line for Saudi Arabia to eliminate its fiscal deficit is more than 85 to 87 US dollars per barrel; yet, crude oil futures are trending between 50 to 60 US dollars per barrel as of February 2019, even after Venezuela stopped supplying. This is a serious blow for Saudi Arabia. Since the breakeven line of shale production for America is exceeding 45 to 50 US dollars, President Trump has the room to apply pressure to block Saudi Arabia's output cuts. In other words, at present the Trump administration is not necessarily able to find common interests with Saudi Arabia politically and economically. The U.S. exit from the Middle East is no longer an unimaginable impossibility.

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(Completed on February 5, 2019)