

*Who Is in Command?*

*The Civil-Military debate over U.S. troop presence in Syria*

Author Name: Anthony Avic Du Buisson

Date: 11/05/2025

Journal of International Service

American University School of International Service

## **Abstract**

The U.S. military intervention in Syria highlights a central dilemma in civil-military relations: whether strategic decisions about troop presence should be guided primarily by military expertise or civilian authority. This paper argues that while military assessments are indispensable for evaluating operational feasibility, civilian policymakers should not wholly defer to military leadership. Drawing on the broader theoretical debate between Max Weber's views of bureaucratic expertise and Carl von Clausewitz's arguments that war is inherently political, the study situates the Syrian case within a setting of unclear political objectives and shifting military realities. The study applies a framework of strategic coherence, operational feasibility, and political legitimacy to evaluate competing civilian and military perspectives. The analysis finds that civilian supremacy is essential to ensure alignment with long-term strategic interests and broader political goals. A balanced consultative approach, one that integrates military advice within a framework of civilian decision-making, emerges as the most effective means of sustaining U.S. engagement in the region.

**Keywords:** *Civil-Military relations; U.S. Foreign Policy; Security Policy; Strategic*

*Decision-Making; Democratic Oversight; Middle East Security; Syria*

## **I. Introduction**

Currently, there are around 2,000 U.S. military personnel who occupy a small part of Syrian territory under the operational umbrella of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR).<sup>1</sup> Since June 2014 when the official intervention began, U.S. forces have operated alongside local partner forces to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and stabilize the region. These forces are primarily stationed in the northeastern quadrant of Syria near the Turkish border, in places such as Kobani, Raqqa, Jazira, and the Deir Ezzor countryside near the al-Omar oilfields.<sup>2</sup> However, since 2017, an ongoing debate between civilian policymakers in Congress and military leaders in the Pentagon regarding the continued presence of U.S. military personnel is reigniting wider discussions on civil-military relations. Past and present Administrations have oscillated between maintaining and withdrawing troops, with military leadership pushing them to extend troop presence, while civilian policymakers advocate withdrawal.

The United States' intervention into Syria raises a dilemma in civil-military relations: should strategic decisions be handled by civilian authority or military expertise? This dichotomy reflects a broader debate between Weberian views of bureaucratic expertise that emphasize the importance of the military's technical competence, and Clausewitzian arguments that war is inherently political and should therefore remain under the control of civilian policymakers. The case of U.S. troop presence in Syria, characterized by unclear political objectives and evolving military dynamics on the ground, offers a compelling context to explore this dynamic. Unpacking this debate is fundamental to determining who has authority over operations when U.S. troops are deployed abroad. This paper argues that while military expertise is essential to assessing

operational feasibility, civilian policymakers must retain ultimate authority to ensure that U.S. actions align with broader political objectives and long-term strategic interests.

This paper argues for civilian authority in the following manner: First, a literature review establishes the central theoretical debates in civil-military relations. Second, the methodology introduces the analytical framework that is used to evaluate decision-making. Third, the paper applies this framework to evidence taken from Syria and comparative historical cases. Fourth, a resolution is proposed that aims to synthesize that evidence. Fifth, counterarguments are examined to assess the strengths of military deference. Finally, the conclusion identifies the implications of this debate for U.S. engagement in Syria and future interventions.

## **II. Literature Review**

This literature review explores the tension between civilian control of the military and the military's expertise in decision making. The issue lies at the intersection of civil-military relations theory and strategic decision-making, especially in hybrid conflict zones such as in northeast Syria. It will assess relevant themes of this theory, evaluate historical precedents, and examine the normative and practical debates about the roles and responsibilities of civilian and military actors in strategic military decisions.

### **A. Expertise vs. Political Control**

The first theme, Expertise vs. Political control, is a fundamental tension in civil-military relations and is central to the question of deference to military leadership. Max Weber's 'theory of bureaucracy' in *Economy and Society* (1978) placed emphasis on the bureaucratic rationality and technical competence of experts.<sup>3</sup> Weber advanced the argument that experts, in this case military specialists, possess unique knowledge that best positions them to judge feasibility and success in

their area of expertise.<sup>4</sup> Weber's arguments reinforce the notion that military officials, by virtue of their unique training and operational knowledge, are the best assessors of effectiveness and viability in combat operations.

Contrasting Weber is Carl Von Clausewitz in *On War* (1918) arguing that war is an extension of politics, and therefore, its purpose must remain political.<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz asserted the authority of war policy held by civilian policymakers, who are ultimately responsible for defining political objectives, ensuring the military meets those ends.<sup>6</sup> War without a political objective only devolves into chaos. This is because basic human behavior drivers, such as primordial violence, emotion and irrationality, are uncontrolled, which creates the circumstances for unpredictable and often counterproductive state violence.<sup>7</sup> Noting the military expertise of officers in combat operations, Clausewitz also highlights that their plans must align with the political objectives set by civilian authorities to ensure that the use of force remains a tool of policy.<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz posits that civilian authority must govern the use of force by the military during conflict precisely because of the military's inherent lethal might.

## **B. Objective control vs. Integration**

The second theme, Objective control vs. Integration, centers on the different institutional models for managing the relationship between the military and civilian leadership within a state's political structure. In this case, Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* (1957) provides a solid foundation for contemporary civil-military relations theory.<sup>9</sup> Huntington's "objective control" model supports a separation between the military and civilian leadership. Under this framework, civilian authorities maintain decisive objective control over the affairs of the state, while the military maintains control over operational decision making.<sup>10</sup> Huntington argued that such separation ensures professionalism within the officer corps and preserves its apolitical nature.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, Morris Janowitz in the *Professional Soldier* (1960) envisioned a model of civil-military relations that is more integrated than Huntington's.<sup>12</sup> Janowitz's model is integrated in the sense that it erases the institutional and social lines between the military and civilian sectors, encouraging the military to adopt a social and political outlook more aligned with the civilian elite. Janowitz's "constabulary force" conceptualized a collaborative process where the military works closer with civilian leadership to reflect the democratic values of society and conserve the existing political order.<sup>13</sup> However, historical exceptions exist, where constabulary forces have been perceived as more partisan, such as in the case of the Ulster militias fighting for the Union government against the provisional IRA during the Troubles.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Eliot Cohen refined this in *Supreme Command* (2002) by presenting the concept of "unequal dialogue," asserting that civilian leaders must utilize the height of their political authority to engage with military commanders to shape strategic objectives and operational decisions.<sup>15</sup> Cohen used historical examples, notably U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, to illustrate the strength of civilian oversight in improving military effectiveness rather than undermining it.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Feaver added a third layer in *Armed Servants* (2005) with "agency theory."<sup>17</sup> Feaver conceptualized the civil-military relationship as one of principal-agent tensions, where civilians must monitor military behavior to ensure alignment with policy goals. Military subordinates (agents) hold an information asymmetry advantage over civilian leaders (principals) due to expertise and confidential knowledge, highlighting the potential for selective compliance or "shirking" of orders by the military elite.<sup>18</sup> A pertinent example of this is the growing trend in the last decade of former military officials entering the private sector and then being appointed to civilian cabinet roles, leveraging their expertise and confidential knowledge to influence

intelligence, budgeting, and decision making in government.<sup>19</sup> For example, Gen. James Mattis was brought out of retirement and appointed to the role of Secretary of Defense in Donald Trump's first term as president. Mattis' military experience as a retired Marine Corps general, coupled with confidential knowledge gained through his service, provided him with leverage in both challenging and advocating policy. Tensions between President Trump and Gen. Mattis in late 2018 over Syria highlighted a schism between military and civilian leadership reminiscent of President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam era.

### **C. Historical Precedents and Thematic Insights**

These theoretical tensions play out in high-stakes decisions about war and peace. The following historical examples of the U.S. interventions in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Syria, and Korea are testing grounds for the models outlined above. Each model demonstrates the clash between civilian and military leadership in strategic decision making that lacks balance.

#### **i. Divergence between political goals and military strategy**

During the Vietnam conflict, in 1968 tensions emerged between the senior leadership of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Lyndon Johnson over troop deployments. Johnson often deferred to military assessments, yet the broader political strategy was ill-defined and resulted in a protracted conflict characterized by continued troop rotation in and out of the Vietnam theatre of conflict.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, during the conflict in Afghanistan (2009), President Obama faced a clash with the military leadership when senior ranking members of the military, including Generals McChrystal and Petraeus, called for a troop surge. Obama ultimately compromised between civilian caution and military urgency, reflecting both the need to achieve political aims and heed operational warnings.<sup>21</sup>

ii. Civilian override and its costs

During the conflict against ISIS in Syria (2018), President Trump announced that troops in Syria would be withdrawn. This policy change was made against the advice of Gen. James Mattis, exposing the risks of unilateral decision-making detached from both operational timelines and coalition commitments. Mattis' advice to Trump was that the Islamic State was far from defeated and that withdrawing troops would undermine U.S. credibility in the region, as well as risk harming relations with U.S. local partner forces.<sup>22</sup> Though ultimately temporarily reversed, President Trump did follow through with the decision in October 2019. The impact of the move highlighted Mattis' earlier warnings and led to a humanitarian crisis that was exploited by U.S. adversaries, such as Russia, and led to the deaths of civilians including U.S. local partner forces in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>23</sup> The decision illustrated how disregarding military expertise can create strategic vacuums and jeopardize long-term goals.<sup>24</sup>

iii. Consequences of civil-military tensions

During the Korean conflict (1951), President Harry S. Truman quarreled with General Douglas MacArthur over action against the Chinese in the north of the peninsula.<sup>25</sup> MacArthur's advocacy for expanding the war into China put him into direct conflict with Truman, who aimed to keep the war contained and avoid a broader conflict with the Soviet Union. The tensions between escalation and de-escalation ended with Truman asserting civilian control by forcing MacArthur's resignation.<sup>26</sup> Truman's removal of MacArthur reinforced the idea that civilian control is paramount and demonstrated the cost of military insubordination. This case reflected the necessity of civil-military alignment to ensure that the military means remain subordinate to political ends, and it highlights the potentially damaging consequences when that alignment is severed.

#### **D. Syria and the U.S Civil-Military Tension Today**

The Syria case continues to typify the civil-military tension. The U.S. military often emphasizes conditions-based withdrawals, or withdrawals requiring a set of minimum objectives to be satisfied such as certifying that a host nation's military units have achieved minimum training and operational capabilities, such as with the tranche system in the case of Afghanistan from 2011-2014.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Syria, the military often cites the enduring threat of ISIS, regional instability, and maintaining positive relations with local partner forces and Coalition partners when considering withdrawal.<sup>28</sup> Civil administrations, particularly elected officials, face domestic political pressures to reorient focus and address broader strategic threats, such as China and Russia in recent years. This realignment towards Great power competition is best articulated in the 2018 National Defense Strategy.<sup>29</sup>

Some scholars argue that the Syria troop deployment lacks a coherent political objective, making continued military presence an exercise in mission creep.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the lack of concrete objectives for the troop deployment in Syria is leading to an expansion of the original mission set beyond the realm of what is feasible to achieve.<sup>31</sup> Proponents of the deployment, such as the RAND Corporation's Bryan Frederick, et al., suggest that the presence itself is a low-cost, high-return strategy for maintaining deterrence and influence.<sup>32</sup>

#### **E. Gaps in Literature**

The existing literature on civil-military relations reveals several limitations when applied to the ongoing U.S. military presence in Syria. Most of the foundational scholarship focuses on conventional interstate warfare, whereas the Syrian conflict exemplifies a hybrid battlefield. The complexity of conflicts characterized by counterterrorism operations, proxy warfare, and

partnerships with non-state local forces stretch traditional frameworks and create analytical blind spots.

The rapidly evolving conflict environment of Syria since 2011 also has limited the availability of comprehensive scholarly analysis. This is due to the recent emergence of the conflict in the last decade and a half (2012-2025), and the focus placed by the U.S. military on the Middle East and security partnerships with regional state actors. Existing models often assume a binary civil-military relationship, which overlooks the growing influence of intelligence agencies, foreign allied forces, and defense contractors in shaping military policy.

One dynamic that is unexplored in the literature is the strategic modality of U.S. military deployment in Syria. This refers to how to typify U.S. involvement in the country, such as whether the commitment should be classified as a limited, Special Operations Forces-led approach, or a conventional, large-scale intervention. The literature does not examine the role of special forces and tier 1 operators as primary personnel in the kinetic operations on ground and why the U.S. adopted this approach in Syria unlike in previous conflicts. The contrast between past conflicts where ground troop presence involved large-scale conventional maneuver and more recent approaches to conflicts, like in Syria, suggests not just a military strategy shift but a policy shift. Examining that shift could support the notion that U.S. policymakers have reached a consensus that Syria's hybrid landscape required a surgical approach using Special Operations Forces.

The literature on civil-military relations still offers essential insights into the debate about civilian deference in military deployment decisions and vice-versa. The central issue in civil-military relations is less about whether authority rests in civilian leadership or the military, but more about whether the political objectives of the state and military strategies are aligned. The Syrian case illustrates this tension acutely: without a coherent civilian-defined mission, military presence risks

devolving into mission creep, while without military expertise, political aims lack operational grounding.

### **III. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach supported by limited quantitative data, using civil-military relations frameworks and historical case-studies to evaluate the U.S. troop presence in Syria. The limited quantitative data is due to the scarcity in reliable and available data sets, such as on troop numbers, due either to the sensitive classified nature of the information or the changing environment that makes quantitative modelling difficult. This paper evaluates whether civilian leadership or military leadership should hold supremacy in decision making regarding U.S. troop presence in Syria through a three-part analytical framework. Together, these criteria provide the foundation for analyzing the evidence in the following section, which will be presented from the civilian and military viewpoints for each criterion.

1. **Strategic Coherence and Alignment:** Effective decision-making requires that military actions directly support clearly defined political objectives.<sup>33</sup> This criterion is rooted in Clausewitz's emphasis on the primacy of politics to assess whether operational plans, such as counterterrorism, stabilization, and deterrence, are cohesively integrated into U.S. foreign policy goals.
2. **Operational Feasibility and Adaptability:** Decisions must be viable, sustainable, and responsive to evolving conditions. This criterion reflects Weber's perspective, which places emphasis on military expertise and the ability of plans to be implemented within resource constraints and evolving conflict dynamics.<sup>34</sup> This perspective ensures

recommendations are technically sound and executable without exceeding political mandates.

3. **Political Legitimacy and Public Support:** Since U.S. military engagements are accountable to domestic audiences, decision-making must be grounded in democratic legitimacy. This criterion assesses whether actions in Syria garner public and congressional backing. Effective policies balance military expertise with political feasibility based on popular support to ensure long-term sustainability.

#### **IV. Evidence**

In evaluating whether civilian policymakers should defer to military leadership regarding U.S. troop presence in Syria, the following evidence is examined through the criteria established above.

##### ***1. Strategic Coherence and Alignment***

###### **A. Against withdrawal (Military viewpoint)**

Proponents of continued U.S. military presence, such as former commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) General Joseph Votel, argue that the mission in northeastern Syria remains strategically coherent due to its dual purpose: countering the resurgence of Daesh (ISIS), and deterring adversaries such as Iran and Russia.<sup>35</sup> The pentagon has emphasized that local partner forces, notably the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are integral to achieving U.S. counterterrorism objectives in the region.<sup>36</sup> These partnerships represent a military strategy that aligns with broader U.S. interests in maintaining regional stability and credibility with global partners in the fight against ISIS.

###### **B. For withdrawal (Civilian viewpoint)**

Conversely, civilian critics contend that the U.S. mission lacks clearly defined political objectives. Since 2019, ISIS's proto-state has been largely dismantled, and U.S. personnel now operate without a coherent strategic rationale.<sup>37</sup> This lack of a clear political direction risks becoming disconnected from long-term U.S. foreign policy objectives, especially regarding great-power competition with China. The 2018 National Defense Strategy sets out the primary strategic goals of the United States and is produced by the civilian administration. The Strategy places an emphasis on the need to reorientate strategy to countering regional adversaries, such as Russia and China in the Pacific, by investing in technology, strengthening existing alliances and enhancing primacy in these adversaries' areas. The risk management involved in the global war on terrorism that spanned the last decade and a half is being deprioritized in favor of great power competition.

## ***2. Operational Feasibility and Adaptability***

### **A. Against Withdrawal (Military viewpoint)**

Proponents of sustained engagement emphasize that military leadership has demonstrated adaptability on the ground. This adaptability is demonstrated in the adjustment of troop levels, reconfiguration of operational plans, and effective collaboration with local partner forces to meet evolving challenges of hybrid warfare in Syria. This is reflected in the evolution of the mission from fighting terrorism with ill-equipped and poorly trained fighters to conducting counterinsurgency operations with trained and organized local partner forces.<sup>38</sup> When transferring security duties to fragmented states, the United States has struggled to successfully align the host country's military forces with its new political government so that local troops can effectively take over operations previously run by U.S. personnel. A notable example of this is the failure of the Afghan National Army in successfully managing Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal.<sup>39</sup> In cases where there is some success, issues remain with the efficacy of local partner force management in

conducting security and stabilization operations. The Iraqi Security Forces notoriously fled Iraq with the rise of ISIS in 2014, pushing the U.S. to return to stabilize the country.<sup>40</sup> Military strategists emphasize that withdrawal without the effective completion of the mission undermines success.

## **B. For Withdrawal (Civilian viewpoint)**

Feasibility must also consider sustainability. Critics argue that prolonged military presence strains resources and lack legal clarity under the existing 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF).<sup>41</sup> Weighing operational and financial costs—along with mission creep (as in Afghanistan)—places considerable stress on operations in the northeast of Syria. According to the Department of Defense’s *Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)* for Fiscal Year 2025, the budget allocated for coalition forces in northeast Syria was 148 million dollars.<sup>42</sup> As former special envoy for the Coalition against ISIS, Brett McGurk stated in 2019, “America Can’t Do More With Less, and it Shouldn’t Try.”<sup>43</sup>

## **3. Political Legitimacy and Public Support**

### **A. Against Withdrawal (Military viewpoint)**

Supporters of a continued U.S. presence contend that a measured military engagement, when combined with targeted political oversight, preserves U.S. credibility and deters adversaries in Syria.<sup>44</sup> They argue that robust military engagements, while under a limited political mandate, can garner international support and reassure regional allies, thereby, reinforcing the external legitimacy of U.S. actions.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, a limited U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria in 2019 spurred a humanitarian crisis due to Turkey’s invasion.<sup>46</sup> This undermined U.S. credibility with local partners in the region and emboldened adversaries like Russia.<sup>47</sup> While the military prioritizes

this external credibility, it must be acknowledged that domestic political support for the sustained deployment is low and conditional. A recent *Defense Priorities* poll (2024) indicates fewer than 30% of Americans are aware of the troop presence in Syria,<sup>48</sup> while an Ipsos poll from 2025 notes that 41% of Americans support the current mission to combat ISIS. This data suggests the military's argument for legitimacy rests more on strategic necessity and allied reassurance than on a majority domestic political mandate.<sup>49</sup>

## **B. For Withdrawal (Civilian viewpoint)**

Despite the U.S. military's institutional preference to remain engaged, the lack of a domestic consensus and the absence of an updated legal framework weaken the legitimacy of continued involvement. Data from a *Pew Research* poll conducted in 2019 asking Americans for their opinions of President Trump's withdrawal from Syria suggested a split. According to the poll, Americans remained divided on the issue with a slight majority against pulling out.<sup>50</sup> While national security officials may see merit in continued troop presence, public opinion and Congressional oversight suggest declining support for the status quo. A majority of those asked by a 2024 poll why they do not support troops in Syria cited a waste of resources and lack of legal justification.<sup>51</sup> Another poll from *FiveThirtyEight* highlights that the partisan support in the Republican party for withdrawal from Syria in 2019 was significant.<sup>52</sup> A recent poll conducted in 2025 from *Ipsos* only confirmed this growing trend of Americans' declining support for troop presence in Syria, highlighting that across partisan lines only 41% support remaining in Syria to fight ISIS.<sup>53</sup> However, as Daniel Silverman and Caitlin Failing of Carnegie Mellon Institute for Strategy & Technology (CMIST) note, the polling data must be analyzed through a critical lens as framing will impact on the results of the data.<sup>54</sup> Framing is noted to be a significant contributor to how people perceive the necessity of troop presence in a conflict environment. The examples of

“enemy victory” framing (i.e. the enemy will win if withdrawing) versus the “middle ground” framing (i.e. offering alternative options) shifts the data for attitudes in support of withdrawal by 26%.<sup>55</sup> Taking this into consideration when reviewing the polling data is important and relevant for determining whether actual public attitudes are being reflected, versus pollster biases. Without clear civilian leadership defining the mission's parameters and seeking democratic mandate, military engagement risks drifting into illegitimacy, even if tactically successful.

## **V. Resolution**

Given the complexity of the U.S. military presence in Syria, civilian policymakers must prioritize strategic political considerations over military advice in key decisions. While military leadership provides invaluable insights into operational capabilities, it is ultimately the responsibility of civilian authorities to ensure that military actions align with the broader geopolitical goals and the long-term stability of the region. A clear civilian lead in decision-making, with military input as a consultative component, best ensures the effectiveness and sustainability of U.S. engagement in Syria.

## **VI. Framework Application to Recent Developments**

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad dictatorship in late 2024 shifted the conflict dynamic and attitudes towards Syria from both the military and civilian standpoints. For the military, the fall of the Assad regime ended a potential liability to military operations in northeast Syria. The Assad regime rejected the legitimacy of United States operations against ISIS and other stabilization initiatives on its soil.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Assad’s hostility to the Syrian Democratic Forces and other U.S. allies in the region, such as Israel, undermined both political and military efforts to deal effectively with regional instability.<sup>57</sup> Now, the new government in Damascus provides an opening

to normalize relations between the United States and Syria and shift the focus away from the global war on terrorism to great power competition. Irrespective, the removal of the Assad regime by a concerted force of opposition fighters spear-headed by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) may have shifted the security environment, but the same debates persist.

#### **A. Against Withdrawal (Military Standpoint)**

The removal of Assad by the predominantly Islamist adjacent opposition led by Muhammad Al-Jolani (Ahmed al-Sharaa) did not end the fighting in Syria. Israel's targeting of the country's military infrastructure in December 2024,<sup>58</sup> coupled with the emergent violence at the hands of the new government's forces in Latakia against Alawites,<sup>59</sup> in Suwayda against Druze,<sup>60</sup> and in Manbij against the Kurds and other ethnic groups signal continued stability issues.<sup>61</sup> Military officials such as Brad Cooper, current head of CENTCOM, advocates for maintaining troops in the country to continue the fight against ISIS. However, there is also an effort by the military to consolidate forces in the northeast and troop reductions to align with this consolidation are ongoing.<sup>62</sup>

#### **B. For Withdrawal (Civilian standpoint)**

The Assad regime's removal is shifting the political dynamics in the region and the attitude of the White House. President Donald Trump met the new president, Ahmed al-Shaara, in Riyadh in May of 2025, shortly after the meeting was arranged by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.<sup>63</sup> Washington's approach to al-Sharaa shifted from one of animus to one of normalization. Formerly, al-Sharaa had a \$10 million dollar bounty on his head, and the United States imposed sanctions on the country.<sup>64</sup> However, since normalization between Washington and Damascus started in May, U.S. sanctions have lifted,<sup>65</sup> and the civilian administration is open to working with the new government in Damascus. The Trump Administration's special envoy to Syria, Thomas Barrack,

advocates for Syria's sovereignty and joint US-Syria operations to combat ISIS.<sup>66</sup> This is only reinforced by President Trump's meeting with al-Sharaa in the White House on November 10, 2025 in which he vowed to make Syria successful, and which allowed Syria to formally join the US-led Coalition against-ISIS.<sup>67</sup> This shift in approach by Washington has led to arguments in support of the notion of withdrawing forces from Syria.<sup>68</sup> The updated rationale stems from Damascus's potential to tackle on going conflicts with non-state actors without U.S. military assistance.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The question of whether civilian policymakers should defer to military leadership in decisions regarding the continued U.S. military presence in Syria reveals the complex dynamics of civil-military relations, notably as they relate to modern hybrid conflicts. While military expertise remains critical in assessing operational feasibility, the strategic coherence and political legitimacy of U.S. actions in Syria cannot be achieved through military guidance alone. Civilian policymakers must maintain control over overarching political objectives to ensure that military operations align with long-term U.S. interests, domestically and regionally. A balanced approach that integrates military expertise through consultation and maintains civilian oversight is the most effective way to navigate the challenges of U.S. engagement in Syria. This integrated model can help avoid mission creep, prevent the overextension of resources, and maintain the political legitimacy necessary for continued American involvement. The decision to stay or withdraw hinges not on a binary approach but on the ability to adapt strategy to evolving circumstances, ensuring both military effectiveness and political objectives are sustained. This reinforces the notion that while military input remains important, subordination to civilian leadership is paramount to preserve the political direction and legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy.

## Bibliography:

- “James Mattis’ Resignation Letter in Full.” *BBC News*, December 21, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46644841>.
- “Inteqal: Transition to Afghan lead (2011–2014).” *NATO*, last updated September 15, 2022. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_87183.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_87183.htm).
- “Maintaining U.S. Support for Syrian Kurdish Forces.” Penn Center for the Study of Ethnic Conflict, March 15, 2019. [www.penncenter.org/news/maintaining-u-s-support-for-syrian-kurdish-forces/](http://www.penncenter.org/news/maintaining-u-s-support-for-syrian-kurdish-forces/).
- “Poll: U.S. Military Presence in Syria.” *Defense Priorities*, February 3, 2024. <https://www.defensepriorities.org/polls/us-military-presence-in-syria/>.
- “Turkey-Syria offensive: US sanctions Turkish ministries,” *BBC News*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50041239>.
- “US to scale down its military bases in Syria, envoy says.” *Reuters*. June 3, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-scale-down-its-military-bases-syria-envoy-says-2025-06-03>.
- Aftandilian, Gregory. *A Security Role for the United States in a Post-ISIS Syria?: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, 2018. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/395/>.
- Al-Ahmed, Bassam. “‘You’re a Druze... We Will Burn You and Your Motorcycle’: Gross Violations against the Druze (April–May 2025).” *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, August 20, 2025. <https://stj-sy.org/en/youre-a-druze-we-will-burn-you-and-your-motorcycle-gross-violations-against-the-druze-april-may-2025/>.
- Atanasiu, Mirela. “MENA—U.S. Military Withdrawal from Syria: Signals, Motivations and Possible Consequences in the Medium and Long Term.” *Strategic Impact*, no. 68–69 (2018): 63–66. [https://cssas.unap.ro/en/pdf\\_periodicals/si68-69.pdf](https://cssas.unap.ro/en/pdf_periodicals/si68-69.pdf).
- Avicé Du Buisson, Anthony. “Assessing U.S. State-Building Initiatives in Northeastern Syria”. New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, August 19, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16914651>.
- Barrack, Thomas. “Implementing President Trump’s Vision for a Prosperous, Stable Syria.” U.S. Embassy Turkey / Special Envoy for Syria statement. May 2025. <https://tr.usembassy.gov/u-s-ambassador-to-turkiye-and-special-envoy-for-syria-thomas-barrack>.
- Bateman, Tom. “US Scraps \$10m bounty for arrest of Syria’s new leader.” *BBC News* (20 December 2024). <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c07gv3j818ko>.
- Betts, Richard K. *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

- Bolton, Lt. Col. John Q. "Military Power Is Insufficient: Learning from Failure in Afghanistan." *Military Review*, January-February 2023. Army University Press.  
<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2023/Bolton/>.
- Brooks, Risa, and Alice Hunt Friend. "Career Military Officers and Political Appointments." *Critical Questions*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2020.  
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/career-military-officers-and-political-appointments>.
- Brooks, Risa. *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Brooks, Risa. *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Translated by J. J. Graham. Ebook. Revised by F. N. Maude. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1918. [https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2050/Clausewitz\\_1380-01\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2050/Clausewitz_1380-01_EBk_v6.0.pdf).
- Cohen, Eliot A. *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*. New York: Free Press, 2002.
- Davison, Ketti. "Forecast: The Consequences of the U.S. Withdrawal from Syria." Institute for the Study of War October 13, 2019.  
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/forecast-consequences-us-withdrawal-syria>.
- Dunn, Amina, and Bradley Jones. "Americans Divided Over Decision to Withdraw from Syria." Pew Research Center, January 18, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/18/americans-divided-over-decision-to-withdraw-from-syria/>.
- English, Richard. *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Feaver, Peter D. *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Feaver, Peter D. "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control." *Armed Forces & Society* 23, no. 2 (December 1996): 149–78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9602300203>.
- Feltman, Jeffrey and Hrair Balian. "The United States needs a new Syria policy." *Brookings Institution*, January 29, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-needs-a-new-syria-policy/>.
- Frederick, Bryan., et al. *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020.  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2533.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2533.html).
- Gordon, Chris. "U.S. Troops in Syria Needed to Check ISIS Comeback, CENTCOM Nominee Says." *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, June 24, 2025.

<https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-troops-syria-stop-isis-comeback-centcom-nominee/>.

Halberstam, David. *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*. New York: Hyperion, 2007.

Hoffman, Max. "Trump's Syria Shambles." *Center for American Progress*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/trumps-syria-shambles/>.

Holland, Steve and Matt Spetalnick. "Trump vows to do everything he can to help Syria after Landmark talks with Sharaa." *Reuters*, November 10, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-meet-sharaa-white-house-capping-major-turnaround-syria-2025-11-10/>.

Human Rights Watch. "Are You Alawi?: Identity-Based Killings During Syria's Transition." September 23, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/09/23/are-you-alawi/identity-based-killings-during-syrias-transition>.

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957.

Institute for Economics & Peace. *The Economic Cost of Violence Containment*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Economic-Cost-of-Violence-Containment.pdf>.

Ipsos. "Most Americans Say U.S. Can't Afford Military Action in Syria and Ukraine." January 13, 2025. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/most-americans-say-us-cant-afford-military-action-syria-and-ukraine>.

Janowitz, Morris. *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*. New York: Free Press, 1960.

Levy, Ido. "Supporting the SDF in Post-Assad Syria." *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 13, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria>.

Mackay, Robert. "Trump Envoy Praises New Syrian President for 'Counter-ISIS Measures'." *The Guardian*. May 24, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/24/syria-thomas-barrack-ahmed-al-sharaa>.

Mackenzie, James and Suleiman Al-Khalidi. "Israel says its air strikes destroyed most of Syria's Strategic weapons Stockpiles." *Reuters*. December 10, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-incursion-into-syria-reaches-25-km-southwest-damascus-security-sources-2024-12-10>.

Malkasian, Carter. "The Meaning of Setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan." *PRISM* 8, no. 2 (Oct. 4, 2019). NDU Press. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1979772/the-meaning-of-setbacks-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/>.

McChrystal, Stanley. *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*. New York: Portfolio, 2013.

- McGurk, Brett. "Hard Truths in Syria: America Can't Do More With Less, and It Shouldn't Try." *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2019. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>.
- Mehta, Dhrumil. "Republican Voters Are Largely Backing Trump's Withdrawal From Syria." *FiveThirtyEight*, October 18, 2019. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/republican-voters-are-largely-backing-trumps-withdrawal-from-syria>.
- Military Assessment of the Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East*. Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session. H.A.S.C. No. 115-27. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg25093/html/CHRG-115hhrg25093.htm>
- Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Justification for FY 2025 Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, March 2024. [https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025\\_CTEF\\_J-Book.pdf](https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_CTEF_J-Book.pdf).
- Olsen, Nathan P. "Preserving U.S. Military Advantages in the Middle East." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/preserving-us-military-advantages-middle-east>.
- Quilliam, Neil. "Meeting of al-Sharaa and Trump Has Shifted Balance of Power in Middle East." *Chatham House* (May 16, 2025). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/meeting-al-sharaa-and-trump-has-shifted-balance-power-middle-east>.
- Roth, Jason. "The Risk of Delay: The Need for a New Authorization for Use of Military Force." National Defense University Press, April 9, 2018 <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1325952/the-risk-of-delay-the-need-for-a-new-authorization-for-use-of-military-force/>.
- Shanahan, Rodger. "The Danger of Mission Creep in Syria." *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), October 4, 2018. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/danger-mission-creep-syria>.
- Silverman, Daniel, and Caitlan Fealing. "Framing the Exit: Pollsters, Public Opinion, and the Politics of Military Withdrawal." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2025): 445–58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf020>.
- Shalal, Andrea, Daphne Psaledakis and Humeyra Pamuk. "Trump to Sign Order Lifting Sanctions on Syria, White House Says." *Reuters*. June 30, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-sign-order-related-syria-sanctions-easing-cbs-news-reports-2025-06-30>.

*Syria Study Group: Recommendations for U.S. Policy.* Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 116th Congress, First Session. Serial No. 116-75. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, October 16, 2019.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg38156/html/CHRG-116hhrg38156.htm>.

The Syria Study Group. "Syria Study Group Final Report." Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, September 2019. <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>.

Ulrich, M.. *The Role of the Military in National Security Decision Making.* Washington, DC: Defense Technical Information Center, 2011.

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA548907.pdf>.

Wand, Alexander, et al. "Syria Joins Coalition Against Islamic State as Nation's Leader Visits Trump," *The Wallstreet Journal*, November 10, 2025, [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syria-to-join-coalition-against-islamic-state-as-countrys-president-visits-trump-ed16328c?reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syria-to-join-coalition-against-islamic-state-as-countrys-president-visits-trump-ed16328c?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink).

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Wright, Stuart. "Was Obama's 2009 Afghanistan Surge Based on Sound Strategy?" *Military Strategy Magazine*, 23 Jan. 2020, [www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/was-obamas-2009-afghanistan-surge-based-on-sound-strategy/](http://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/was-obamas-2009-afghanistan-surge-based-on-sound-strategy/).

Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir. "Do the Suwayda Clashes in Syria Signal Future Clashes Between the Kurds and the New Syrian Regime?" *Jamestown Foundation*, July 30 2025. <https://jamestown.org/program/do-the-suwayda-clashes-in-syria-signal-future-clashes-between-the-kurds-and-the-new-syrian-regime>.

Vesoulis, Abby. "Mattis Quit After Trump's Syria Pullout. Here are all the times He publicly split with the president." *Time*, December, 20, 2018. <https://time.com/5486300/james-mattis-disagree-donald-trump/>.

Votel, Joseph L., and Eero R. Keravuori. "The By-With-Through Operational Approach." *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40-47.

[https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89\\_40-47\\_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_40-47_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307).

## END NOTES

---

- <sup>1</sup> Matthew Olay, "DOD Announces 2,000 Troops in Syria, Department Prepared for Government Shutdown," *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4013726/dod-announces-2000-troops-in-syria-department-prepared-for-government-shutdown/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Anthony Avicé Du Buisson, "Assessing U.S. State-Building Initiatives in Northern Syria," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, August 19, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16914651>, 8.
- <sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
- <sup>4</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 956-959.
- <sup>5</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham, rev. F. N. Maude (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1918), [Ebook], Book 1, Chapter 1, 37, [https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2050/Clausewitz\\_1380-01\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2050/Clausewitz_1380-01_EBk_v6.0.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 29-30.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 39.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.
- <sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).
- <sup>10</sup> Peter D. Feaver. "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control." *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (1996): 149–78, 158-159. doi:10.1177/0095327X9602300203.
- <sup>11</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 7-11.
- <sup>12</sup> Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960).
- <sup>13</sup> Janowitz, *Professional Soldier*, 80.
- <sup>14</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96–105.
- <sup>15</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).
- <sup>16</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Commander*, 185-188.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- <sup>18</sup> Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 118-121.
- <sup>19</sup> Risa Brooks and Alice Hunt Friend, "Career Military Officers and Political Appointments," *Critical Questions*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/career-military-officers-and-political-appointments>.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 29.
- <sup>21</sup> Marybeth P. Ulrich, "The General Stanley McChrystal Affair: A Case Study in Civil-Military Relations." *Parameters (Carlisle, Pa.)* 41, no. 1 (2011): 86. doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2576.; Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Portfolio, 2013); Stuart Wright, "Was Obama's 2009 Afghanistan Surge Based on Sound Strategy?" *Military Strategy Magazine*, January 23, 2020 [www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/was-obamas-2009-afghanistan-surge-based-on-sound-strategy/](http://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/was-obamas-2009-afghanistan-surge-based-on-sound-strategy/).
- <sup>22</sup> "James Mattis' Resignation Letter in Full," *BBC News*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46644841>; Abby Vesoulis, "Mattis Quit After Trump's Syria Pullout. Here are all the times He publicly split with the president," *Time*, December, 20, 2018, <https://time.com/5486300/james-mattis-disagree-donald-trump/>.
- <sup>23</sup> Max Hoffman, "Trump's Syria Shambles," *Center for American Progress*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/trumps-syria-shambles/>.
- <sup>24</sup> Mirela Atanasiu. "MENA–US MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA. SIGNALS, MOTIVATIONS AND POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES IN THE MEDIUM AND LONG TERM." *Strategic Impact*, no. 68+69 (2018): 63–66, 63.
- <sup>25</sup> David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 589-601.
- <sup>26</sup> Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, 29.

- 
- <sup>27</sup> “Inteqal: Transition to Afghan lead (2011–2014),” *NATO*, last updated September 15, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_87183.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_87183.htm).
- <sup>28</sup> *Syria Study Group: Recommendations for U.S. Policy*, hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress, First Session, Serial No. 116-75 (October 16, 2019), U.S. Government Publishing Office, [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg38156/html/CHRG-116hhrg38156.htm](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg38156/html/CHRG-116hhrg38156.htm).
- <sup>29</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, May 2018, 2. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>.
- <sup>30</sup> Rodger Shanahan, “The Danger of Mission Creep in Syria,” *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), October 4, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/danger-mission-creep-syria>.
- <sup>31</sup> Benjamin Friedman, *Disentangling from Syria’s Civil War: The Case for U.S. Military Withdrawal* (Washington, DC: Defense Priorities, May 29, 2019), <https://www.defensepriorities.org/reports/disentangling-from-syrias-civil-war-the-case-for-us-military-withdrawal/>.
- <sup>32</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *The Economic Cost of Violence Containment* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Economic-Cost-of-Violence-Containment.pdf>; Bryan Frederick, et al. *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 143, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2533.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2533.html).
- <sup>33</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 36-37.
- <sup>34</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 956-959.
- <sup>35</sup> *Military Assessment of the Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East*, hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, H.A.S.C. No. 115-27 (March 29, 2017), U.S. Government Publishing Office, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg25093/html/CHRG-115hhrg25093.htm>.
- <sup>36</sup> Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40-47, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89\\_40-47\\_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_40-47_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307).
- <sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Feltman and Hrair Balian, “The United States needs a new Syria policy,” *Brookings Institution*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-needs-a-new-syria-policy/>.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> Lt. Col. John Q. Bolton, “Military Power Is Insufficient: Learning from Failure in Afghanistan,” *Military Review*, January-February 2023, Army University Press, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2023/Bolton/>.
- <sup>40</sup> Carter Malkasian, “The Meaning of Setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *PRISM*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Oct. 4, 2019), NDU Press, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1979772/the-meaning-of-setbacks-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>41</sup> Jason Roth, “The Risk of Delay: The Need for a New Authorization for Use of Military Force,” National Defense University Press, April 9, 2018, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1325952/the-risk-of-delay-the-need-for-a-new-authorization-for-use-of-military-force/>.
- <sup>42</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Justification for FY 2025 Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, March 2024), 17, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025\\_CTEF\\_J-Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_CTEF_J-Book.pdf).
- <sup>43</sup> Brett McGurk, “Hard Truths in Syria: America Can’t Do More With Less, and It Shouldn’t Try,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2019, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>.
- <sup>44</sup> Nathan, P. Olsen, “Preserving U.S. Military Advantages in the Middle East,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/preserving-us-military-advantages-middle-east>.
- <sup>45</sup> The Syria Study Group, “Syria Study Group Final Report,” (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, September 2019), 12-17, <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>.
- <sup>46</sup> “Turkey-Syria offensive: US sanctions Turkish ministries,” *BBC News*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50041239>.
- <sup>47</sup> Ketti Davison, “Forecast: The Consequences of the U.S. Withdrawal from Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, October 13, 2019, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/forecast-consequences-us-withdrawal-syria>.

- 
- <sup>48</sup> Defense Priorities, “Poll: U.S. Military Presence in Syria,” January 8–15, 2024, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/polls/us-military-presence-in-syria/>.
- <sup>49</sup> Ipsos, “Most Americans Say U.S. Can’t Afford Military Action in Syria and Ukraine,” January 13, 2025, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/most-americans-say-us-cant-afford-military-action-syria-and-ukraine>.
- <sup>50</sup> Amina Uunn and Bradley Jones, “Americans Divided Over Decision to Withdraw from Syria,” Pew Research Center, January 18, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/18/americans-divided-over-decision-to-withdraw-from-syria/>.
- <sup>51</sup> Defense Priorities, “Poll: U.S. Military Presence in Syria,” 2024.
- <sup>52</sup> Dhrumil Mehta, “Republican Voters Are Largely Backing Trump’s Withdrawal From Syria,” *FiveThirtyEight*, October 18, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/republican-voters-are-largely-backing-trumps-withdrawal-from-syria>.
- <sup>53</sup> Ipsos, “Most Americans Say U.S. Can’t Afford Military Action in Syria and Ukraine,” 2025.
- <sup>54</sup> Daniel Silverman and Caitlan Fealing, “Framing the Exit: Pollsters, Public Opinion, and the Politics of Military Withdrawal,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2025): 445–58, 455–456, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf020>.
- <sup>55</sup> Daniel Silverman and Caitlan Fealing, “Framing the Exit: Pollsters, Public Opinion, and the Politics of Military Withdrawal,” 2025.
- <sup>56</sup> Gregory Aftandilian, *A Security Role for the United States in a Post-ISIS Syria?: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, 2018), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/3957>.
- <sup>57</sup> Ido Levy, “Supporting the SDF in Post-Assad Syria,” *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 13, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria>.
- <sup>58</sup> James Mackenzie and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Israel says its air strikes destroyed most of Syria’s Strategic weapons Stockpiles,” *Reuters*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-incursion-into-syria-reaches-25-km-southwest-damascus-security-sources-2024-12-10>.
- <sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch, “*Are You Alawi?: Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition*,” September 23, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/09/23/are-you-alawi/identity-based-killings-during-syrias-transition>.
- <sup>60</sup> Bassam Al-Ahmed, “‘You’re a Druze... We Will Burn You and Your Motorcycle’: Gross Violations against the Druze (April–May 2025),” *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, August 20, 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/youre-a-druze-we-will-burn-you-and-your-motorcycle-gross-violations-against-the-druze-april-may-2025/>.
- <sup>61</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Do the Suwayda Clashes in Syria Signal Future Clashes Between the Kurds and the New Syrian Regime?” *Jamestown Foundation*, July 30 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/do-the-suwayda-clashes-in-syria-signal-future-clashes-between-the-kurds-and-the-new-syrian-regime>.
- <sup>62</sup> Chris Gordon, “U.S. Troops in Syria Needed to Check ISIS Comeback, CENTCOM Nominee Says,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-troops-syria-stop-isis-comeback-centcom-nominee/>.
- <sup>63</sup> Neil Quilliam, “Meeting of al-Sharaa and Trump Has Shifted Balance of Power in Middle East,” *Chatham House* (May 16, 2025), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/meeting-al-sharaa-and-trump-has-shifted-balance-power-middle-east>.
- <sup>64</sup> Tom Bateman, “US Scraps \$10m bounty for arrest of Syria’s new leader,” *BBC News* (20 December 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c07gv3j818ko>.
- <sup>65</sup> Andrea Shalal, Daphne Psaledakis and Humeyra Pamuk, “Trump to Sign Order Lifting Sanctions on Syria, White House Says,” *Reuters*, June 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-sign-order-related-syria-sanctions-easing-cbs-news-reports-2025-06-30>.
- <sup>66</sup> “US to scale down its military bases in Syria, envoy says,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-scale-down-its-military-bases-syria-envoy-says-2025-06-03>.
- <sup>67</sup> Steve Holland and Matt Spetalnick, “Trump vows to do everything he can to help Syria after Landmark talks with Sharaa,” *Reuters*, November 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-meet-sharaa-white-house-capping-major-turnaround-syria-2025-11-10/>; Alexander Wand, et, al. “Syria Joins Coalition Against Islamic State as Nation’s Leader Visit Trump,” *The Wallstreet Journal*, November 10, 2025, [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syria-to-join-coalition-against-islamic-state-as-countrys-president-visits-trump-ed16328c?reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syria-to-join-coalition-against-islamic-state-as-countrys-president-visits-trump-ed16328c?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink).
- <sup>68</sup> Thomas Barrack, “Implementing President Trump’s Vision for a Prosperous, Stable Syria,” U.S. Embassy Turkey / Special Envoy for Syria statement, May 2025, <https://tr.usembassy.gov/u-s-ambassador-to-turkiye-and-special-envoy-for-syria-thomas-barrack/>; Robert Mackay, “Trump Envoy Praises New Syrian President for ‘Counter-ISIS

---

Measures’,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/24/syria-thomas-barrack-ahmed-al-sharaa>.