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Rep. Cheney rebukes President Trump on shift in Syria policy

By Nick Reynolds

Rep. Liz Cheney publicly split with President Donald Trump on Monday over a planned withdrawal of roughly 1,000 U.S. troops from Northern Syria, calling the decision “a catastrophic mistake that puts our gains against ISIS at risk and threatens US security.”

“Terrorists thousands of miles away can and will launch attacks against America, as the United States learned on September 11, 2001,” she said in a statement. “Pulling out of northern Syria ignores that painful lesson, represents an abandonment of our Kurdish allies despite their vital contributions to the fight against ISIS, emboldens Iran, and serves as an undeserved gift to the Erdogan regime, which has only continued its steady march toward Moscow.”

Trump announced he would be pulling U.S. involvement from Northern Syria following a Sunday night phone call with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a move sharply in contrast with the policies set out by his own Department of Defense.

Turkish forces have been ramping up efforts to clear the southern border the country shares with Syria for weeks now – an escalation of a long-standing conflict between Turkey and a large Kurdish minority in the region.

Turkey, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, has fears an established independent Kurdish state in Syria “could accelerate secessionist movements in other Kurdish areas of the Middle East.”

The move by Trump effectively ends U.S. support of America’s Kurdish allies in the region, who have been an integral piece in the fight against the terroristic Islamic State, while opening them up to assault from Turkish forces – a move defense experts say could have a chilling effect on America’s allies across the globe.

Others say Trump’s announcement could undermine the United States’ position in the Middle East, opening the region up to greater control by American adversaries like Russia, which has an increasingly close relationship with Turkey.

Trump, however, says withdrawal from the region would actually upset America’s adversaries, arguing that countries like Russia and China delighted in American involvement in



House Republican Conference chair Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., flanked by Rep. Doug Collins, R-Georgia, top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, left, and House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, D-Calif., speaks at a press conference in September in Washington. Photo by J. Scott Applewhite, AP

foreign conflicts.

Many have speculated that the end of U.S. involvement could lead to the renewed presence of the Islamic State in the region and the potential of a “mass prison break” of 10,000 extremist fighters imprisoned in the region: a fear buffeted by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi’s signaling of initiating a campaign to free ISIS loyalists from in Northern Syria, according to a Sept. 23 post from the Institute for the Study on War.

Trump, however, brushed off these concerns, threatening to “totally destroy and obliterate” Turkey’s economy if they did anything the president – in his “great unmatched wisdom,” as he tweeted Monday – did not like.

The Republican establishment – Cheney included – disagreed.

Cheney – an ally of the president and a leader in the Republican minority in Congress – said Trump’s announcement “ignores the lessons of 9/11,” and that the withdrawal of troops will allow the continued existence of safe havens where terrorist cells can incubate.

While Cheney – a member of the Armed Services Committee – did not refer to the president by name, she seemed to hint at threats posed by American adversaries overseas while speaking during an appearance at an aerospace and defense industry summit in Casper on Monday morning.

“It is a dangerous world,” she said. “People that tell you that the threat doesn’t exist anymore are wrong. We face a more complicated global threat environment than we have at any

time since World War II.”

Notably silent upon Trump’s announcement was Sen. John Barrasso, who in the past has supported conditional draw downs of American troop levels in Syria.

While the senator – just days removed from a visit to Wyoming National Guard Troops stationed in the Middle East – was in Casper on Monday morning to attend the same conference as Cheney, no statement on Trump’s announcement came, even as fellow members of leadership like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell came out with denouncements of the president’s decision to withdraw.

“While the physical caliphate has been removed, ISIS and al Qaeda remain dangerous forces in Syria and the ongoing Syrian civil war poses significant security and humanitarian risks,” McConnell said in a statement. “A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. And it would increase the risk that ISIS and other terrorist groups regroup.”

Barrasso’s office did not respond to a request for comment by press time.

Trump’s announcement notably comes on the 18th anniversary of the start of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

America’s tenure in the region has cultivated a new movement among former veterans and conservative politicians like Wyoming State Rep. Tyler Lindholm, R-Sundance, who have begun speaking out against the “Bush Doctrine” of foreign policy and the wars that have stemmed from it.

This sentiment is shared by many Republican voters as well: According to a Morning Consult/Politico poll conducted this past January, roughly 81 percent of Trump voters support withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, while an additional 76 percent support withdrawing from Syria.

“I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars, where our great Military functions as a policing operation to the benefit of people who don’t even like the USA,” Trump wrote in a tweet Monday morning. “The two most unhappy countries at this move are Russia & China, because they love seeing us bogged down, watching over a quagmire, & spending big dollars to do so.”