

Safe Enough to Leave, Too Dangerous to Trust: America's Syria Contradiction

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Giran Ozcan
Fellow for Kurdish Affairs

Jonah Brody
Policy Analyst

The United States withdrew from the [al-Tanf garrison](#) in eastern Syria yesterday, handing over one of its most strategic bases in the Middle East to the government in Damascus. At the same time, Washington is completing the transfer of nearly [5,000 Islamic State](#) (ISIS) prisoners from Syria to Iraq.

The administration cannot have it both ways. Either Syria is stable and capable enough to inherit critical American security responsibilities, or it is not. The contradictions in U.S. policy reveal a hasty, ill-considered withdrawal that sacrifices strategic leverage while creating new security vulnerabilities—all in service of a political imperative to leave Syria that ignores the realities on the ground.

A Base Too Important to Keep, Prisoners Too Dangerous to Leave

Al-Tanf is not just another outpost. Established in 2014 at the tri-border confluence of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, it occupies perhaps the most strategically vital position in the Middle East. Lying at the crossroads of two major threats to the United States and regional security, the garrison served as both a bulwark against ISIS and a chokepoint on Iran's land bridge to Lebanon. According to estimates, al-Tanf hosted roughly [200 troops](#)—about [one-fifth](#) of the entire U.S. presence in Syria at the time of evacuation—yet provided outsize strategic value far beyond its modest footprint.

Yet today, the Trump administration handed al-Tanf to forces led by Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa—a former al-Qaeda commander whose government has incorporated [ex-jihadists](#) into its ranks. Just two months ago, on December 13, a member of Syria's own security services—reportedly under [investigation for extremism](#)—killed two U.S. soldiers and a civilian interpreter in Palmyra.

U.S. Central Command described the withdrawal as part of a “[deliberate and conditions-based transition](#)” following ISIS’s territorial defeat in 2019, but offered no specifics on what conditions had been met. CENTCOM also assured the public that “[U.S. forces remain poised to respond to any ISIS threats](#)”—but apparently from [Jordan](#), not from the ground in Syria where those threats actually exist.

If Syria’s new government is trustworthy and capable enough to defend al-Tanf, guard the Syrian-Iraqi border, and interdict Iranian weapons shipments, then why did the United States just finish

evacuating 5,000 ISIS detainees to Iraq? Iraqi officials report that these prisoners include “[highly dangerous](#)” senior ISIS leaders and perpetrators of genocide against the Yazidis. These prisoners are not mere foot soldiers; they are the committed core of a terrorist organization that once controlled territory [the size of Great Britain](#).

The implicit message is clear: Washington evidently judged that the Syrian government, now taking [control](#) of detention facilities from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, could not be trusted to securely hold some of the world’s most dangerous jihadists. That judgment thoroughly undermines the premise of the al-Tanf handover.

The Strategic Cost of Contradiction

The administration’s contradictory approach creates several problems:

First, it squanders leverage. The Syrian government is not ready or capable of assuring the security of the country. A fact underscored by its recent attacks on the U.S. partners who fought ISIS, instead of ISIS itself. By withdrawing from al-Tanf before securing ironclad commitments from Damascus on counter-ISIS operations, interdicting Iranian weapons flows, and protecting regional partners, Washington gave away its strongest bargaining chip for free. The base was not a burden—it hosted several hundred troops and provided outsize strategic value. Now Syria’s government has both the base and no obligations to the United States.

Second, it signals unreliability to partners. Jordan, which shares a border with the al-Tanf zone, now faces increased risks from both ISIS remnants and Iranian proxies—precisely the threats al-Tanf was designed to counter. Israel watches as Iran has a new opportunity to rebuild its “land bridge” to Hezbollah. Both countries are left wondering whether American security commitments in the region are still reliable.

Third, it creates new vulnerabilities in Iraq. The ISIS prisoners are now concentrated in Iraqi facilities, making them attractive targets for jailbreaks and rescue operations. Iraq’s National Security Advisor felt compelled to assure parliament that the detainees are under “high-level security, intelligence, and judicial monitoring”—a tacit admission that the challenge is significant. Meanwhile, the security situation for ISIS family members in Syrian camps has deteriorated. At al-Hol, Syria’s largest camp holding some 24,000 suspected ISIS relatives, most foreign families have reportedly left since Damascus took control from Kurdish forces last month. Whether they escaped or were released remains unclear, but the episode is evidence that neither Damascus nor Baghdad is equipped to manage this reservoir of radicalization.

Fourth, it validates the premise that withdrawal is inevitable regardless of conditions. President Trump has long desired to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. But ISIS is not defeated; it is degraded and dispersed. Iran has not abandoned Syria; it is recalibrating after setbacks. By pulling out now, the United States is repeating the mistake of the 2011 Iraq withdrawal—declaring victory prematurely and creating the conditions for the enemy’s return.

The Logic That Doesn’t Add Up

Admiral Brad Cooper, Commander of CENTCOM, insisted that “[maintaining pressure on ISIS is essential to protecting the U.S. homeland and strengthening regional security](#).” He is right. But the United States cannot maintain pressure from over the horizon. It cannot monitor ISIS networks from Jordan. It cannot interdict Iranian weapons from across the border. And it certainly cannot rely on a government it simultaneously deems unfit to guard jihadist prisoners.

Indeed, U.S. officials [reportedly](#) told Iraqi counterparts months ago that it is “entirely likely” that if Sharaa’s government controls the ISIS prisons, detainees could escape or be released and launch new attacks on Iraq. Yet the same administration is now reportedly preparing to hand over its remaining bases in Syria “in coming days or weeks, as conditions warrant”—a timeline that suggests withdrawal, not conditions, is driving policy.

The administration appears to believe it can have its withdrawal and its security, too—that it can leave Syria while somehow retaining the capability to defeat ISIS. This is wishful thinking. The entire logic of the American presence in Syria was that proximity matters, that persistent engagement prevents terrorist resurgence, and that strategic locations like al-Tanf are force multipliers. None of that changes just because the regime in Damascus has changed leadership.

If Damascus is capable and trustworthy, then the ISIS prisoners should have stayed in Syria. If Damascus is incapable or untrustworthy, then al-Tanf should have remained under American control. The administration cannot coherently argue both positions simultaneously.

What Should Be Done

The U.S. presence in Syria is now primarily stationed at the [Qasrak base](#) in Hasakah, northeast Syria. The United States should halt any further withdrawals from Syria until it has secured verifiable commitments from Damascus on counterterrorism cooperation, Iranian weapons interdiction, and the security of remaining U.S. personnel and partners. It should condition any future handovers on demonstrated performance in countering terrorist threats in Syria, not aspirational assurances. Crucially, Washington must closely monitor the [ongoing integration](#) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into Syria’s military and ensure that SDF brigades retain their operational cohesion and command structure within the Syrian army—preserving the most effective counterterrorism force in the region.

Washington must also intensify pressure on the international community to repatriate ISIS detainees. Only [36 countries](#) have repatriated any of their nationals from Syria, while 21 have refused to act at all. Iraq’s repatriation of roughly [25,000 citizens](#)—about 80 percent of Iraqis detained in Syria—shows what political will can accomplish. The United States should bring the same diplomatic intensity to securing repatriations and burden-sharing commitments that it applies to [criminal deportation](#) agreements, reducing the long-term security risks these detained populations pose to the region.

The Trump administration wanted to leave Syria and to keep Syria secure. It cannot have it both ways. And in trying to have it both ways, it is likely to end up with neither—a weaker strategic position, a resurgent ISIS, and an emboldened Iran. The choice was never between staying forever and leaving tomorrow. It was between staying as long as necessary and leaving responsibly. Today’s contradictions suggest the administration has chosen neither.