

[Middle East](#)

U.S. troops will stay in Syria to counter ‘strategic’ threat from Iran



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson speaks to the Hoover Institution and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University on Jan. 17, 2018. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

By [Liz Sly](#) and [Carol Morello](#)

[Middle East](#)

January 17 at 5:51 PM

BEIRUT — Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Wednesday committed the United States to an indefinite military presence in Syria, citing a range of policy goals that extend far beyond the defeat of the Islamic State as conditions for American troops to go home.

But a crisis unfolding on the Syria-Turkey border that threatens to embroil the U.S. military in a wider regional conflict underscored how hard it will be for the

relatively small U.S. presence in Syria to influence the outcome of the conflict there.

Speaking in a major Syria-policy address hosted at Stanford University by the Hoover Institution, Tillerson listed vanquishing al-Qaeda, ousting Iran and securing a peace settlement that excludes President Bashar al-Assad as among the goals of a [continued presence in Syria of about 2,000 American troops](#) currently deployed in a Kurdish-controlled corner of northeastern Syria. His comments represented the most comprehensive and ambitious articulation of Washington's often-contradictory policy in Syria since President Trump took office a year ago, and they underline the extent to which the war against the Islamic State has inevitably also entangled the United States in the region's other conflicts.

[\[Trump tells Turkish president U.S. will stop arming Kurds in Syria\]](#)

The U.S. troops in northeastern Syria were initially deployed during the Obama presidency to aid local Kurdish forces in the fight against the Islamic State. Their presence now appears to be evolving into a wider regional policy aimed, among its goals, at **fulfilling the Trump administration's promises to get tough on Iran.**

Tillerson said the experience of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which was followed by the rise of the Islamic State and the U.S. military's return to the region, necessitated an open-ended U.S. presence in Syria to prevent a revival of the Islamic State. **"We cannot repeat the mistake of 2011, where a premature departure from Iraq allowed al-Qaeda in Iraq to survive and eventually become ISIS," Tillerson said,** using an acronym for the Islamic State.

But he also indicated that **one of the biggest challenges of the post-Islamic State era is Iran's enhanced role.** With the Islamic State now beaten back into a small pocket of territory along the Iraq-Syria border, the United States has to address the reality that **Iran's support for Assad in Syria has given Tehran a vastly expanded reach,** he said.

"Continued strategic threats to the U.S. other than ISIS persist. I am referring principally to Iran," he said. "Iran has dramatically strengthened its presence in Syria by deploying Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops; supporting Lebanese Hezbollah; and importing proxy forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. Through its position in Syria, Iran is in a stronger position to extend its track record of attacking U.S. interests, allies and personnel in the region.

[\[Who is attacking Russia's bases in Syria? A new mystery emerges in the war.\]](#)

Squeezing Iran will, therefore, be one of the foremost goals of the continued U.S. troop presence in Syria, he said, acknowledging that the project will be difficult.

“Syria remains a source of severe strategic problems and a major challenge for our diplomacy,” Tillerson said. “But the United States will continue to remain engaged.”

One of the starkest illustrations of the risks of the entanglement is unfolding now, as Turkey escalates threats to attack the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria.

The area is controlled by Kurdish fighters from the People’s Protection Units, or YPG, who are allied to the United States but did not directly participate in the fight against the Islamic State. They are closely tied to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which is waging war against NATO member and U.S. ally Turkey.

The latest threat from Turkey was triggered by [U.S. military plans to train a 30,000-strong border force](#) to protect the Kurdish-controlled area of northeastern Syria. Turkey regards such a force as a threat to its national security. Saying that the force would represent “an army of terrorists,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to wage war on Syria’s Kurds. Turkish tanks and troops have massed in the border region, and Erdogan has said an invasion could occur this week.

[\[Turkish president threatens to ‘drown’ U.S.-backed force in Syria\]](#)

The United States would not feel compelled to defend the Afrin area because it did not feature in the war against the Islamic State, according to statements by U.S. officials in recent days. “We don’t consider them as part of our Defeat ISIS operations, which is what we are doing there, and we do not support them” with training and advisory programs, a Pentagon spokesman, Marine Corps Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway, told Turkey’s state-owned Anadolu Agency, in comments he confirmed in an email Wednesday. “We are not involved with them at all,” he said. “The groups that we support are exclusively involved in operations countering Daesh,” he added, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

The announcement of the border force, which has exposed contradictions between State Department and Pentagon policies in the region, has triggered one of the worst crises in years in the already fraught relationship between Turkey and the United States.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters Wednesday after meeting with Tillerson in Vancouver, Canada, that any resulting damage to Turkey's ties with the United States could be beyond repair. "Such a development would damage Turkish-American ties in an irreversible manner," the Anadolu Agency quoted Cavusoglu as saying.

Morello reported from Vancouver. Heba Habib in Stockholm and Erin Cunningham and Zakaria Zakaria in Istanbul contributed.

Read more:

[U.S. moves toward open-ended presence in Syria after Islamic State is routed](#)

[U.S. is trapped between its allies' ambitions in Syria](#)

[Today's coverage from Post correspondents around the world](#)

[Like Washington Post World on Facebook and stay updated on foreign news](#)