

Trump pulling all U.S. troops from Syria, declaring IS defeat

By **LOLITA C. BALDOR,**
ROBERT BURNS AND
MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is pulling all 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria, officials announced Wednesday as the president suddenly declared victory over the Islamic State, contradicting his own experts’ assessments and sparking surprise and outrage from his party’s lawmakers who called his action rash and dangerous.

The U.S. began airstrikes in Syria in 2014, and ground troops moved in the following year to battle the Islamic State, or ISIS, and train Syrian rebels in a country torn apart by civil war. Trump abruptly declared their mission accomplished in a tweet.

“We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency,” he said as Vice President Mike Pence met with top leaders at the Pentagon. U.S. officials said many details of the troop withdrawal had not yet been finalized, but they expect American forces to be out by mid-January.

Later Wednesday, Trump posted a video on Twitter in which he said is “heart-breaking” to have to write letters and make calls to the



Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, rushes to the office of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., at day’s end on Capitol Hill in Washington on Wednesday.

loved ones of those killed in battle.

“Now it’s time for our troops to come back home,” he said.

A senior administration official, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity, said Trump made the decision based on his belief that U.S. troops have no role in Syria beyond combatting Islamic State, whose fighters are now believed to hold about 1 percent of the territory they did at the peak of their power.

The president informed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of his decision in a telephone call, the official said. Turkey has recently warned that it would launch combat operations across its southern border into northeastern Syria against Kurdish forces who have been allied with the U.S. in the fight against the Islamic State.

Trump’s declaration of victory was far from unanimous, and officials said U.S. defense and military lead-

ers were trying to dissuade him from ordering the withdrawal right up until the last minute. His decision immediately triggered demands from Congress — including leading Republicans — for more information and a formal briefing on the matter. Sen. Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, just returned from Afghanistan, said he was meeting with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis late in the day.

Graham, typically a Trump backer, said he was

“blindsided” by the report and called the decision “a disaster in the making.” He said, “The biggest winners in this are ISIS and Iran.”

The decision will fulfill Trump’s long-stated goal of bringing troops home from Syria, but military leaders have pushed back for months, arguing that the Islamic State group remains a threat and could regroup in Syria’s long-running civil war. U.S. policy has been to keep troops in place until the extremists are eradicated.

The senior administration official said American forces would still work with allies to fight the Islamic State or other extremists in the country but gave no details on what that might entail.

Another official said it still is not clear to defense leaders whether U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State insurgents will continue in Syria after the American troops leave. U.S. military officials worry that American-backed Kurdish troops will be targeted by Turkey and the Syrian government, leaving no ally on the ground to help direct the strikes.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who remains concerned about Iranian efforts in the area, reacted in noncommittal fashion after talking with

Trump by telephone.

“This is, of course, an American decision,” he said. No matter what, he said, “we will safeguard the security of Israel and protect ourselves from this arena.”

Leading Republican senators reacted with displeasure to the news.

Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida said the withdrawal would be a “grave error” and that Kurdish fighters will stop fighting the Islamic State when they must confront Turkish troops crossing the border into Syria.

“This is a bad idea because it goes against the fight against ISIS and potentially helps ISIS,” he said, warning it could trigger a broader conflict in the region.

Just last week, the U.S. special envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk, said U.S. troops would remain in Syria even after the Islamic State was driven from its strongholds.

“I think it’s fair to say Americans will remain on the ground after the physical defeat of the caliphate, until we have the pieces in place to ensure that that defeat is enduring,” McGurk told reporters on Dec. 11. “Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished. Defeating a physical caliphate is one phase of a much longer-term campaign.”

Federal Reserve lifts rates for 4th time this year but sees fewer hikes

By **MARTIN CRUTSINGER**
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve raised its key interest rate Wednesday for the fourth time this year to reflect the U.S. economy’s continued strength, but signaled that it expects to slow its rate hikes next year.

Despite the forecast for fewer hikes, investors sent stocks plunging once Chairman Jerome Powell began a news conference, apparently disappointed that Powell

didn’t go further to signal a slowdown in rate increases.

Wednesday’s quarter-point increase, to a range of 2.25 percent to 2.50 percent, lifted the Fed’s benchmark rate to its highest point since 2008. It will mean higher borrowing costs for many consumers and businesses.

The Fed’s move came despite President Donald Trump’s attacks in recent weeks on its rate hikes and on Powell personally. The



Powell

president has complained that the moves are threatening the economy. At a news conference after the Fed’s announcement, Powell said Trump’s tweets and statements would have no bearing on the central bank’s policymaking.

“Nothing will deter us from doing what we think is the right thing to do,” Powell said.

The statement the Fed issued Wednesday after its

latest policy meeting said that only “some” further gradual rate increases are likely; previously, it spoke simply of “further gradual increases.” And its new forecast projects two rate hikes next year, down from three the Fed had predicted in September.

U.S. stocks had been up sharply before the Fed’s announcement, but the Dow Jones Industrial Aver-

age closed down about 352 points. Bond prices surged, though, sending yields lower.

Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton, said the Fed projected that it is prepared to be flexible in deciding on future hikes but the market had wanted even more assurances that the central bank is ready to hit the pause button.

“Much of that (Fed) flexibility was lost in translation for financial markets because the fed remains optimistic about growth,” Swonk said.

The central bank has raised rates with steady regularity as the U.S. economy has strengthened. Wednesday’s was the Fed’s ninth hike since it began gradually tightening credit three years ago.

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