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## US strategy in Syria post-ISIS beginning to take shape but Congress may not be on board

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“Because the government in Damascus remains allied with Moscow, the strategy poses a challenge to Russia as well.”

The United States appears committed to maintaining an indefinite presence in Syria, senior US State Department officials say, with the Syrian government and Iran replacing the Islamic State (ISIS) as the principal opponents.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaking January 16 at Stanford University, outlined a strategy based on maintaining an indefinite military presence in Syria with the goal of ousting the regime of Bashar Assad, countering the Iranian presence and ensuring that new militant groups do not rise up.

Taking dead aim at Damascus, Tillerson said: “Total [US] withdrawal would restore Assad and continue the brutal treatment of his own people... Such oppression cannot persist forever.”

Tillerson’s remarks reflect a more aggressive position against the Assad government by the United States. Because the government in Damascus remains allied with Moscow, the strategy poses a challenge to Russia as well.

Tillerson advocated for the UN-mediated Geneva peace process

culminating in UN-supervised elections – without Assad’s participation – and the return of Syrian refugees.

Prior to Tillerson’s speech, David Satterfield, the acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, told a US Senate hearing the primary role of US military forces in Syria would be countering Iranian activities.

While insisting that “our job is not done” in dealing a final blow to ISIS, Satterfield claimed that coalition-backed efforts have liberated more than 98% of territory previously controlled by the terrorist organisation.

Nevertheless, US forces would remain in Syria for the indefinite future, Satterfield said, because “a premature US departure from Syria would enable ISIS to return... and enable Iran to expand its malign influence throughout the region, especially to threaten Israel through Iran-backed proxies like Hezbollah.”

Even more specifically, Satterfield said: “We seek to not only diminish Iranian foreign influence in Syria generally but to protect our allies from the very real threat Hezbollah poses in south-west Syria.”

He added that “it is absolutely

our policy to see Syria able to move forward free of all foreign forces and that specifically includes Iranian forces.”

When pressed by Senate Foreign Relations Committee member Chris Murphy for details about what actions US forces in Syria would take to counter Iran, Satterfield replied that he would prefer to discuss the issue in a classified setting, not a public hearing. However, he gave an indication of US worries: “We are deeply concerned with the activities of Iran, with the ability of Iran to enhance those activities through a greater ability to move material into Syria.”

Satterfield challenged the notion that Iran had established a land corridor across the region. “We see minimal movement by Iran across land borders,” he said, adding that this was the result of the US military presence in Syria.

The US Department of Defence declined to send a witness to the hearing, frustrating senators from both political parties. Senator Ben Cardin told Satterfield that Congress had not authorised the use of US military forces to carry out the mission in Syria that Satterfield appeared to be describing. Congress,

Cardin said, “has not authorised anything close to what you are saying.”

Senator Bob Corker, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, agreed with his Democratic counterpart, saying “certainly the authorisations are not there for that kind of activity.”

Satterfield said Washington continued to view the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a new Syrian constitution and UN-monitored elections, as the only way to end Syria’s devastating civil war. He called on Moscow “to pressure the [Assad] regime to work seriously towards a political resolution to this conflict or face continued isolation and instability indefinitely in Syria.”

Satterfield insisted, however, that a stable Syria would require new leadership in Damascus with the departure of Assad and his family and called on Russia to join the international community in demanding Assad’s removal. Senator Jeanne Shaheen however, was sceptical: “I’m still not clear on how we think we’re going to get Russia to accomplish what you’ve laid out in terms of Syria.”

## By stigmatising Kurds, Erdogan’s AKP has destroyed hopes for long-term peace

**Stephen Starr**

is the author of “Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising” and has lived in Syria and Turkey since 2007.



“Young Kurds are growing up with a hatred for the state that will colour their and their children’s thoughts and relations with the authorities.”

Not too long ago, Turks and Kurds imagined a peaceful, prosperous future together. In the decade starting 2003, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had done more to permit the free expression of Kurdish identity than any other Turkish government. It had allowed the opening of Kurdish cultural centres and schools. It allowed Kurdish-language broadcasting. In so doing, the AKP government began to chip away at the status hard-line Kurdish separatist groups enjoyed among Kurds.

For most of Turkey’s Kurdish population, peace, security and job prospects were of greater importance than self-governance, at least in the short term.

Then, Ankara did something unimaginable: It sought to negotiate peace with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK.) Those negotiations, four years ago, resulted in tens of thousands of Kurdish militants withdrawing from the mountains of south-eastern Turkey. Reports claim that, while accompanying her husband during a visit to Diyarbakir for talks in 2013, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s wife, Emine, donned a traditional Kurdish scarf.

To sell the peace process to the Turkish public, Turkey’s then-minister for the economy, Numan Kurtulmus, claimed the decades-long Kurdish war had cost the country \$1.2 trillion. If not for the money the state had spent battling separatists, the minister said, every family in Turkey “would have had a free house and a car... or we could have added 17,000 kilometres of roads.”

Clearly, the narrative being pushed was the positive implications of ending the war.

However, after the Kurdish-rooted Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) entered parliament in June 2015, hopes for peace have gone up in flames. Hundreds of thousands have been made homeless by the Turkish military’s assaults on predominantly Kurdish towns and cities in the south-east. Kurdish leaders and mayors have been fired and imprisoned. Kurds are again being treated

as outcasts in a country that is supposed to be theirs.

This is the doleful context of the January 4 announcement by Selahattin Demirtas, the jailed HDP co-chairman once referred to as “Turkey’s Obama.” He said he would not stand for re-election as party leader next month. Demirtas faces charges of leading a “terrorist organisation,” meaning he faces hundreds of years in jail if convicted.

It would be a pity if Demirtas, a centrist who has repeatedly called on the PKK to lay down arms, is forced from the political scene. With him would go the last great hopes for long-term reconciliation between the Turkish state and its 15 million Kurds. Clearly, by

targeting Kurdish political leaders and civilians, the AKP has decided to forgo peace in Turkey for the next several decades. The conflict

has coloured life across Turkey for nearly 40 years. Both national and local economies in the south-east have suffered from the violence. Economists Firat Bilgel and Burhan Can Karahasan wrote in a London School of Economics blog post in September 2016: “The economic costs of separatist terrorism spread beyond the borders of eastern Turkey.”

“While according to some estimates the region could have enjoyed around 7% higher GDP per capita, Turkey as a nation could have experienced a 14% higher GDP per capita, which translates into an increase in per capita income of \$1,600,” they added.

From the late 1970s, tens of thousands of civilians and service personnel have lost their lives in the conflict. Atrocities are etched into the collective memories of families on both sides. This has led to a simmering resentment, one that burns within people from eastern Thrace to Hakkari in the far south-east.

For the Kurds, recent developments have been particularly dispiriting. At the height of 2013’s peace negotiations, the Kurds had been weighing the pros and cons of distancing themselves from the separatist movement and the violence it engendered. Now, their trust in Ankara has evaporated.

The long-term effects of the government’s stigmatising of Kurds will be to erase the prospect of peace for at least another two decades. Young Kurds are growing up with a hatred for the state that will colour their and their children’s thoughts and relations with the authorities. It did not have to be this way.



Old grudges. A demonstrator holds a placard reading “Turkey terrorist!” during a protest in Paris, on January 6. (AFP)

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