

U.S. starts withdrawing supplies, but not troops, from Syria

By **ROBERT BURNS**
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WASHINGTON — The U.S. military said Friday it has started pulling equipment, but not troops, out of Syria as a first step in meeting President Donald Trump's demand for a complete military withdrawal. The announcement fueled concern about how quickly the U.S. will abandon its Kurdish allies, amid contradictory statements recently by administration officials on an exit timetable.

The withdrawal began with shipments of military equipment, U.S. defense officials said. But in coming weeks, the contingent of about 2,000 troops is expected to depart even as the White House vows to keep pressure on the Islamic State group. Once the troops are gone, the U.S. will have ended three years of organizing, arming, advising and providing air cover for Syrian, Kurdish and Arab fighters in an open-ended campaign devised by the Obama administration to deal the IS group a lasting defeat.

Uncertainty over the timing and terms of the Syria pullout have raised questions about the Trump administration's broader strategy for fighting Islamic extremism, including Trump's stated intention to reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan this summer.

U.S. airstrikes against IS in Syria began in September 2014, and ground troops moved in the following year in small numbers.

The U.S. military has a limited network of bases inside Syria. Troops work mostly out of small camps in remote parts of the country's northeast. Also, U.S. troops are among 200 to 300 coalition troops at a garrison in southern Syria known as al-Tanf, where they train and accompany local Syrian opposition forces on patrols



In this April 4, 2018, file photo, a U.S. soldier sits on an armored vehicle behind a sand barrier at a newly installed position near the front line between the U.S.-backed Syrian Manbij Military Council and the Turkish-backed fighters in Manbij, north Syria.

to counter the IS group. Al-Tanf is on a vital road linking Iranian-backed forces from Tehran all the way to southern Lebanon — and Israel's doorstep.

Trump's decision to leave Syria, which he initially said would be rapid but later slowed down, shocked U.S. allies and angered the Kurds in Syria, who are vulnerable to attack by Turkey. It also prompted the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and drew criticism in Congress. Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, called the decision a "betrayal of our Kurdish partners."

The U.S. military command in Baghdad, which is managing the counter-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria, said Friday that it "has begun the process of our deliberate withdrawal from Syria," adding that, for security reasons, it would not reveal timetables, locations or troop movements. Other U.S. officials later made clear that the pullout did not yet include troops.

The withdrawal plan,

whose details are classified, includes bringing hundreds of additional troops into Syria temporarily to facilitate the pullout. These include troops to provide extra security for those who are preparing to leave. The full withdrawal is expected to take several months.

The USS Kearsarge amphibious assault ship is now in the region and could provide troops and equipment to support the withdrawal.

U.S. troops are still working with a partner known as the Syrian Democratic Forces to stamp out the last IS holdouts in the Middle Euphrates River Valley near the Iraqi border. Trump has asserted that the IS group in Syria is defeated, but others have said a continued U.S. military presence is necessary to prevent a resurgence of the group. Two weeks before Trump announced he was ordering a pullout, Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the U.S. still had a long way to go in training local Syrian forces to stabilize areas ridden of the IS group. He said it

would take 35,000 to 40,000 local forces in northeastern Syria to maintain security, but only about 20 percent had been trained.

Another complication is the fate of hundreds of foreign IS fighters being held in Syria. The U.S. doesn't want these prisoners to be released once U.S. forces are gone, since they could rejoin the militant cause in Syria or elsewhere.

There has been confusion over plans to implement Trump's pullout order amid threats from Turkey to attack the Kurdish fighters, who are seen by Ankara as terrorists because of their ties to insurgents within Turkey.

On a visit to Turkish troops stationed near the Syrian border Friday, Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, reiterated that Ankara is "determined" to fight Kurdish militias it considers terrorists and said military preparations were ongoing.

"When the time and place comes, the terrorists here will also be buried in the ditches and trenches they have dug," he said.



In this Nov. 6, 2018, file photo, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, greets supporters in Honolulu.

Democratic Hawaii Rep. Gabbard running for president in 2020

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii has announced that she is running for president in 2020.

Gabbard said in a CNN interview slated to air Saturday night that she will be formally announcing her candidacy within the next week.

The 37-year-old Iraq War veteran is the first Hindu elected to Congress and the first member born in the U.S. territory of American Samoa. She has visited early primary and caucus states New Hampshire and Iowa in recent months and has written a memoir that's due to be published in May.

Gabbard is joining what is expected to be a crowded Democratic field. Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts has already formed an exploratory committee and is moving quickly with trips across early primary states. California Sen. Kamala Harris, New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders are all weighing their own presidential bids and are expected to announce decisions in the upcoming weeks. Former Obama administration housing chief Julian Castro plans to announce his run for the presidency on Saturday.

Gabbard's run would not be without controversy. In 2016, she alarmed fellow

Democrats when she met with Donald Trump during his transition to president and later when she took a secret trip to Syria and met with President Bashar Assad, who has been accused of war crimes and genocide. She questioned whether he was responsible for a chemical attack on civilians that killed dozens and led the U.S. to attack a Syrian air base.

She said she doesn't regret the trip and considers it important to meet with adversaries if "you are serious about pursuing peace." She also noted that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was based on faulty intelligence and said that she wanted to understand the evidence of the Syria attack.

Gabbard was one of the most prominent lawmakers to back Sanders over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. Her endorsement came in dramatic fashion, with her resigning as a vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee to express her support.

Asked last year whether she would still consider running if Sanders ran, Gabbard said Sanders is a friend and she didn't know what his plans were.

"I'm thinking through how I can best be of service and I'll make my decision based on that," she said.

Governor: No sign of security crisis at border with Mexico

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said she saw no immediate evidence Friday at the U.S. border with Mexico of the security crisis described by President Donald Trump, as she pressed U.S. officials there for more information about conditions inside a short-term detention facility for immigrants.

Lujan Grisham visited the border community of Sunland Park and the Santa Teresa port of entry on a fact-finding mission before making further decisions about the ongoing deployment of New Mexico National Guard troops to reinforce border security.

She was briefed by the National Guard and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, but she asked for more extensive information, according to governor's office spokesman Tripp Stelnicki.

"I wanted to see the situation for myself," said Lujan Grisham, relaying her impressions through a series of Twitter posts. "I still have questions, and I'm going to work through the data I've requested, so the decisions we make about the issues at our border are evidence-based, not political."

The governor repeatedly has expressed skepticism about Trump's portrayal of immigration and border security situations amid the stand-off over federal funding for a border wall.

That's a sharp shift in outlook from the preceding governor of New Mexico, Republican Susana Martinez, who deployed nearly 200 troops to the border in April and this week defended Trump's call for a border wall as part of a deal to end the partial government shutdown.

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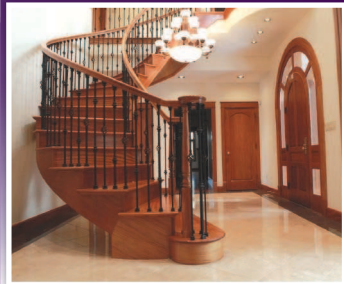
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