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Post-Daesh Syria: U.S. and Training Syrian Opposition

Tarek Diab

At the end of July 2017, media reports said that U.S. President Donald Trump decided to end the CIA's covert program to arm and train Syrian opposition. Trump reportedly said his decision came as a result of the "massive, dangerous, and wasteful payments to the Syrian rebels".

Some observers say that this decision did not bring about a U.S. desire to improve relations with Russia, as Trump approved on August 2 a package of new sanctions imposed by the U.S. Congress on Russia. Others say the decision probably was due to Trump's conviction that this program was a failure, as it was only a U.S. pressure card that was not intended to topple Assad. However, the decision came as a prelude to more steps in the future within a broader deal with the Russian side to divide the spheres of influence in Syria, carry on with the U.S. constant position from the Syrian revolution, especially after the emergence of Daesh - which has given priority to fighting Daesh rather than seeking to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad. So, there is nothing new in the general U.S. stance towards the Syrian crisis after Trump's decision. Also, the United States no longer needs the policy of supporting the Syrian opposition militarily, in light of its direct military intervention with Russian acquiescence, which led to the retreat of the opposition forces, and the advance of the regime's forces.

Decision implications

In view of the timing of Trump's decision, there are two important implications:

First: The decision coincided with an imminent liberation of Al-Raqqa from Daesh. Therefore, the United States is sending a message that it is not against the idea that Bashar Al-Assad could remain in power for a period of time, even after the expulsion of Daesh completely from Syria. This means that the rebels should prepare themselves to accept the presence of Bashar Assad in power within the post-Daesh arrangements in Syria with U.S. approval.

Second: The decision came after Trump had almost passed the congressional investigation on his ties to Russia and the effect of this on the U.S. presidential



election, without being clearly condemned, especially after the testimony of the former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), James Comey, on June 8. Although Comey referred to Trump's relationship with Russia, yet, did not clearly confirm Russia's intervention in the U.S. presidential election. In fact, Trump could not have ended the CIA program if there had been a possibility to be impeached for his ties to Russia, as such a decision would have been considered an evidence that Trump had an illegal relationship with Russia.

Decision Background

We can read Trump's decision within one of the two following tracks:

First: The decision was made independently by the United States, with no bargaining or negotiation with the Russian side on arrangements in Syria. In this case, the decision would be a major strategic mistake if there was no alternative to this support; as the U.S. would then lose a very important pressure card against the Russians and Iranians.

Second: The decision was made within the framework of a deal between the U.S. and Russia. In this case, the decision could be viewed as a step to pave the way for post-Daesh arrangements on dividing the Syrian territory into U.S. and Russian areas of influence.

In fact, the timing of Trump's decision coincided with three changes on the ground that are greatly in favor of the second track:

- The meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump on July 7 on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Germany.
- The imminent elimination of Daesh in Raqqa and accordingly from all Syria.
- The cease-fire agreement in the South of Syria, sponsored by the U.S., Russia, and Jordan on July 7, which came as a result of the latest meeting between Putin and Trump.

Therefore, it is not ruled out that Trump's decision to suspend support to the Syrian opposition was also a result of the Putin-Trump meeting.



If this decision is viewed in the context of greater understandings, and a more comprehensive deal between the U.S. and Russia, then we can point to several things:

1- The United States is sending a message to the Russian side, that it may turn a blind eye to the issue of Bashar al-Assad's departure in return for Russia's disengagement from Iran on the Syrian file. That is, although this decision is politically in favor of Bashar Al-Assad and his remaining in power, however, it comes within Trump's plan to contain the growing Iranian influence in Syria and the region. Perhaps the most likely analysis is that the cease-fire agreement in southern Syria revealed the U.S.-Russian understandings at the expense of Iran, namely, the exclusion of Iran and its allied militias, especially Hezbollah, from southern Syria.

2- The battles to liberate eastern Syria, especially Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, from Daesh will be extremely important, as more U.S.-Russian understandings may be reached at the expense of Iran. Accordingly, expulsion of Daesh from these areas would be left to the United States, so that they would become areas of U.S. influence, or at least Iran's allied militias would be removed from there.

3- The removal of the Iranian militias from the Syrian south, and the U.S. military presence there, especially in Tanaf military base (on the Jordanian-Syrian borders), could hit the Iranian project and contain its influence - if only the Russians and Americans were able to distance Iranians from eastern Syria, especially on the Iraqi-Syrian borders - as this would prevent the establishment of a road corridor from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut or the Mediterranean.

But there are two problems related to eastern Syrian:

First: The United States will have to continue its alliance with and support for the Kurds' Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) even during the post-Daesh period; because the U.S. suspension of its alliance with the Kurds of Syria would likely push them into an alliance with Russia and Iran, which would then give Iran a corridor starting from Iraq through Syria's Hasaka which is already controlled by SDF.



Second: Most of the Syrian raw materials are found in the east, especially oil and agricultural fields. Therefore, if Russia left most of the eastern regions in favor of the American influence, it would be necessary for Russians to reach a satisfactory formula with the American side on maintaining supplies of oil and agricultural crops from the east to the west, where Syria's oil refineries and textile mills are based.

4- It is not likely that a complete disengagement will occur between the alliance between Russia and Iran on the Syrian issue, at least in the foreseeable future. As Russian warplanes have control over Syria's skies, in fact, Iran and its allied militias are prevailing on the ground to a large extent. So, there is an urgent need to maintain military cooperation between the two sides. However, it is possible to create loopholes in this alliance and push Russia to give it up, as it did in the agreement in southern Syria. Thus, it is expected that Russia will seek to balance both its alliance with Iran and its understandings with the United States on cease-fire and influence-sharing.

Decision Implications

In fact, the repercussions of Trump's decision and its political implications are more effective than the decision's military repercussions on the ground. The U.S. military support to some opposition groups was not a significant qualitative support to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, but it was a limited support, intended to:

- a) Bring about a military balance and prevent achievement of a decisive military success by the regime forces,
- b) Exhaust all parties, so that the U.S. would keep a pressure card in the face of its international and regional opponents,
- c) And also to practice pressure on the opposition groups and push them to move in line with the U.S. agenda.

So, suspension of this support is not likely to lead to a qualitative change on the ground, but it could have some political repercussions on the ground. Bashar Al-Assad now realizes that he will remain in power for a period of time, even after the elimination of Daesh, with U.S. consent. At the same time, the Syrian opposition



realizes that it must accept that Bashar Assad could remain in power after the expulsion of Daesh. In fact, this decision dealt a blow to the opposition not only on the ground, but also in the corridors of negotiations; forcing them to reduce the ceiling of their demands.

We may also find Iranian-Russian differences on the Syrian soil as we approach the post-Daesh benefits and division of influence. But Russia is likely to control these differences so that it could maintain its alliance with Iran, especially as there is a Russian need for Iranian presence on the ground.

Alternative policies

Since the U.S. military support for some Syrian opposition groups was not intended to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad, but, in fact, had other objectives, what is the U.S. alternative plan to achieve its own goals in Syria?

The alternative U.S. policy is to engage in a direct military intervention in the form of tactical airstrikes that can prevent a military victory by the regime on the ground, to curtail Iran's influence, and to impose an American role in the division of spheres of influence in Syria. This policy was carried out by Trump more than once:

- a) First: On April 7, two U.S. warships in the Mediterranean launched a missile attack on the regime-controlled Shayrat airbase in Homs.
- b) Second: On May 18, the US-led coalition warplanes hit a pro-regime convoy, which was moving towards Tanaf military base on the Iraqi-Syrian-Jordanian borders.

Thus, the United States no longer needs its former policy of supporting the opposition militarily, in light of its direct military intervention with Russian acquiescence, and under its agreement with Russia on the pro-Daesh arrangements in Syria.

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