

# How Syria's collapse imperils US interests



US Army soldiers and Syrian forces enter a CH-47 Chinook at the al-Tanf garrison in Syria in February 2025.

● FRED BROWN/US ARMY

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## OPINION

The United States is leaving Syria, not with the thunder of collapsing Saigon embassies or Black Hawk Down spectacles, but through a quiet, undignified fade into irrelevance. Three of America's eight military bases in northeastern Syria are closing. US troop levels are being halved — no declaration, no defined endgame, no accountability. What looks like prudent disengagement from a peripheral war is, in reality, the latest episode of America's strategic abdication. The cost? Not just the abandonment of allies but the empowerment of adversaries — and a region inching toward chaos.

This is not a pivot; it's a pattern. Like Afghanistan before it, Syria is another case study of America's inability to match tactical success with strategic resolve. The illusion that a battlefield victory — defeating the ISIS in territorial terms — would allow for a clean withdrawal has collapsed under the weight of Middle Eastern geopolitics. And while Washington looks away, the region is being reordered by powers with clearer aims and fewer scruples.

**Legacy of incoherence**

It's worth recalling that the US never had a grand strategy in Syria. The initial aim was modest: degrade ISIS and prevent its resurgence. And in 2019, the ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate was destroyed. But even then, the critical question remained unanswered: what comes after? That silence, maintained across administrations, now defines America's presence in Syria. The Biden administration, much like Trump's before it, has drifted — supporting the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with minimal commitment, while avoiding a broader political or diplomatic engagement. This vacuum has left the US presence not as a stabilizing anchor, but as an

exposed, shrinking outpost with no political backing at home and even less deterrent credibility abroad.

In the meantime, Syria has changed. The civil war's original dynamics are unrecognizable. Bashar al-Assad, once seen in the West as the irredeemable villain of the conflict, has been overtaken in parts of the country by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist outfitted with transnational ambitions. What was once a contest between a brutal secular regime and various opposition factions has devolved into an ungoverned zone of extremists, shifting alliances, and regional interference.

**Cost of strategic illusions**

Washington's rationale for withdrawal is politically understandable. The American public is exhausted by the "forever wars". Syria, with its complex tribal and sectarian tapestry, holds no obvious economic or political reward. But geopolitics is never a matter of public sentiment, it's a matter of hard realities. And the reality is this; the US is not exiting a war; it is conceding a geopolitical space. That space will not remain empty. Already, Russia, Iran, and Turkey are maneuvering to shape

post-American Syria. Moscow, with its airpower and regional diplomacy, is entrenching its military and political presence. Iran, through its backed Shia groups and networks, is threading together its long-sought land corridor to the Mediterranean. Turkey, under the guise of counterterrorism, is targeting Kurdish territories and expanding its influence in northern Syria. And now, radical factions are exploiting the uncertainty, aiming to recapture territory and legitimacy. For Washington to pretend this outcome doesn't matter is not merely naïve, it's dangerous. Syria is not just another Middle Eastern mess. It sits at the intersection of regional and global power struggles. It is a testing ground for how far Russia and Iran can go in defying the West. It is a pressure point on NATO's southern flank. And most critically, it is the holding pen for thousands of ISIS fighters who remain in makeshift prisons, watched over by an increasingly abandoned and vulnerable Kurdish force.

**Betraying Kurds — again**

The betrayal of the SDF is a stain on American credibility. These forces, largely Kurdish, carried the brunt of the fight against ISIS. They did so without air power,

armored divisions, or global diplomatic backing. They fought street by street, died by the thousands, and asked only for recognition and support. Now, they are being left to face Turkish bombardment, regime hostility, and radical revenge.

This isn't just a moral failing — it's a strategic blunder. Allies around the world take note of how America treats its partners. The message from Syria is loud and clear: the US will use you, then abandon you. In the corridors of Taipei, Kyiv, and Tbilisi, this message echoes with alarming resonance.

**Strategic vacuum, global consequences**

Those who argue that Syria is not worth the cost are missing the forest for the trees. The US presence there is not about dominating Damascus or building a new democracy. It's about maintaining a foothold in a region increasingly shaped by hostile powers. It's about preventing the resurgence of ISIS before it threatens the world.

More broadly, it's about signaling that the United States still has the will and capacity to shape global events. In geopolitics, perception is often as important as power. America's quiet retreat signals

something else entirely: fatigue, indecision, and strategic incoherence.

**What real strategy looks like**

The choice is not between endless war and total withdrawal. There is a middle ground — one grounded in realism, responsibility, and resolve.

The US withdrawal from Syria also disrupts the already fragile balance among regional non-state actors who have long operated in the shadow of major powers. With America's deterrent role vanishing, groups such as Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq may find new strategic corridors to operate across borders with greater impunity. Israel is compelled to conduct more pre-emptive operations without the cushion of American coordination in the region.

Gulf monarchies, sensing a power vacuum and Washington's retreat from its traditional guarantor role, may double down on proxy investments, exacerbating sectarian divides. Moreover, China's silent but steady diplomatic courtship could signal an emerging alignment that adds an Eurasian layer to Syria's crisis. The withdrawal not only weakens US leverage — it accelerates the transformation of Syria into a hub where multipolar competition, extremist resurgence, and regional insecurity converge unchecked.

**Verdict of history**

Syria is not just another distant conflict. It is a mirror of America's foreign policy choices, its resolve, and its values. A country that allows radical networks to reclaim territory, that surrenders its alliances to Turkish drones and Russian maneuvering, is not leading the world — it is yielding it. The world is watching. Ukraine, Taiwan, and others are studying at this moment closely. If Washington cannot hold the line in Syria, what lines will it hold anywhere? The answer, increasingly, is none.

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A US military convoy is seen passing by in northeastern Syria in January 2025.

● BERNAT ARMANGUE/AP

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