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Syria debacle deepens crisis of Trump administration

The last significant enclave held by US-backed groups near the Syrian capital of Damascus collapsed Sunday with the agreement of two groups to evacuate and of another to submit to Russian military police acting on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad.

The fall of Eastern Ghouta, with a population estimated at 400,000 people, is the biggest debacle suffered by the US-backed Islamist groups since the Assad regime recaptured the country's largest city, Aleppo, in December 2016.

The largest rebel group in Eastern Ghouta, Jaish al-Islam, which controlled Douma, the biggest population center in the area, reached an agreement Sunday on evacuating the enclave, according to the Syrian government news service SANA. Other reports said Jaish al-Islam was still pressing for Russian military police to be introduced as a buffer force between its own fighters and Syrian army troops.

Jaish al-Islam agreed Saturday to evacuate its wounded to Idlib, in northwestern Syria, the last province in the country under the control of Islamist forces opposed to Assad. The group was in negotiations with the Assad government through Russian mediators.

Two smaller rebel groups reached a full evacuation deal with the Russian intermediaries, which called for the evacuation of 19,000 people to Idlib, including fighters from the Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham groups, their families, and residents who wished to join them.

Douma and the surrounding Eastern Ghouta area, comprising eastern suburbs of Damascus and an adjacent rural area that served as a source of food, have been under the

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control of rebel forces since 2013, but largely cut off from other groups fighting the Assad regime.

The Syrian army stepped up its siege of the enclave in February, accompanied by heavy bombing raids by Russian warplanes, and then in March began incursions that systematically broke through rebel lines and separated the insurgents into isolated pockets that were overwhelmed or starved out one by one.

The biggest breakthrough came Friday and Saturday, after rebel resistance except in Douma itself effectively collapsed. The southern and western portions of the Ghouta region were evacuated by rebel forces Saturday afternoon.

It is the comprehensive defeat of the US-backed rebels and the consolidation of the Assad regime's control over the last area from which attacks could be mounted on the capital that underlies the evident disarray in US policy in Syria.

On Thursday, President Trump told a campaign-style rally in Richfield, Ohio that US forces would "be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now." While the remark came in the context of Trump boasting about the successes of US military forces against ISIS in eastern Syria and western Iraq, his suggestion that the 2,000 US troops now in Syria could soon be withdrawn contradicted the official policy of his own administration.

In a speech delivered by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson barely two months ago, the administration publicly declared its intention to stay in Syria more or less indefinitely, not merely to ensure the final destruction of ISIS, but to achieve the longstanding goal of US imperialist policy in the country, the ouster of the Assad regime, which is allied to Iran and Russia, and its replacement by a US puppet.

Tillerson's pronouncement followed close on the release of a new US military strategy document that declared that the Pentagon was now making as its top priority, not the struggle against so-called terrorist groups, but great power conflicts, particularly with Russia and China, that could erupt into major, and even nuclear wars.

Trump fired Tillerson on March 13, and National Security Advisor General H. R. McMaster on March 22, but he proposed to replace them with even more belligerent figures, CIA Director Mike Pompeo to head the State Department, and John Bolton, ambassador to the UN under the Bush administration and a major architect of the Iraq war, to replace McMaster.

Accordingly, Trump's sudden prediction that US forces would withdraw from Syria "very soon," caused consternation at the Pentagon, the State Department, the National Security Council, and the editorial pages of pro-war publications like the *Washington Post*.

While the initial response of the military-intelligence agencies was to dismiss Trump's comment as though it was a random tweet, the remark was followed by reports revealing that the White House had put on hold some \$200 million in State Department funding for "stabilization projects" in Syria. Tillerson had announced the new spending on roads, water and sewer repairs in areas of eastern Syria captured from ISIS during a visit to the region in February.

The Associated Press reported Friday that Trump's comment about pulling out of Syria "was not a one-off," but reflected sentiments he had expressed in internal meetings with top aides for more than a month.

The corporate media has responded with a barrage of commentaries denouncing Trump's comment as a surrender to Assad and to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Assad's principal backer internationally, along with Tehran.

The *Washington Post* in particular has devoted column after column to demanding a long-term US commitment to military intervention in Syria. An Easter Sunday editorial sought to dismiss Trump's comment as "the gap between the policies pursued by President Trump's administration and what the president says when he is outside the range of a teleprompter..."

The editorial pointed to the conflict between Trump's remark and the statements of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and other top officials, while warning, "the president's words will surely encourage Russian and Iranian hopes of driving the United States out of the country, so they can entrench their military bases and political influence. That would pose a major threat to Israel and severely damage U.S. standing throughout the Middle East."

Even more inflammable was an op-ed column by Josh Rogin, a member of the newspaper's editorial board, under the remarkable headline, "In Syria, we 'took the oil.' Now Trump wants to give it to Iran." Rogin was quoting Trump's own comment about the real motive for the US war in Iraq, while pointing to US control of Syria's oil-rich eastern provinces as a key point of leverage against Assad, Putin and Iran.

While assailing Trump's comment at the Ohio rally, Rogin argued that it contradicts Trump's own commitment to tearing up the nuclear agreement with Iran and otherwise confronting Iran throughout the region, a policy that "must begin in Syria."

Congressional advocates of an all-out conflict with Iran were quick to criticize the suggested pullout from Syria. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a leading Republican war hawk, declared in an interview on Fox News Sunday that “It’d be the single worst decision the president could make.”

He continued: “If we withdraw our troops anytime soon, ISIS would come back, the war between ... Turkey and the Kurds would get out of hand, and you’d be giving Damascus to the Iranians.”