

By Richard Hall

From Independent | Original Article

Private military contractors could replace US troops withdrawing from [Syria](#), Blackwater founder [Erik Prince](#) has suggested.

The former security firm chief said contractors could protect US allies and counter Iranian influence after the US leaves the country.

“The United States doesn’t have a long-term strategic obligation to stay in Syria. But, I also think it’s not a good idea to abandon our allies,” he told Fox Business.

The allies to which Mr Prince refers are the [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF), a mostly Kurdish militia that has been a key partner of the US in the fight against [Isis](#) in Syria.

President [Donald Trump](#) abruptly announced that the US would withdraw troops from Syria last month, prompting many in his own administration to express concern that a quick exit would endanger those allies, and threaten to derail the fight against Isis. The decision caused Mr Trump’s defence secretary, Jim Mattis, to resign.

The SDF said a US withdrawal would leave it open to attack from Turkey, who views it as a terror organisation.

Mr Prince said using contractors would allow Mr Trump to keep his campaign promise to end “forever wars”, and still leave behind some protection. But the former navy Seal suggested that the danger to the SDF came from Syrian and Iranian forces, rather than Turkey.

“American history is filled with public and private partnerships, of places that the private sector can fill those gaps, where a very expensive military probably shouldn’t be,” Mr Prince said.

“If there is not some kind of robust capability to defend from a ground invasions from the very conventional power that the Iranians and the Syrians have, our allies will be smashed,” Mr Prince said.

His comments suggest some confusion over the shifting alliances of the Syrian battlefield as the US prepares to exit. The SDF view Turkey as a much greater threat than Damascus. As the US withdrawal comes closer to reality, the group has sought negotiations with the Syrian government to allow the return of the Syrian army to some areas in order to prevent a Turkish incursion.

[Blackwater](#), the company founded by Mr Prince in 1997, received hundreds of millions of dollars in US government contracts during the Iraq and Afghan wars, providing support for US forces and guarding officials and installations.

But the company found notoriety for a 2007 incident in which four of its guards killed 14 Iraq civilians in Nisour Square, Baghdad. Three of the men were convicted of manslaughter in 2014, and another of murder. The case brought intense scrutiny to the use of American private military contractors in Iraq.

Mr Prince’s pitch for a mercenary force in Syria follows [a similar proposal to privatise the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan](#). In 2017,

The New York Times

reported that Mr Prince had been tasked by then advisor to Mr Trump, Steve Bannon, to come up with an alternative to sending more troops to the country. Mr Prince had donated \$250,000 to Mr Trump’s presidential campaign the year before.

His plan involved a force of 6,000 private contractors, made up of former US and European special forces, and training for Afghan troops, running to a cost of around \$5bn a year. The plan reportedly found a receptive audience in Mr Trump, who has grown frustrated with the spiralling costs of the 17-year conflict.