

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Nagata Explains the Consequences of a U.S. Withdrawal from Syria

Overwatch Podcast Transcript
Featuring LTG Nagata and Jennifer Cafarella



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American forces in Northern Syria have begun a “deliberate withdrawal” as Turkish-backed forces continue to deepen their invasion of areas held by the U.S. partner force, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Lieutenant General Michael Nagata (U.S. Army, retired), discusses the immediate and long-term implications of this retreat from Syria. LTG Nagata retired as the Director of Strategy at the National Counterterrorism (NCTC) after a long career in special operations.

Speaker 1:

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Jennifer Cafarella:

It is 10:15 on Sunday, October 13. My name is Jennifer Cafarella, I am the Research Director at the Institute for the Study of War, and I am joined today by Lieutenant General (Retired) Mike Nagata to discuss the evolving crisis in Northern Syria. General Nagata is a retired U.S. Army officer with a long career in special operations. He recently retired as the Director of Strategy at NCTC.

U.S. forces are withdrawing from Syria as Turkey continues to push south of the border to fight our now-former partnered force, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. This is obviously a major inflection in not only the American role in Syria but actually our wider involvement in the Middle East. Sir, what are the likely immediate consequences of this decision to withdraw?

LTG Nagata:

Thank you for the question. This has been much on my mind lately. I think the immediate consequences will also likely be the long-term consequences. Before diving into this, let me also say that my personal view is that we will be feeling the consequences of this choice for many years to come. I think this is a generational choice we have made, whether we realize it or not. But regarding the immediate consequences, there are at least three that I'm concerned about which, as I've already indicated, I believe will turn into long-term consequences.

The first one is intangible. Despite the fact it is intangible, it is strategically important, and that is the choice we have made regarding Northeastern Syria is eroding and will continue to erode America's credibility, and therefore our influence both in this region and around this region. We should expect, I think we're already seeing the evidence of, a significant loss of both credibility and influence, and I think that deterioration will continue.

The second one is much in the news these days, and I share this view. I think that our decision to depart Northeastern Syria is an unintended but very significant strategic gift to the Islamic State. I think that the Islamic State leadership will not only see our withdrawal from Syria as an opportunity for them regarding Northeastern Syria, where they still have a significant presence, but they will see this in combination with the current political violence and chaos in Iraq. For ISIS, there's no difference between Syria and Iraq. This is all what they consider to be their territory, and I think that they will see both of these things through the lens of being an enormous strategic opportunity for them to recover and to rebound, and it's not a fantasy. This is a significant opportunity for them.

And then finally, I think that any actor either in the region or around the region will have two related reactions to the choice we have made. The first one is the most obvious one, which is with the American departure from Northeastern Syria, what opportunity does that give me to strengthen my pursuit of my own goals in this part

of the world? A rather obvious example of this is Iran. As I think everybody knows, the American presence, the coalition presence in Northeastern Syria, was a hindrance to Iran's strategic investment in what some people call the Shi'a Crescent, what others just more practically call the 'land bridge' that they have successfully created from Iran through Iraq and Syria into the Mediterranean.

The coalition presence in Northern Syria induced a significant amount of friction in their ability to use this. The American departure results in much greater freedom of action for Iran. I'm only using Iran as an example, but it's a good example. I think it's a rather obvious example of an opportunity that a local actor will seek to take advantage of.

More broadly though, there's another aspect to this, and that is whether you're Iran, or Russia, or Hezbollah, or any actor in the region or around the region that is antagonistic to the United States, it's rational for these actors to view the choice we have made in Northern Syria as a possible sign of larger American weakness. Now that is something I suspect many in my government would contest – 'no, this is just a local choice for a specific reason, and it does not signal an American withdrawal from other important parts of this vital region'.

But it's rational for an actor like Iran or Russia to see this through the lens of this may be sign of a deeper rot, and I think what we will see is a variety of actors deciding to test our resilience, our resolve, and our staying power in the Levant, or in the broader Middle East, or potentially globally. Hopefully they won't be right about that, but it is utterly rational for them to decide the time has come to test the Americans in other places.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Thank you, sir. I'd like to pick up on that last point. In what location or form do you expect American adversaries might test our resolve moving forward?

LTG Nagata:

Well, predicting the future is always a chancy thing, but I think that we're most likely to see an immediate set of activities to test American activities to be in the same place that we've decided to withdraw, or at least in the same region. It could be our presence in Iraq, it could be our relationship with the Lebanese Government, it could be the relationship we have with the state of Israel. These are all inside the region.

I would not be shocked to see a malign actor's efforts to test that relationship in any of the places I've just mentioned, and there are others besides - you know, our relationship with Jordan, our relationship with the Gulf States. It wouldn't surprise me if we saw an increase in Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen as a way of testing whether or not what has happened in Syria might be evidence of a deeper reduction in American commitment elsewhere.

So, in the region is my short answer, but I think that given the fact that there are other actors around the world who dislike American activity, dislike American presence in those places where we do have either diplomatic, military, or other footprints on the ground, it has to be on the mind of virtually any adversary around the world the same question I've already stated several times. Is the presence, and the investment, and the seriousness of American activity in any part of the world now in doubt?

Again, I can easily imagine almost any American policymaker dismissing that as ludicrous or irrational, but that's from our point of view. From a potential adversary's point of view, it's completely rational to think that way.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Will the ISIS resurgence in Iraq and Syria that is likely to unfold in coming weeks threaten us here in the United States or is this primarily a regional problem?

LTG Nagata:

That's a great question. I don't think I'd characterize it that way. It will absolutely be a United States problem regardless of whether or not it constitutes an increase in the likelihood of attack inside the United States. My personal view is I don't think that this dramatically increases the likelihood of a spectacular attack inside the United States, for the very simple reason that the United States for the last nineteen years has made such an enormous investment in safeguarding the homeland. It's not perfect, but it's so much stronger than it once was.

We can never dismiss the possibility, but I don't think the decision that has just been made triggers even a sudden rise in the likelihood of a successful attack inside the United States. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be strategically worried about this. It does create a series of strategic problems for the United States that, whether we like it or not, we're going to have to care about.

One is that we already know that ISIS has reverted to an insurgency campaign in both Iraq and Syria, and they've had to do out of necessity because of the success of a military campaign in destroying the proto-state structure that they had once created. Another way of characterizing this of course, and I'm not the only one who says this, is that ISIS has reverted to its Al Qaeda in Iraq roots, you know, which was a very effective violent insurgency that almost brought down the Iraqi Government.

We have to remember that despite the successes of the coalition over the last four years, numerically, ISIS is still much larger today than AQI was in its heyday, so it is still a formidable force. And as an insurgent group now, it's much harder to combat because now it's mingled with the population. Previously, this proto-state structure that ISIS had created was mostly not intermingled with the population, so we could strike it with relative impunity. Those days are gone, so it's harder to fight, it's still very large, and it has greater freedom of action now. So what we're going to see is we're going to see violence, and not only in places like Syria and Iraq.

ISIS can easily export this violence in all the places we saw the previous version of ISIS export violence to - elsewhere in the Middle East, into the Levant, into Eastern Europe, into Western Europe, into North Africa. And it's important we remember that, over the course of the last four years, ISIS has built a global network, and they built this in only four years. Their global network today is significantly larger than the Al Qaeda network ever became, and Al Qaeda worked on their global network for two decades. So this is a very impressive global network that, if I were Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, I know what I would be planning. I would be planning to use the strategic gift that I've been given in Syria as a way of not only expanding my insurgent activities in the Middle East and the Levant, but of exporting it into my global network.

Jennifer Cafarella:

You mentioned the other jihadist threat against the United States, which is Al Qaeda. Are there any implications for Al Qaeda of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria or what should we keep in mind regarding that threat as we watch the consequences of this decision unfold?

LTG Nagata:

Well, first of all, at the risk of repeating everything I've just said, Al Qaeda is a rational actor. They will also see this decision in Syria as a potential sign of a reduction in American resolve elsewhere. So they're going to be having the same conversations amongst themselves that everybody else is going to be having. What does this

mean? And what opportunities does this create for me?

They still have a significant presence in Afghanistan. They still have a significant presence in Syria. They still have a global network, although not as large as ISIS's global network. So they'll be examining their array of options for testing whether or not there is newfound freedom of action for them in a variety of places because the Americans may be less serious now. Hopefully they'll be completely wrong about this, but it's not irrational for them to think this way.

Matter of fact, I expect them to do this. I expect them to do what everybody else will do, and to try to find ways to test whether or not this is a sign of deeper rot in the American commitment overseas. More specifically related to places like Afghanistan, where we have a presence, or places like Syria, where unfortunately now our presence is departing, they have significant investments in both places, but in both places they're in competition with the Islamic State.

I think it is conceivable that as both ISIS as well as Al Qaeda start trying to answer the question, is there greater freedom of action for either of them respectively, that it could result in either increased friction and competition between the two of them. Because they both may be trying to spread their wings a little more aggressively now.

If they're smart, and they are smart, the more levelheaded among their leaders will be asking the question, "Is perhaps now the time to come to at least some sort of accommodation with this other jihadist extremist group?" I hope it leads to friction between the two. What I'm very worried about is, if they're strategically wise, they'll see this as an opportunity to reach some sort of at least tactical accommodation with each other, which would not benefit anybody in the developed world.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Final question. What are the implications of this decision for America's relationship with Turkey and potentially our military presence there?

LTG Nagata:

In my judgment, this substantially increases the strategic dilemma the United States faces regarding Turkey. We were in a dilemma already. In my judgment, the decision we made, instead of reducing the dilemma, it's increased the dilemma. That may be a surprising answer for some because I suppose some would react to what I just said by saying, "But we've given Erdogan what he wanted." That is true. This is what Erdogan had longed for, which is to finally have the freedom of action to attack a Kurdish element that he is completely convinced is an arm of the PKK. But the reason it compounds our dilemma is we can't walk away from the negative consequences that it is now creating.

We are already being affected by these negative consequences. As these consequences continue to expand and unfold, we will be even more negatively affected by these consequences. There must be a desire in the United States Government to try to ameliorate, reduce, or eliminate these consequences, but so long as the Turks keep attacking the Kurds, that's impossible.

There are efforts underway, based on the news reporting I see, to try to convince the Turks to modulate or reduce what they are doing. I think there is zero prospect of that being effective. I think the Turks will simply continue to do what they believe is in their own self-interest, and that's why the dilemma will keep going up. The negative consequences we feel will continue to grow, but we will be completely unable to reduce what is causing

those negative consequences. At least for the foreseeable future, we have no ability to forestall what is now happening.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Is the unity of the Global Anti-ISIS Coalition now at risk?

LTG Nagata:

Yes, it has to be. Again, I'm sure any formal official spokesperson for the Coalition would contest everything I'm saying, but as a pragmatic, practical matter, just this big question mark that now exists about American commitment and American staying power has to be on the mind of every government associated with the Coalition. I'm sure most of them wouldn't acknowledge it, they wouldn't admit it, but I know these governments well enough, and I know many of the leaders well enough, that I know it has to be on their mind.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

LTG Nagata:

One is... I'm going to engage in a little bit of speculation here, but I don't think it's irrational speculation. I'm going to use Iran as my example, but it's not the only example. So as I've already indicated, Iran, I believe, will see what has now happened as a potential opportunity either for the Shi'a Crescent or for other activities they engage in. They're going to do these things not just because they want to test us, because clearly there are opportunities for them now.

There are other actors, both in the Levant and the Middle East, who will not like what Iran starts to do. Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, there are several examples. They will act in their own self-interest. They will try to come up with some degree of activity, some type of activity to try to push back against what Iran is doing. But what is potentially new here is whether it's Israel, or Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates, or pick your government, all of them will have a very large question mark in their strategic thinking; "Can I rely on the United States to help me?"

Because what they'll be thinking is you're going to be with us just like you were with the Kurds. This question about American resolve, and staying power, and commitment is not just going to be in the minds of our adversaries. It's going to be just as vivid in the minds of our allies and friends. I am very confident they are having these internal conversations with each other right now - can we rely on the Americans?

The second one is in a way a tactical-operational issue, but I believe it has strategic consequences. I'm starting to see news reporting about this now. It flows from the fact that, over the last couple of years, the Syrian Democratic Forces have been compelled to embrace a responsibility that they didn't want. That was the responsibility for harboring and safeguarding thousands of displaced persons and refugees, and thousands of ISIS detainees.

One of the things I'm most worried about is if we have not just a catastrophe for either of those populations. My nightmare scenario is we have a catastrophe with both of those populations. There are so many bad things that can flow from this - another migrant crisis in the Middle East that potentially affects both North Africa and Western Europe. Neither of those places have recovered from the previous migrant crisis. The last thing they need is another one, but I can't get out of my head the possibility this could lead to another one.

There's some other dominoes that have to fall for this to happen, but they're pretty obvious dominoes. And the second one is both the practical as well as the reputational consequences of some awful outcome with these detainees. If, for example, they are unlawfully killed or treated, much of the world is going to blame the United States for that. That'll be enormous reputational damage.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Thank you, sir.

LTG Nagata:

You're welcome.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn more about ISW's work, and to sign up for our mailing list.

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