



# CHANGES IN THE US PRESENCE AND OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**hrough three successive White House administrations, the US linked its presence in Syria to the war on terrorism, then represented by ISIS, which began in Iraq and then spread to Syria. During the era of Barack Obama, in the sec-

ond half of 2014, Washington began forming an international coalition to fight ISIS. The military operation of the international coalition continued until the end of March 2019, the month in which ISIS was geographically defeated after Donald Trump's administration moved into the White House in about twenty-six months.

On March 23, 2019, the official spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that the SDF, in coordination and with direct support from US-led international coalition forces, had completely eliminated ISIS in northeastern Syria, six months after the start of a new military operation targeting the area of Baghouz in Deir Ezzor province, which was the last stronghold of ISIS in Syria. After the direct fighting with ISIS ended, there was talk of the Trump administration's intention to withdraw US forces from Syria.

### **TRUMP'S DECISION.... WITHDRAW OR REPOSITIONING?**

In October 2019, US forces began withdrawing, but not from Syria, but from the eastern areas of al-Hasakah governorate. At that point, Trump decided to officially begin the withdrawal, tweeting at the time, "It's time to withdraw from the ridiculous endless wars," while Kino Gabriel, the YPG/SDF representative, called this American move a "stab in the back." The US forces abandoned military facilities in the northeast regions

of Aleppo province (Ayn Arab and Manbij) in addition to military facilities in al-Raqqa province, which were located in the north near the Turkish border, the city of Raqqa, and in al-Tabqa airbase. At that time, US forces were stationed at more than 13 points in al-Raqqa province and northwestern Aleppo province, but the most prominent withdrawal of US forces was from 9 bases that were considered the most prominent at that time according to the following criteria:

1. The size of the military base in terms of its area and the number of facilities within it.
2. The strength/capability of the defensive systems of these bases.
3. The classification of the base in terms of air power (airfields for combat aircraft - helipads for military helicopters).
4. The main objective of the base establishment (Air logistic support - Ground logistic support - Defense base - Signals and network bases).

| Base Known Name | Province | Ground Forces | Runway | Helipad | Defense System | Signal Base | Current Situation |
|-----------------|----------|---------------|--------|---------|----------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Tabqa Base      | Raqqa    | Yes           | Yes    | Yes     | Yes            | No          | Russian Presence  |
| Tal-Samn Base   | Raqqa    | Yes           | No     | No      | No             | Yes         | Russian Presence  |
| Brigade 93      | Raqqa    | Yes           | No     | Yes     | Yes            | No          | Russian Presence  |
| Ayn Issa School | Raqqa    | Yes           | No     | No      | No             | Yes         | Empty             |
| Sirin Base      | Aleppo   | Yes           | Yes    | Yes     | Yes            | No          | Russian Presence  |
| Sabit Base      | Aleppo   | Yes           | No     | No      | Yes            | No          | Empty             |
| Ghassaniya Base | Aleppo   | Yes           | No     | No      | No             | Yes         | Russian Presence  |
| Nuaimiya        | Aleppo   | Yes           | No     | Yes     | No             | No          | Russian Presence  |

However, during 2020/2021, it became clear that Trump's decision was not a withdrawal but a repositioning, as forces were re-deployed from al-Raqqa and Aleppo to key bases in al-Hasakah and Deir Ezzor province. In 2021, under the new US administration, many US bases were improved in al-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces, and underwent the following changes:

1. Increasing the area of the military base and securing the surrounding area with trenches.
2. Improved air and ground defenses.
3. Establishment of runways for military and cargo aircraft.

Currently, US forces are stationed at 13 military points in both of al-Hasakah and Deir Ezzor provinces (7 in Deir Ezzor and 6 in al-Hasakah), but as mentioned earlier, the US command center USE in northeastern Syria has upgraded and expanded specific bases, which were a total of 6, those bases were chosen in line with the new US map of interests and priorities in Syria (2 in Deir Ezzor and 4 in al-Hasakah).

The following table shows the 6 main bases in al-Hasakah and Deir Ezzor for which the US has decided to expand and improve its military and logistical capabilities during 2021:

## Changes in the US presence and objectives in Syria

| Base Known Name   | Province   | Size Increase | Size Increase Ratio | New Runway | Runway Improvement | Defense Improvements | HQ/OR | Oil/Gas |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------|---------|
| Shadadi Base      | Hasakah    | Yes           | 89%                 | Yes        | -                  | Yes                  | Yes   | No      |
| Rumelan Base      | Hasakah    | Yes           | 54%                 | -          | Yes                | Yes                  | Yes   | Yes     |
| Tall Baydar Base  | Hasakah    | Yes           | 37%                 | -          | Yes                | Yes                  | Yes   | No      |
| Qulayb Base       | Hasakah    | Yes           | 65%                 | -          | Yes                | Yes                  | No    | No      |
| Omar Filed Base   | Deir Ezzor | Yes           | 29%                 | No         | -                  | Yes                  | No    | Yes     |
| Koniko Filed Base | Deir Ezzor | Yes           | 31%                 | No         | -                  | Yes                  | No    | Yes     |

The table above shows that the withdrawal of US forces from their positions in December 2019 was not for a complete withdrawal from Syria, but was due to a change in the map of US priorities in northeastern Syria. Therefore, the US began improving some bases within the new geographical area that aligned with their new priorities in Syria, the number of these bases as mentioned above, was six.

In addition to the new US priorities behind improving the 6 bases, there was another trigger for these improvements that took place in some of these bases. A clear example is the improvement of the defense systems in both the al-Omar and Koniko bases, which was triggered by a mid-2021 regime attack by Iran-backed militias.

From all of the above, we can deduce that the Americans do not currently intend to withdraw their forces from northeastern Syria, but rather to define and focus their efforts on specific fronts to achieve an entirely new list of objectives:

1. Eliminate ISIS cells and dismantle their networks within YPG/SDF-held areas.
2. Prevent Iran from using its security tools to expand in northeastern Syria, especially Deir Ezzor.
3. Prevent Iran from using its soft power method/tactics to expand in northeastern Syria.
4. Prevent Russia from expanding further in northeastern Syria, and block Russian attempts to create some sort of military cooperation between the YPG/SDF and Russia/regime.
5. Monitor oil production in YPG/SDF-held areas and stop smuggling and selling oil from the YPG/SDF to the regime.

Finally, and after explaining the US military presence changes between 2019 and 2021, it is important to talk about how the main Russian plans for dealing with the new US set of tactics in northeastern Syria:



A brief note on Russian military movements in the north-east between 2019 and 2021:

1. In the first quarter of 2020, the Russian military established military bases on 9 old US bases without making any improvements or expansions.
2. In October 2021, the Russians began a limited reconstruction of several military sites in al-Raqqa and northeastern Aleppo provinces, the most important were al-Tabqa air base and Sirin air base, where the Russians recently chose to deploy the S-300 defense system on al-Tabqa and expand the runway in Sirin, aiming to draw set the main border of their area of interest there.
3. The Russian military presence in the southern province of al-Raqqa, the northeastern province of Aleppo, and the southwestern province of al-Hasakah occurred only after the withdrawal of US forces from these areas in December 2019.
4. Russia was and continues to be fully aware that the US will not allow it to expand its military and even administrative presence and influence

Russia was and is fully aware that the US will not allow it to expand its military and even administrative presence and influence in northeastern Syria in a way that could negatively affect key new US objectives in the region.





The leaders of the USA and Russia discussed the Syria issue in Geneva.

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In 2021/2020, there were several incidents involving Russian and US forces. These incidents were solid evidence that the US still has control over northeastern Syria, but only in a specific area, as the following examples show:

In early 2020, a US military convoy intercepted a Russian convoy consisting of six armored vehicles on the M-4 road in the southeastern city of al-Qamishli. In October 2021, US forces assisted and protected residents of the town of al-Jeneina in Deir Ezzor when they demonstrated and prevented a Russian military convoy from passing through the town on its way to Raqqa. In the first week of November 2021, US forces prevented Russian forces from holding

a joint military maneuver with regime forces in southern Tal Tamr after the Russians conducted a similar military maneuver near Ayn Issa in Raqqa province. On November 19, 2021, US forces assisted and protected residents of the town of al-Salihyah in Deir Ezzor while they demonstrated and prevented a Russian military convoy from entering the town. The Russian forces did not need to use the roads inside the city, and what the Russians did is more of a PR-stunt at a time when the regime's media is talking about the beginning of a safety net for all civilians working with the YPG/SDF in Deir Ezzor.

## **BIDEN ERA.... WHAT NEXT FOR THE US IN SYRIA?**

As mentioned earlier, with the new US administration taking office in the White House, a series of changes in the transformation of the remaining US bases in Syria has begun.

In parallel, the new US administration has asserted on more than one occasion that the US partnership with the YPG/SDF is still in place, so US forces will remain in Syria. One such statement was that of Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, who said: "Cooperation with the SDF has not changed, as the US mission in Syria based solely on the threat posed by ISIS has not changed."

In the first half of 2021, there were also several official US statements defining the Biden administration's goals in Syria as three:

1. Prevent the return of ISIS activity and by eliminating its hidden cells.
2. Ensure that humanitarian aid continues to reach Syria.
3. Maintaining the ceasefire agreements between the YPG/SDF and the SNA.

Comparing the announced US objectives with the developments regarding the US military influence and areas of interest in Syria, can limit or define the current US approach in Syria, which is based on pacifying and freezing the conflict, and reducing the US diplomatic and military investment in Syria (and do so in very

small increments), through the continuation of a minimal military presence (limited only to certain areas) and the continuation of humanitarian assistance to the needs of the Syrian people inside Syria and in oppressed countries. The US government is using this approach to achieve these goals, not by tightening sanctions on the Syrian regime, as was Trump's policy, but by easing sanctions and using them as a catalyst in a gradual policy, e.g. In exchange, the US raises the barriers to economic and early recovery, in return, Russia/regime will not escalate the conflict and will maintain the existing control map throughout Syria.

### **HOW HAS RUSSIA REACTED TO THE NEW AMERICAN TACTICS IN NORTH-EASTERN SYRIA?**

The second half of 2021 witnessed new Russian military movements in many areas of northeastern Syria from which US forces had withdrawn during 2019, the Russians were aiming to impose a new reality of control on the ground that would force America to accept it at some stage. The year 2021 also witnessed a noticeable increase in Russian military maneuvers

Russia is aiming to impose a new reality of control on the ground that would force the US to accept it. The year 2021 witnessed a noticeable increase in Russian military maneuvers along the M-4 road in the area between al-Raqqah and al-Hasakah.

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along the M-4 road in the area between al-Raqqah and al-Hasakah governorates. Russia's military movements in these locations are intended to send messages to Turkey about the Russian military's spheres of influence and spread along the M-4 road in both al-Hasakah and al-Raqqah. And it was clear that the Russian message is aimed at reducing the chances of a Turkish military operation in these areas against the YPG/SDF. The Russians realize that any new Turkish progress in northeastern Syria will lead to a series of developments at the local level in Syria in favor of the Turkish side, which Russia suffers from because of Turkey's setting new conditions on the negotiating table between it and Russia and not necessarily in the Syrian file.

### **NEW AMERICAN PRIORITIES IN SYRIA AND IRAN**

The Deir Ezzor governorate in eastern Syria is considered one of the most important strongholds of Iranian control and its militias. The towns of al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal are the most prominent areas where they spread out. They are home to the headquarters of the IRGC, the headquarters of foreign and local militias loyal to Iran, and a limited number

of Russian forces, as well as an Iranian cultural center and other Iranian soft assets. Since late 2017, Iran has consolidated its control in the Deir Ezzor governorate, either through military and security means or through the use of its soft assets. With the end of 2021, it is easy to say that Biden's government has failed to control Iranian movements in the region, despite conducting several attacks on facilities controlled by Iranian militias in the region.

American failure is explained by the fact that Iranian militias stationed on the southern side of the Euphrates repeatedly attacked American or YPG/SDF facilities. The last of these attacks occurred in early 2022, coinciding with the passage of a year since the assassination of Qassim Soleimani by US forces. Iran is not seeking a military objective, but rather to increase its sabotage activities in YPG/SDF areas by using its soft-tools across the region to impose an internal threat on US forces in northeastern Syria.

In summary, at the end of 2021, we do not need to analyze the strategies of all international actors in northeastern Syria to conclude that the fate of the northeastern regions of Syria is unclear at the beginning of 2022, and there is no in-



dication of the fate of these areas, especially in light of the new American positioning and the increase in Turkish military buildup. And Turkey's constant messages to take military action against the YPG/SDF, as well as Rus-

sian advances along the M-4 road and lines of contact with the YPG/SDF in Deir Ezzor in the hope of creating a Russian presence, even if it is limited to the YPG/SDF areas in Deir Ezzor.

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