

US plans ‘stabilizing force’ for Syria



US soldiers gather for a briefing during a combined joint patrol rehearsal in Manbij, Syria, in November 2018. (Photo: U.S. Army photo by Spc. Zoe Garbarino via AP)

WASHINGTON DC (Kurdistan24) – US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appeared before a subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee on Tuesday, and during the hearing, the subcommittee chairman, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R, South Carolina), grilled him on the Trump administration’s foreign policy objectives.

High among Graham’s priorities was the future of northeastern Syria, where the US has some 2,000 Special Forces deployed alongside the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), America’s main ally in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria.

Graham repeatedly asked Pompeo about a “stabilizing force” that would remain in Syria, east of the Euphrates River, after the bulk of US forces are withdrawn.

US officials have grappled with the problem of how to deal with that area ever since President Donald Trump’s surprise announcement in December that US troops would leave following the military defeat of the Islamic State.

Eastern Syria is strategic territory, and various parties, some hostile to the US, would step into the vacuum if US forces left abruptly. Moreover, senior US officials—including Trump himself—have repeatedly said they will ensure the protection of America’s Kurdish allies there.

The latest approach to that problem appears to be the creation of a “stabilizing force” in the territory now under the control of the SDF and coalition troops. Graham’s questions focused on understanding the nature of that force.

“The stabilizing force” in Syria will have “more Europeans and our numbers” will decrease. “Is that correct?,” Graham asked Pompeo.

“That’s the discussion that’s underway,” the Secretary replied.

Graham, who also serves on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has long been prominently concerned about the fate of the Kurds, both in Syria and in Iraq. Among other things, Graham played a key role in getting Trump to modify his original decision to withdraw all US forces from Syria.

“Do you agree,” Graham continued, as he addressed Pompeo at Tuesday’s hearing, that “a stabilizing force in northeastern Syria” will prevent Iran from “taking over the oil” there?

“It is an important part of our overall Middle East strategy,” Pompeo replied, “including our counter-Iran strategy.”

Stressing that point, Graham continued, “So containing Iran would include having a policy in Syria that would keep them from benefitting from our withdrawal?”

“That’s right,” Pompeo said, as he also affirmed that the US would maintain a contingent of troops at al-Tanf, further south on Syria’s border with Iraq, which sits astride the main highway from Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut.

By remaining in al-Tanf, the US will continue to block a route that would otherwise become a key part of the “land-bridge” to the Mediterranean that Tehran seeks.

The exchange between Graham and Pompeo over the “stabilization force” marked the first clarification of the future US posture in eastern Syria since late March, when US officials ceased to speak about a “safe zone,” but did not explain what else they had in mind.

Graham also raised the issue of US relations with Turkey, which have become particularly troubled over Ankara’s repeatedly stated intent to purchase the S-400, Russia’s most advanced air defense system.

Graham asked, “Have you told Turkey, that if they deploy the S-400, they can’t be part of the F-35 program,” America’s latest, most sophisticated jet-fighter?

“Yes,” was Pompeo’s terse, one-word reply.

Editing by Nadia Riva

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