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[H.A.S.C. No. 115–118]

U.S. STRATEGY IN SYRIA

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND INVESTIGATIONS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

HEARING HELD
SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE
33–474 WASHINGTON : 2019

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U.S. STRATEGY IN SYRIA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS,
Washington, DC, Wednesday, September 26, 2018.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 3:30 p.m., in room 2123, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Vicky Hartzler (chairwoman of the subcommittee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. VICKY HARTZLER, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM MISSOURI, CHAIRWOMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

Mrs. HARTZLER. The Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee convenes this afternoon to take testimony on the U.S. strategy on Syria. Just weeks ago, our Nation commemorated the somber anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Among the many consequences of that strike on the United States was the increased recognition of the dangers posed by a violent ideology targeting our Nation and its allies and partners. Those dangers remain.

For decades, the Syrian regime has been known for its barbarity and support for terrorism. But 5 years ago, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] emerged from the remnants of al-Qaida in Iraq. ISIS killed and pillaged.

The goal of ISIS was to develop Syria as a base of operations for a global terrorist network. ISIS had some initial success. The group quickly seized territory, including in eastern Syria. And while the United States continued to speak out against the atrocities of the Syrian Government, ISIS posed the possibility of a ruthless anti-American terrorist group controlling a large and important region.

Therefore, the United States assisted some of those fighting ISIS. There have been some important victories. Since March of 2017, significant territory has been liberated from ISIS. Nonetheless, it continues to pose a threat. The Department of Defense has declared that ISIS is well positioned to rebuild. ISIS could recapture lost territory. The goal of the United States is to prevent this possibility, but it is essential that our Nation carefully calibrate its response.

The Syrian situation is extraordinarily complex. Turkey, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan are profoundly affected. The fact that Russia and Iran vigorously support the Assad regime also greatly complicates our efforts. In recent weeks, the administration has suggested that some U.S. military forces will remain in Syria. Furthermore, while Assad, Russia, and Turkey contemplate military activity in and around Idlib around the last week, press reports have dis-

cussed how the U.S. might respond if chemical weapons are used again.

Today, we will hear more about these topics. We will consider the administration's strategic objectives in Syria and the relevant authorities and resources required to achieve them. We will hear about efforts to achieve a political resolution and the status of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. We will also consider the humanitarian crisis in the region and the reestablishment of governance in areas liberated from ISIS.

In a moment, I will turn to Ranking Member Moulton for introductory comments and then introduce today's witnesses, but I want to remind members that this hearing is unclassified, and when we conclude, we will recess briefly and move upstairs to room 2216. And our witnesses will join us there, and we will reconvene for an opportunity to discuss classified information and receive additional details from the witnesses.

I will ask members to move promptly to the second location at the appropriate time. And so, with this administrative note out of the way, I now recognize Ranking Member Moulton for his introductory comments.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Hartzler can be found in the Appendix on page 27.]

STATEMENT OF HON. SETH MOULTON, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM MASSACHUSETTS, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. Thank you for scheduling this hearing—for rescheduling the hearing due to the hurricane, and thank you to our witnesses for being here with us this afternoon. Today, we are seeking clarity on the Trump administration's strategies for achieving U.S. political and military objectives in Syria. While long overdue, today's discussion is timely, given heightened intervention in the region by the Syrian regime's top allies, Russia and Iran. Just this Monday, the Russian Defense Ministry announced plans to equip Syrian air defense forces with the S–300 antimissile system, a move characterized by U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton as a, quote, "significant escalation," end quote, in the 7-year civil war.

In August, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami confirmed Iran's commitment to the Assad regime, affirming Iran would have a, quote, "presence, participation, and assistance," end quote, in the reconstruction of Syria. Increasing military escalation by Russia in Idlib province, which has been temporarily averted by a Russia-Turkey agreement, threatens to exacerbate an already devastating humanitarian crisis, with over 400,000 Syrians dead and over 6 million displaced.

My question to the Trump administration is this: What is your strategy? Moreover, we don't even know what your long-term objectives are. I am alarmed that the President's statements regarding his strategy on Syria have been so overwhelmingly at odds with statements from his senior Cabinet officials. Earlier this year, President Trump stated that the United States would be coming out of Syria, quote, "like very soon," end quote. And that we should, quote, "let other people take care of it now," naively asserting that

the ongoing conflicts in Syria and the resulting humanitarian crisis there will no longer be of concern to the United States.

In April, after ordering missile strikes in Syria, the President tweeted, quote, "mission accomplished," although the accomplishment remains unclear. In an abrupt reversal, of course, senior administration officials recently walked back previous plans of a, quote, "imminent pull-out of U.S. forces in Syria."

Earlier this month, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley warned Russia and Iran of dire consequences if they continue military strikes in Idlib. But what exactly does this mean? This week, John Bolton suggested that the United States envisioned a permanent presence in Syria to counter Iran while Secretary Mattis insisted our forces are only there to counter ISIS. When asked about the inconsistency, Secretary Mattis told press they are on the same sheet of music. But it is clear this is not the case.

I am also disappointed that we will not have an opportunity today to directly engage with the Department of State to examine the administration's plan to support a political settlement in Syria.

U.S. Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey recently called for a, quote, "major diplomatic offensive." However, specific details have been sparse. Defeating terrorist groups with no long-term plans for political stabilization will only serve to perpetuate the cycle of violence and of repeatedly sending U.S. troops into conflict zones.

It troubles me that much of what we accomplished in Iraq has been undone because we did not have a solid comprehensive plan to stabilize the region and secure the peace. I will add that this is not about partisan politics. I was equally critical of the previous administration for what I viewed as a lack of clarity in their strategy on Syria.

I have met with troops fighting on the ground in Syria and have asked them earnestly what they are fighting for, only to find that many of them do not have an answer. It is unfair to our troops to continuously ask them to put their lives on the line without a mission or clear objectives. Although I did not agree with the war in Iraq, at least I knew what the plan was when I went out on patrol at night as a Marine infantry officer.

In today's hearing, we will attempt to secure answers to an array of open questions, such as what are the capabilities and activities of our partners in the region, including the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. I look forward to hearing what progress, if any, the administration has made towards putting forward a comprehensive strategy on Syria.

Thank you, and I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Moulton can be found in the Appendix on page 29.]

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you.

So I am pleased to introduce our witnesses: Mr. Robert Story Karem, he is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs; and U.S. Marine Corps Brigadier General Scott Benedict, he is the Deputy Director of Political-Military Affairs for the Middle East with the Joint Staff.

So, Mr. Karem, we will begin with you.

STATEMENT OF ROBERT STORY KAREM, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; AND BGEN SCOTT F. BENEDICT, USMC, DEPUTY DIRECTOR POLITICO-MILITARY AFFAIRS, MIDDLE EAST, JOINT STAFF J–5

Secretary KAREM. Thank you. Chairwoman Hartzler, Ranking Member Moulton, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting us to participate in this hearing today. Because the hearing is open, I will not be able to discuss many of the details of our military operations in Syria, as doing so could undermine these operations and put our forces at risk. We will be very happy to discuss some of these issues in closed session, but must err on the side of caution to avoid disclosing classified information about our sensitive activities in this setting.

The U.S. Government's objectives in Syria remain unchanged. In Syria, the United States seeks to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaida and its affiliates, deter the use of chemical weapons, and counter Iran's malign destabilizing influence. The United States also seeks a peaceful resolution of the multifaceted conflict in Syria in a manner that protects U.S. interests, preserves a favorable regional balance of power, protects our allies and partners, and alleviates human suffering.

The Defense Department's role in Syria is limited. We are pursuing the enduring defeat of ISIS with a relatively small U.S. military footprint, and a "by, with, and through" strategy that relies on local partners. While we are not intervening in the Syrian civil war because our combat operations target ISIS, this underlying conflict inevitably affects our efforts.

The Assad regime, with Russian and Iranian backing, has retaken significant swaths of territory from the moderate Syrian opposition, which it subjects to violent repression. This behavior imperils international efforts to facilitate an enduring, peaceful resolution to the underlying conflict. Although our military efforts and those of our local vetted partners have hastened the territorial defeat of ISIS and advanced U.S. national security interests, we believe that broader U.S. objectives are most effectively pursued through a negotiated political resolution of the Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis, consistent with U.N. [United Nations] Security Council Resolution 2254.

As we have previously emphasized, we look to our colleagues at the State Department to work in parallel with the United Nations and our international partners to forge a lasting settlement of the Syrian conflict that includes full representation for all Syrians, including the people of northeast Syria, now recovering from ISIS occupation.

The U.S. Government remains committed to the critical diplomatic efforts underway to end the war on terms that protect the rights of Syria's people, and enable the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes. The recent appointments of Ambassador Jim Jeffrey as the State Department's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Joel Rayburn as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant highlight the renewed focus on diplomatic engagement. The Defense Department is eager to support their critical efforts.

In close coordination with and under the authorities granted by the Congress, the Defense Department has made significant progress since 2014 when ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria and terrorized hundreds of thousands of civilians.

My staff briefs the HASC [House Armed Services Committee] subcommittee staff, this committee's staff, on our activities on a regular basis, and we appreciate these opportunities to solicit input and feedback from the committee as we work through these difficult and complex challenges. As you know, coalition-backed efforts have contributed to the liberation of more than 99 percent of the territory and more than seven and one-half million people from ISIS control in Iraq and Syria. Despite this progress, we assess that even after the defeat of the physical caliphate, ISIS remains stronger now than its predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq, was when the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011.

Tough fighting remains in the lower reaches of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and our hard-won gains in Iraq and Syria remain vulnerable. The enemy is adaptive. Even though offensive operations against the last pocket of ISIS-held territory in Syria are underway, ISIS has begun its transition into an underground insurgency. A sustained, conditions-based U.S. presence will enable us to pressure the terrorist insurgency and prevent ISIS' resurgence while simultaneously facilitating diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. We seek to avoid telling the enemy when we will withdraw or leaving before the job is done. We do not want to repeat the mistakes that created the conditions for ISIS' emergence in the first place.

We are not alone. We are working by, with, and through a range of partners to defeat ISIS. In Syria, we are vetting, training, and equipping local Syrian forces, such as the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces, who are leading combat operations against remaining ISIS holdouts. We are also supporting vetted internal security forces drawn from local populations to hold and secure ISIS-liberated territory.

The 79-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS remains committed to the challenges in both Syria and Iraq and is adaptive to ISIS' evolving ambitions and tactics. Our allies and partners are increasingly sharing the burden for ongoing Defeat ISIS operations, stabilization, and humanitarian assistance.

Since April, the United States Government has secured approximately $785 million in contributions committed from coalition partners to UNDP's [United Nations Development Programme's] funding facility for stabilization efforts in areas liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria, including 70 million euros from France, $18.6 million from the United Kingdom, and 10 million euros from Germany towards explosive remnants clearance, plus 235 million euros in humanitarian support from Germany. We applaud these contributions and encourage our partners to seek additional ways to step up their support for stabilization and diplomatic efforts to ensure a safe and stable Syria.

In eastern Syria, the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, and the State Department are leading early recovery and stabilization efforts designed to consolidate military gains and stabilize liberated areas. With support from DOD [De-

partment of Defense], State and USAID are addressing humanitarian needs, removing ISIS-placed mines and IEDs [improvised explosive devices], supporting local early recovery efforts, and helping establish the security, economic, and political conditions that will allow for the safe and voluntary return of displaced Syrians to their homes.

The ability to co-deploy State Department and USAID civilians next to our military forces to plan and monitor these activities alongside local partners remains a key aspect of our success. In northern Syria, the United States is working with our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] coalition partner Turkey to ensure stability and security in the region. We remain committed to a sustainable arrangement in Manbij that ensures continued stability and addresses Turkish concerns. The United States is working with Turkey to promote local governance and security elements acceptable to all parties, including the people of Manbij. We respect Turkey's legitimate national security concerns and are aligned in seeking an end to the Syrian conflict in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 that respects the rights of all Syria's citizens and addresses the humanitarian crisis caused by this conflict.

We welcome recent reports of a Turkish-Russian agreement to form a demilitarized zone in Idlib, but nevertheless remain gravely concerned over the potential for a major military offensive by the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran, that could increase the prospect for the use of chemical weapons and put civilians at grave risk. Turkey shares these concerns.

It remains to be seen whether Turkey's efforts to dissuade Russia from supporting a major regime offensive will hold, and we note that previous ceasefire agreements have been used as an opportunity for Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime to rest, refit, and resume an offensive whenever it suits them.

Putin's continued support for the regime and willingness to partner with Iran and Syria reveals the stark divergences between Turkish and Russian objectives in Syria. A regime offensive in Idlib would represent a dangerous escalation of the conflict and will threaten, not facilitate, diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Our position on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons remains unchanged. As we have demonstrated, we will respond swiftly and appropriately to further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, to defend the international prohibition against the use of such weapons and to deter further use. We urge the regime and its Russian sponsors to refrain from using chemical weapons or risk the international consequences of doing so.

Our resolve is shared by the United Kingdom and France, and we encourage other international partners to join our diplomatic and political efforts to deter Bashar al-Assad from using these weapons.

We continue to support international efforts to attribute responsibility for chemicals weapons use, namely the decision taken by the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention to establish a new arrangement to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria. This decision counters Russia's repeated use of its veto power at the United Nations Security

Council to dismantle the impartial U.N. and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons joint investigative committee mechanism, which found the Assad regime responsible for chemical weapons attacks four times, including the April 2017 chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun that killed and injured hundreds of civilians.

We remain concerned by Iran's significant military, paramilitary, and proxy involvement in Syria. Iran's introduction of sophisticated military equipment into Syria along with the entrenched Iranian and Hezbollah presence there, directly threatens important partners like Israel and Jordan, and risks dangerously escalating the tensions in the region. Iran is also no friend of the Syrian people and if its behavior in Iraq is any indication, its militia proxies and aggressive agenda will only further marginalize Syria's Sunni population, inflame tensions, and sow seeds of further radicalism.

Despite these challenges, the United States is taking steps to strengthen our partners and create opportunities to counter Iran's destabilizing activities. We are working closely with the Department of State to expose Iran's regional destabilizing influence through the Iranian Materiel Display where representatives from over 66 nations have viewed Iran's proliferation of advanced conventional weapons. We continue to shore up the defenses of our Israeli and Gulf Arab partners while working to improve their military defense capabilities against a range of Iranian threats.

We continue to take steps to reinforce vulnerable and fragile regional partners. We maintain a regional force posture and military plans designed to deter and, if necessary, respond to aggression. We are not seeking war with Iran. That said, we will take steps to defend ourselves and work with regional and global partners and allies to address the full range of Iran's destabilizing and malign activities.

DOD's engagement with Russia in Syria remains focused on military deconfliction efforts, conducted via military channels, to prevent miscalculations and accidents involving our respective forces which operate in close proximity on the ground and in the air. Although this tactical deconfliction has been a success, unfortunately, Russia's overall behavior has been at odds with our core objectives. Russia has enabled Assad's use of chemical weapons and continues to hamper efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement to the conflict.

Russia has recently launched a concerted disinformation effort, a campaign to discredit the United States and our international partners, flooding the media with fake stories to sow doubt and confusion about the reality of the situation in Syria and to hide Russia's role in the Assad regime's campaign of murder and brutality. The United States is working with its partners across the world to expose and counter Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

Finally, let me just thank the Congress for your advice, funding, and the authorities provided to the Department of Defense in this endeavor. Although the scope of our military activities and our mandate is narrow, we have together dealt with the scourge of ISIS and will together do right by our troops in ensuring its enduring and lasting defeat. Thank you.

[The joint prepared statement of Secretary Karem and General Benedict can be found in the Appendix on page 32.]

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you very much, Mr. Karem.

And now let us turn to General Benedict.

General BENEDICT. Chairwoman Hartzler, Ranking Member Moulton, and distinguished members of the committee, good afternoon, and thank you for the introduction earlier.

I am Brigadier General Benedict from the Joint Staff Middle East Directorate, and I appreciate the opportunity to take your questions regarding aspects of our operations in Syria.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you very much. I would like to start, before we get into specific questions, that we have a map here in front of us, and I appreciate that. Could you kind of go over with us what things you would like to point out about this map? Are you aware of the map?

Secretary KAREM. I do not know that either of us have seen the map.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Oh, okay.

General BENEDICT. I have seen the map. I had it on the place mat for the secure setting. But I think I can tell you just from having looked at that map quite often, I think a couple key points on there would be: down in the lower portion, there's an area called Al-Tanf. You see sort of a half circle on the border between Jordan and Syria. Yes, ma'am, in blue there. That is an area where we have got a U.S. presence with a partner force. And then you have also got an area that is shaded up in the northeast that is orange. That is the area where we partner with the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] forces. And you will see down in the lower right, that is an area down close to the border with Al Qa'im and Albu Kamal. That is sort of the final portion of the MERV [Middle Euphrates River Valley] where the physical caliphate has shrunk, that tiny little orange sliver.

You have probably seen maps earlier where the caliphate spread much over Iraq into Syria, all the way down toward the Baghdad area. That is all that is left is that tiny orange portion. And then, if you go up to the top of the map, the brown area, that is the area in the vicinity of Manbij. The green area located there is Idlib. I am sure we will have an opportunity to talk about a few of these places today.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Okay. Appreciate that. So, Mr. Karem, while speaking about U.S. policy in Syria recently, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey stated that reducing and ultimately eliminating Iran's military presence in Syria is a primary U.S. objective. Can you confirm it is a primary U.S. objective to reduce and eliminate Iran's military presence and expound on what our troops are doing to carry out this mission?

Secretary KAREM. I think Ambassador Jeffrey, Ambassador Bolton, and other senior administration officials have spoken at length about how concerned we are about the threat that Iran poses to the region, how destabilizing its activities inside Syria have been. It is clearly a high priority of the United States to counter Iran's malign activities throughout the region, including in Syria. I would disaggregate, however, our overall U.S. policy objectives from our military activities.

Our military operations in Syria are squarely focused because of the authorities we have been provided against ISIS and al-Qaida. It is, of course, the case that our presence in Syria, our military presence, has residual benefits. Benefits for our diplomats who are trying to seek and negotiate an end to the conflict, and residual benefits because it can help deter activities from other adversaries. But the purpose of our military operations, the object of our military operations is very squarely focused on the ISIS fight.

I think that I would also note that, just analytically, Iran's presence and malign activities make it increasingly unlikely that we will see an enduring political solution to the crisis. We believe such a political solution is going to be necessary to achieve the conditions that will allow us to secure an enduring defeat of ISIS to prevent the resurgence of ISIS or another similar terrorist organization.

Mrs. HARTZLER. That is concerning, that comment right there. In your testimony, you said that we are working closely with the Department of State to expose Iran's regional destabilizing influence through our Iranian Materiel Display. Can you explain a little bit more what that entails?

Secretary KAREM. Sure. And I would—we, at Bolling Air Force Base, or Joint Base Bolling, we have set up a display of materiel captured from a number of battlefields that our partners have provided us to help explain and expose the types of activities Iran is engaged in. We very much welcome Members of Congress coming out to see this display. We have brought a number of representatives from countries around the world. We think this helps to demonstrate the very activities that we seek international diplomatic support to contest, violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions that these weapons and materiel I think really bring home.

Mrs. HARTZLER. So, based on your statement a minute ago, you are saying basically, and maybe General Benedict can answer this, that the Department of Defense does not have any role really other than just ancillary to countering Iran and Syria, you are just solely focused on ISIS, or is there anything that you are doing as a DOD role regarding Iran?

General BENEDICT. In Syria, Chairwoman, our role is to defeat ISIS. That is it. And as Mr. Karem mentioned, there is a secondary benefit to our presence on the ground there. Certainly, being on the ground and creating stabilized situation limits the freedom of maneuver of anybody who has got malign activities. That includes Iranian proxies as well as some of the violent extremists.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Great. So what are the administration's current counterterrorism objectives in Syria?

Secretary KAREM. Our principal primary counterterrorism objectives are to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaida and other associated terrorist groups. And I can talk a bit in closed session about some of the activities, but this involves both U.S. unilateral activities as well as the support to local partners who are doing much of the fighting on the ground to retake territory from these organizations and to kill and capture ISIS fighters.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Okay. How will you measure the destruction of ISIS besides just how much territory the group controls, because

obviously now it does not control very much? So how are you measuring their impact?

Secretary KAREM. So there are a range of metrics that we would look at, and it is not just a job for the Department of Defense, but for the intelligence communities and the whole of government. I think we have looked at the territory they control, the assets that they have, the number of fighters and supporters, their freedom of movement, the extent to which their ideology and strategic communications resonate, both within local populations and across the region, and other more ambiguous factors. But in terms of the sheer numbers, as I said, we do measure their strength as still being fairly significant.

Mrs. HARTZLER. And the last question I have here before I go to Ranking Member Moulton: Does the administration have a plan to prevent the reemergence of ISIS?

Secretary KAREM. The United States military objectives are designed to destroy the physical caliphate and to set the conditions for a diplomatic solution, an economic solution, and social solutions that will allow for the enduring defeat of ISIS and to prevent its resurgence. The military can only play one part in that equation, which is why we are so encouraged by the renewed diplomatic offensive from Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. But ultimately this will require our partners joining us, and it will require the Russians, the Iranians, and the Syrian regime being willing to sit down at the table with members of the Syrian opposition to bring about an end to the conflict in a manner that creates more stable, more respectful conditions for Syria's people.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Very good. Ranking Member Moulton.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. And just to emphasize how bipartisan this hearing is and our concerns are with regard to what is going on in Syria, many of your questions are written down right here on my list of questions. So we share—we did not share notes prior to the hearing, but we have a lot of common concerns.

Mr. Karem, I was wondering if you could answer, does the 2001 and 2002 AUMF, Authorizations for the Use of Military Force, allow operations against Iran?

Secretary KAREM. The 2001 AUMF is quite clear that it applies to al-Qaida and associated groups. And the 2002 AUMF has been focused on Iran. We are not conducting operations against Iran, have not been asked to conduct operations against Iran. That said, I would note that, wherever we are in the world, our military forces have the right to self-defense in the event that we are attacked. But under none of those AUMFs are we envisioning or conducting operations against Iran.

Mr. MOULTON. Right, and that seems consistent with what Secretary Mattis said when he stated quite unequivocally that, quote, "Right now our troops inside Syria are there for one purpose, and that is under the U.N. authorization about defeating ISIS." That has nothing to do with Iran. He has made that very clear.

Now, you said in the answer to the previous question, we have to disaggregate our overall strategy, which includes countering Iran's influence in the region, from our military presence on the ground. Is that correct?

Secretary KAREM. I think I was making the point that I think we need to disaggregate legal authorities questions and that there are many tools we use to contest Iran across the region. There are aspects of our military operations or presence that can be useful in countering Iran, but we are not conducting military operations against Iran, is the point I was trying to make.

So, as General Benedict and I have said, our presence in certain places can constrain Iran's freedom of maneuver. It can empower our diplomats to put more pressure on Iran, but our purpose in being there and our military operations are not being conducted per se against Iran.

Mr. MOULTON. So if we are going to counter Iran and we have an authorization to do so, we might have operations against Iran, or we might simply have troops in the region. But either actually requires an authorization. I mean, if we are going to conduct operations against North Korea, we are going to get a congressional authorization to do so before we send troops into North Korea, correct?

Secretary KAREM. I would defer to the lawyers as to the precise mechanics——

Mr. MOULTON. Well, you are the best we got for lawyers right now. We are asking you the questions. Because the problem is that National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that the United States intends to keep an indefinite military presence in Syria until Iran withdraws its forces. That to me sounds like we are sending our military to Syria to counter Iran, especially because their withdrawal is apparently dependent on actions of Iran, not actions of ISIS or the defeat of ISIS. It is dependent upon the withdrawal of Iranian forces, not on the defeat of ISIS or the withdrawal of ISIS troops or operatives from the area. That is what the National Security Advisor has stated.

Secretary KAREM. Congressman, the guidance we have been given is that we have a conditions-based approach in Syria, and that our presence is focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS.

Mr. MOULTON. But that is not what the National Security Advisor said. He said that the military presence will last in Syria until Iran withdraws its forces. That to me sounds like an operation against Iran, which you have just stated is not allowed under the Authorization for Use of Military Force.

Secretary KAREM. Congressman, I think if we were conducting operations against Iran, that would be the case, but we are not. I think what the National Security Advisor and others recognize is that as long as Iran continues to pose a threat, as along as Iran continues to engage in destabilizing activities, as long as it continues to foment sectarianism in Syria, it is going to be very difficult to end this war. And until that happens, it is going to be very difficult for us to secure the conditions to allow for the enduring defeat of ISIS.

Mr. MOULTON. So, Mr. Karem, just to be clear. What you are stating is that sending U.S. troops to Syria as part of a strategy to deter Iran, and with the guidance that they will not be withdrawn until Iran withdraws its forces is not a military operation against Iran? If I go and ask those troops, "Your mission is to stay here and deter Iran until Iran leaves," they would say: Yes, that

is our mission. We are not operating against Iran. We are not here as part of a strategy against Iran because, of course, that would be illegal.

Secretary KAREM. Congressman, our forces were sent to Syria to defeat ISIS. It is true that there is a residual—there are residual——

Mr. MOULTON. Why is their withdrawal, according to the National Security Advisor, dependent on Iran withdrawing its forces?

Secretary KAREM. I think he is making the analytical judgment that——

Mr. MOULTON. This is not an analytical judgment. You are telling troops when they can go home. You are telling the parents of these troops when they can come home. You know, if your son or daughter was in Syria right now and the National Security Advisor said, "Your daughter can come home when Iran leaves," it seems to me that is pretty dependent on Iran.

Secretary KAREM. The guidance we have been given is that we are there to bring about the enduring defeat of ISIS. We are proud of the progress that we have made, but we understand that there is a tough fight ahead and that the diplomatic effort is going to end up being predominant.

Mr. MOULTON. Well, the National Security Advisor has given you different guidance. And if that is what the troops are hearing—if that is what the American parents and families of these troops are hearing, and you have already said that that is illegal under the authorization given from Congress, then I think the administration has got a big problem.

I yield back.

Mr. CONAWAY [presiding]. The gentleman yields back.

I recognize myself for 5 minutes. Thank you both for being here.

General, that map that you had, at one point in time, there was a particularly significant humanitarian wreck at Al-Tanf. I may be mispronouncing it. Are those folks still there? And can you give us any kind of an update? You say we have people there. Can you give us an update of what the humanitarian refugee issue looks like in that enclave?

General BENEDICT. Sir, I believe you are referring to the Rukban camp. There is about 50,000 IDPs, internally displaced persons, in the Rukban camp.

Mr. CONAWAY. Are the Syrians allowing humanitarian effort coming in from the——

General BENEDICT. They are not.

Mr. CONAWAY. They are not.

General BENEDICT. They are not.

Mr. CONAWAY. And so the Jordanians are still in effect crane-lifting across that line the humanitarian supplies that are getting in there?

General BENEDICT. The Jordanians are providing limited assistance to the——

Mr. CONAWAY. Does the regime explain why they are not—why they are making their own people suffer like that?

General BENEDICT. Sir, we do not talk directly to the regime about it, but, no, there has not been an explanation of why they

have not allowed a humanitarian corridor to open from Damascus to Rukban.

Mr. CONAWAY. That is a pretty rugged part of the world, temperatures—it is a desert. Would it be fair to say that those refugees, those Syrian internally displaced folks are under some stress and misery?

General BENEDICT. I certainly agree with you that that is a rough part of the—a rough area to live in. So I imagine that the conditions there would not be——

Mr. CONAWAY [continuing]. Ideal.

General BENEDICT [continuing]. Very good.

Mr. CONAWAY. So does the regime led by Assad have the capacity and wherewithal to actually send humanitarian relief there if they were of such a mind?

General BENEDICT. We definitely believe they do have the capacity.

Mr. CONAWAY. So there is no physical barriers? There is no blocking forces? There is no issue why they wouldn't do that, other than he just does not care about his people?

General BENEDICT. The U.S. military has not provided any inhibition for them providing that.

Mr. CONAWAY. And you are not aware of any other outside forces between there and Damascus that would physically prevent humanitarian aid getting there? That is rhetorical, but—so in the southwest corner, our allies with Israel and Jordan have said no Iranians in that area. Can you tell if the Iranians are abiding by that?

Secretary KAREM. Congressman, I think we would be happy to talk in closed session about what we see in southwest Syria. They are both clearly very concerned about the threat that would be posed by an Iranian residual presence in southwest Syria. They have sought to secure the departure of Iranian forces through negotiations with the Russians. We do not have a presence in that part of Syria, but——

Mr. CONAWAY. Our allies do?

Secretary KAREM. Our allies——

Mr. CONAWAY [continuing]. Live there?

Secretary KAREM. They are not present on the ground in Syria.

Mr. CONAWAY. I know, but they are right across the line from them.

Secretary KAREM. The regime now controls that territory.

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you, gentlemen.

I yield back. You get a second bite at the apple before the rest of us go.

Mr. MOULTON. I get a second bite of the apple apparently because the other Members here are not on the subcommittee.

Mr. CONAWAY. All right. I recognize Seth for an additional 6 weeks.

Mr. MOULTON. I will be brief. Just one question. What kind of political end state for Syria does the administration envision? How does our military presence support that goal?

Secretary KAREM. And I would refer you to Ambassador Jeffrey and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Rayburn to articulate sort of the specific diplomatic strategy and end state they envision.

They have talked about it consistent with the plan or the framework outlined by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 and a process that is inclusive of all of Syrians and allows for full participation. So I would defer you to——

Mr. MOULTON. But here is the key question. When I go to the Middle East and talk to troops regarding Syria, and I say, "Hey, what is your mission? What are you trying to achieve?" and my experience is they will say: "Well, we are trying to take this town back from ISIS. We are trying to take this village."

And I will say: "Okay. Well, what happens next?" In other words, that is your immediate tactical mission, but what are you trying to—what is the objective that you are trying to achieve? Who is going to take over? I mean, a lot of people disagree with the war in Iraq, but it was very clear what we were doing. We were taking territory back from al-Qaida or other insurgent groups or militias or whatever, and we were handing it over to the government of Iraq.

There was a very clear political objective to our strategy. You might have disagreed with it, but at least we knew what we were trying to achieve.

What is that political objective in Syria? In the language that us here on the committee and that, most importantly, the troops on the ground can understand?

Secretary KAREM. So I think General Benedict and I have spent a good deal of time talking with some of our forces who are out there, and I think they do have an appreciation of what we are trying to accomplish. They also have a better appreciation I think than we often do of how difficult this is. And there are these immediate tactical objectives: retaking the next town from ISIS.

There is the longer-term objective that is tactical but blends into the strategic in terms of setting up governance and stabilizing liberated areas into our——

Mr. MOULTON. Governance by whom?

Secretary KAREM. Pardon?

Mr. MOULTON. Governance by whom?

Secretary KAREM. Governance by locals. And what our military has been facilitating in conjunction with START Forward [Syria Transition Assistance Response Team Forward] and international partners has been using the Syrian Democratic Forces and increasing Arab percentage of them to ensure that the towns that have been liberated by ISIS, that security and governance is provided by locals, that the governance structures that are put in place are responsive to and comprised and representative of local populations.

Mr. MOULTON. So we are trying to create——

Secretary KAREM. All of that, though, is then sort of fed into this larger political process, which we do not control, but we support. And that is about how do we put diplomatic pressure on the regime and the Russians to allow for a diplomatic process that is inclusive of all of Syria's opposition and can resolve the conflict.

Mr. MOULTON. So that is the answer the troops would give?

Secretary KAREM. I think they would see the immediate objective of liberating towns and a vast swath of Syria from ISIS, and I think they would see a connection to the need for a political end state, so that the hard-won military fight that our partners have

been leading is not for naught, that Iran and the regime does not simply plunge across the river and take back and repress these same villages from which ISIS sprung in the first place.

Mr. MOULTON. So essentially what you are saying is that we are going to have local control of all these different villages that we tactically take back, sort of like recreating medieval Europe in Syria. We do not know what is going to happen with the big picture. We do not know who is going to control the government. The national leadership of Syria is totally up for grabs. We do not have any idea what is happening there or even what our goal or objective would be in determining that strategy.

Secretary KAREM. Congressman, I think it is similar to your experience in Iraq where we were trying to help Iraqis take back their towns. The difference is, however, this is taking place in a different kind of conflict with a civil war that is raging. And we are not prepared to simply abandon our partners to the Assad regime. And so we are not seeking to create an independent country. We want to use the hard-won military victories of the Syrian Democratic Forces as leverage towards a diplomatic end state. We cannot promise what that would look like. But our presence will help these communities have a better shot at securing political negotiation.

Mr. MOULTON. General Benedict, is there anything you would like to add to that from the military perspective from the troops on the ground in terms of what they are trying to achieve?

General BENEDICT. Yes. Thank you. So I was just in Raqqa. I guess it was about a month or so ago, and really no question in my mind that that Green Beret battalion commander understood what his mission was: providing stabilization in that area. Also, the forces, of course, who are defeating ISIS, it is a very clear, you know, operational mission that they understand what the intent is.

I think the last point that Mr. Karem made, you know, is particularly important. So, you know, the military mission is pretty clear. There was no, at least from my mind from the lieutenant up to the lieutenant colonel, any question what they were doing there, why they were doing it. And they were seeing the results of what they were doing in the stabilization, and that then can contribute as part of that leverage to eventually get to a political settlement.

But no question, lasting defeat of ISIS is their mission. They understand that. That includes that stabilization to set the conditions so ISIS does not come back.

Mr. MOULTON. General, there is no debate from me that they understand an operational mission. My question is, what is the strategic mission? You know, what are they trying to achieve when they succeed with their operational mission? And just to use the Iraq analogy again, I mean, I do not think it is very consistent because I think, in Iraq, we clearly had a strategic goal, a strategic political goal.

Remember, we had this big debate: Maybe we should divide Iraq into three parts, or maybe we should just have one central government. We resolved that debate. Not everybody agreed with how we resolved it, but we knew what we were trying to do was empower a central government in Iraq. So that is my question. And I guess your answer, General, is simply that they know that they are creating stability to support some sort of future government?

General BENEDICT. Well, yes, sir. And as mentioned, you know, the efforts of Ambassador Jeffrey is to get this back into the Geneva. And part of that process of having the discussions to get the players to the table, our activities and the success that we have had, not only providing for the defeat of ISIS, the most successful operations that are being conducted in Syria against violent extremists, but also the success that we are having locally with setting up—supporting the local governments, supporting their reconstruction, stabilization, return of services, that type of leverage does play into the negotiations that Ambassador Jeffrey has to drive towards a political solution.

So I believe that they can see through that operational perspective and see the value of the effort that they are doing towards a larger political goal.

Mr. MOULTON. General, I recognize that this is a very difficult situation, and in some ways you and your troops are in an impossible position. I think having some clarity on that strategic objective, rather than just sort of creating the conditions for some sort of government, would be helpful. Helpful to us and also helpful to the troops on the ground. But thank you for what you are doing.

Mrs. HARTZLER [presiding]. Thank you.

Mr. Scott.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Madam Chair. I am not sure how much influence we have in the political process in Syria, and I am pretty sure we have very little, if any, control over it. I do have questions that would not be—you could not answer in this setting that I will save for the next one. But I do have a question for you, Mr. Secretary.

Getting back to the issue of the authorization, it seems that because ISIS is in Syria, that is how we justify being authorized to operate in Syria. Is that correct?

Secretary KAREM. That is correct.

Mr. SCOTT. How many countries is ISIS in?

Secretary KAREM. Off the top of my head, I could not tell you. I think the reality has been that the largest preponderance of ISIS fighters have been contained in Iraq and Syria. It is where they established territorial control. They have operated more under the radar, hiding in populations in other countries. So there is a difference in terms of the unique situation we found ourselves in in 2014, where ISIS took over what was basically a swath of territory the size of Indiana.

Mr. SCOTT. So it is territorial control then that the legality of the authorization is based on, not the fact that ISIS is there?

Secretary KAREM. No, I think it is the territorial control that ISIS had that facilitated or led to certain types of military operations rather than more intelligence or law enforcement activities. We also no longer had governance structures in western Iraq or eastern Syria. We were welcomed into Iraq by the Iraqi Government, which explains some of the legal parameters of our operations there. But, in Syria, the previous administration and this administration has continued to rely on the 2001 AUMF to conduct its operations. This has been amplified by specific authorities the Congress has provided us to provide support to our local partners,

the Syrian Democratic Forces, for example, which is authorized in statute.

Mr. SCOTT. So just—I do not think there was ever a win in Syria, I mean, just looking at things, and for the United States, I mean, it just—it was like a kaleidoscope; every time one thing changed something else changed. The Russians clearly already had the high ground. And, I mean, just looking at the scenario, I want to go back to where—we are obviously there. We—the issue of the legality of us being there is based on ISIS being there. And just hypothetically, if we follow that through—if ISIS is in—just a hypothetical number, just say 20 countries, do we then have the authorization to go into all of those 20 countries?

Secretary KAREM. I think we would have to take a look case by case at the situation on the ground. What was the capacity of the individual country to take action.

Mr. SCOTT. Can I ask you to follow up—when you say "we," do you mean Congress or the administration?

Secretary KAREM. The United States writ large. And I think our operations, our activities, have been conducted often in large consultation with the Congress. Our efforts to support local governments in fighting ISIS, we cannot do without explicit authorities and support from the Congress. Moneys that are appropriated for our train-and-equip efforts, for example, are provided by the Congress and overseen by the Congress.

Mr. SCOTT. I think that—I think, respectfully, I think some of that might be debatable, but I do—I am concerned that future administrations, I am close to this administration, the idea that just because an organization by a certain name is in a country, that that gives us the ability to say: Well, because they are there, I have got the authorization to go do whatever I want to in that country.

And I am very concerned about the authorizations, and I think it deserves further discussion.

But I have some very specific questions, but I will yield any remainder of time that I have for the next setting.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you for yielding back your 14 seconds. Appreciate that.

Representative Gabbard.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, gentlemen.

It has been estimated by several sources and confirmed by General Dunford publicly that there are approximately 20,000 to 30,000 al-Qaida terrorists and other jihadist terrorists that are holed up and in control of the city of Idlib in Syria. We have recently heard just in the last several days threats from your administration of, quote/unquote, dire consequences for any military offensive by Syria, Russia, or Iran against these al-Qaida terrorists in Idlib. James Jeffrey stated that the U.S. will not tolerate, quote, "an attack, period, and that any offensive is to us objectionable as a reckless escalation."

So, considering the fact that, Mr. Karem, you have noted many times just in this hearing that our troops are in Syria operating under the Authorization to Use Military Force that was passed after al-Qaida attacked us on 9/11 and that we are supposed to be at war with al-Qaida, my question is, how is it in the national security interest of the United States that rather than going after al-

Qaida and defeating al-Qaida, the United States is making these threats and essentially acting as the protectors of al-Qaida in Idlib, in Syria, and these other terrorist groups? How is this not a complete kick in the face and an insult to the American people, all of those lives who were lost on 9/11, first responders, our troops, their families, everyone who has sacrificed so much?

Secretary KAREM. Congresswoman, I would strongly dispute the notion that we are protecting al-Qaida in Idlib, that we are protecting al-Qaida in any faction.

Ms. GABBARD. How can you dispute this when all indications, if you follow this path and this trail, in reality, that al-Qaida and other terrorist groups are in control of Idlib today? And our government has threatened any of these other countries who are—have talked about attacking these terrorist groups in Idlib. How can you see it in any other fashion?

Secretary KAREM. We will be happy to talk about some of the dynamics in Idlib in closed session.

Ms. GABBARD. Do you dispute those numbers that General Dunford has confirmed publicly?

Secretary KAREM. I think those numbers may refer to a global ISIS number, but we——

Ms. GABBARD. He was very specific. He was very specific to say 20,000 to 30,000-plus al-Qaida and other terrorist groups in control of Idlib.

Secretary KAREM. There is no dispute that Idlib has become a hornet's nest of multiple terrorist organizations. Regrettably, this is the product of the Russian and regime approach to consolidating control on the ground in Syria. They have used de-escalation zones and local negotiated deals to purge areas in Syria and have used Idlib as a dumping ground. And they have allowed the free transit of the worst terrorists to go to Idlib.

Ms. GABBARD. And the fact is, and I have asked this question of many of our other both civilian and military leaders over the last few years, both in the previous administration and in this administration, the fact is that the United States Government and military has not made a concerted effort to go after al-Qaida early on in Syria as they have with ISIS.

Before my time is expired, I want to ask about Iran and follow up to some of the questions that were asked earlier with regard to the fact that in Iraq and Syria, Iran has more influence in those two countries today than ever before in recent history. And since it is apparently not in our national security interest to have Iran's influence in that region expanded, would you agree that our policies in these countries have resulted in the exact opposite of what would be in our national security interest with Iran having a stronger presence there than they did specifically in Syria prior to 2011?

Secretary KAREM. I am not sure that I follow that our specific activities are the reason that Iran has more influence.

Ms. GABBARD. Prior to our invasion to Iraq, Iran had less influence there than after.

Secretary KAREM. I think there are——

Ms. GABBARD. In Syria, prior to 2011, when this war broke out to overthrow the government and our support for that, along with

Saudi Arabia and Qatar and other countries, Iran had far less of a presence and far less influence in Syria than they do today.

Secretary KAREM. Regrettably, Iran's presence and influence in Syria and Lebanon and across the region predates the war——

Ms. GABBARD. Would you not agree that they have far more of a presence and influence today than before?

Secretary KAREM. I think their influence in Syria has far more to do with the Syrian civil war than it does——

Ms. GABBARD. I am just asking a simple question of whether or not they have more of a presence and influence today than before 2011?

Secretary KAREM. Sure, but it has nothing to do—little to do with our policies so much as it does with the Syrian civil war and the relation with Bashar al-Assad.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Time is expired. Thank you.

Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Thank you. Given that Russia—I would like to pull the string on the Russia angle a little bit. Given that Russia has leased ports and air bases for, in some cases, five decades—and I apologize if this was already covered—to me that suggests this is about far more than just shoring up support for the Assad regime, that Russia has a sort of a broader regional play in mind.

What is your assessment of Russia's long-term goals and objectives in Syria and in the eastern Mediterranean?

Secretary KAREM. I think there is a debate in the analytical community about whether Russia does have long-term strategies or relies on short-term tactical improvisation. I would agree that I think they are looking simply beyond just shoring up Bashar al-Assad and are utilizing their newfound influence and presence in Syria for diplomatic leverage and influence to undermine the United States, to project power into the eastern Mediterranean. We can talk more about some of this in closed session, but I think it is unquestionable that Russia's intervention in Syria has changed the trajectory of that conflict, and very much complicated the situation. Regrettably, at every turn they have chosen not to be partners in trying to end the conflict through peaceful negotiations, but instead have complicated the political situation on the ground with their full-throated support for the Assad regime and willingness to partner with Iran on the ground.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I hope in closed session we can dig in deeper to the nature of that partnership, particularly as it pertains to any operational coordination between Russia and terrorist proxies and Hezbollahis deployed to Syria.

But, General Benedict, I do not know, to the extent possible in open session, obviously, the Russians have deployed S–300s and S–400s to Syria since at least 2006, but in the last few weeks, we have heard that S–300s are being transferred to the Assad regime.

Can you just give us an assessment of what that means, if anything, for our ability to conduct operations, and by extension, does that place limits on our allies, the Israelis in particular, their ability to conduct operations in and around Syrian air space?

General BENEDICT. I think I would like to take most of the details of the question about both our operations or our partners into the closed session. But I think what I would say is that the intro-

duction of more of these systems in there only serves to create more unstable conditions and the likelihood of miscalculation that we—such as which we tragically saw earlier in the week with the Russian plane being shot down by the Syrians.

So I think that my greatest concern is that the more things that we are putting into this small area, particularly as we are starting to close in the north part of Syria, the more dangerous the entire situation becomes because of the instability.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I can also see a scenario in which it might limit our options, if, for example, Russian personnel were in an area and we were contemplating taking action, we might be more loath to do so as a result of the introduction of such technology and associated forces necessary to operate it.

To just quickly on what my colleague Mr. Scott was talking about, the National Security Advisor, Ambassador Bolton, has said any potential third strike on the Assad regime would be, I think he used the term, qualitatively different in nature, meaning that this would be—there would be some sort of escalation of force.

If a strike would be of a greater magnitude, qualitatively different, does the administration still intend to use—to rely mostly upon the 2001 AUMF and this sort of grab bag of authorities that you referenced earlier, or would it be interested in seeking a new authorization for the use of military force in Syria.

Secretary KAREM. I think Secretary Mattis would not want us to opine on hypothetical or operational matters.

Mr. GALLAGHER. But it would be fun to do so right now.

Secretary KAREM. Not fun for me when I get back to the Department. I would say that the administration has produced and provided public Office of Legal Counsel assessment of its legal authorities under which it operated in the April strike that I would refer you to that speaks at length to the authorities it has to respond to the previous use of chemical weapons.

Mr. GALLAGHER. My concern with the reasoning laid out in that document is that you are placing a lot of weight on the inherent constitutional authority of the Commander in Chief to conduct foreign relations. But as anyone knows, the Constitution vests enormous war declaration and war-making authority in the Congress of the United States. So I think there are many of us here that would suggest that we have stretched the logic beyond the bounds of recognition. And I think there is a bipartisan interest in doing something about it. And I recognize fully that ultimately this is not necessarily the fault of the executive branch. Executive branches always tend to aggregate power wherever they can. It is the fault of Congress' unwillingness to do its basic duty.

And I have run out of my time. I apologize.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you.

Mr. Gallego.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you. Mr. Karem, let's go back to Russia. I heard some things I just—that kind of astound me. Russia's goals have always seemed clear to me and has been since the 1800s: warmwater port, warmwater port, make sure you keep Turkey off the sidelines and destabilize their alliances to us, which, by the way, at this point seems is what they got. What else do they want, and what else do they have? As far as they were propping up a

puppet, they still have their puppet. They now will continue to have free access to the Mediterranean military resources they had before. But more importantly, what they are getting right now is they are tying us down to what seems to me to be a war or operation, whatever you want to call it, that has no end, which eventually just starts sucking away at our resources that we need to take care of the interests that we really care about, which from my understanding historically are continued freedom of the seas, continued rejection of human rights violations, counterterrorism, and defense of Israel.

How are we not actually basically falling into the Russian traps by basically continuing to, you know, basically engage in this quagmire without an end and actually end up rejecting some of these other interests that are actually important to the United States?

Secretary KAREM. So I think it is regrettable that Russia's behavior in Syria has complicated this conflict and made a political resolution more complicated. But I do not think it has necessarily tied us down. In fact, I think if you compare the success that the United States and its partners have had in defeating ISIS and liberating territories in areas where we have operated in Syria with Russia and the regime's efforts against ISIS and al-Qaida, I think we stack up remarkably well. In fact, it is what we are focused on.

Mr. GALLEGO. We are further separated from Turkey as our NATO allies since the start of this war. They still have the warm-water port they had before, and they still have Assad, but at the same time, we are clearly not getting out of there any time soon, and, at the same time, also taking our interests off the balls in other areas.

On all scopes of this, we are losing right now in terms of protecting our overall interests outside of Syria. That aside, let me just leave that there. Right now, I would like to ask another question. The Department is not authorized to fight the Syrian Government. Is that correct?

Secretary KAREM. We are not intervening in the Syrian civil war. We do not have the authority.

Mr. GALLEGO. What is being done to ensure that U.S. forces or funds are not being used to engage in hostilities when it comes to the Syrian Government—with the Syrian Government?

Secretary KAREM. Can you restate the question?

Mr. GALLEGO. The Department is not authorized to fight the Syrian Government. What is being done to ensure that U.S. forces or funds are not being used to engage in hostilities with Syrian Government forces?

Secretary KAREM. I think Congress has been fairly explicit with us in terms of how we allocate our funds and the vetting procedures we use with respect to training and equipping, which we report on a regular basis, both the procedures we use to vet as well as the activities of our partners. That is one example of how carefully we adhere to the restrictions that Congress has placed on our authorities in Syria.

Mr. GALLEGO. And to engage in a hypothetical, if you can: You know, much like Congressman Moulton, I also served in Iraq and played a lot of whack-a-mole all through actually Haditha, Al Qa'im, and a lot of cities actually that are on these maps today.

The last thing I want to see is other young men and women playing whack-a-mole indefinitely through the Syrian plains.

What is the definition of true defeat against ISIS if our operational—if our orders are to be there until ISIS is defeated, what does that actually mean in Syria? Because what I am interpreting it as right now is we may actually defeat ISIS and actually destroy the functionality of ISIS, but there seems to be this other element where because the idea of ISIS may exist, that is the pretext of why we should stay in Syria when in fact it is just for us to, you know, buffer against Iran, which if that is the case, then you should come back to Congress and actually ask for that authorization.

Secretary KAREM. I think the last thing that we want is to continue simply playing whack-a-mole. And we want to avoid the mistakes that we have made in the past and ensure that what we leave behind in Syria and Iraq means that U.S. service men and women are not going to have to come back and fight an even more dangerous enemy. But this is why the political resolution of the conflict, it is why the political and security developments of the Iraqi Government are so important. And it is why we do what we can as the U.S. military to be connected to the State Department's activities, whether that is to help the Iraqis develop their security forces and governance capacity or whether it is to facilitate a political end to this conflict in Syria. We need to see local security forces who are representative of and respectful of local populations, who can keep control. And, unfortunately, we do not see an indication that the Assad regime is going to result in that kind of stability.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Okay. Well, votes are going to be at 4:45 to 5:00, and so this is going to conclude the open portion of this afternoon's hearing. And we will walk upstairs to 2216 for a classified discussion. We will adjourn for 3 minutes and then promptly reconvene. Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 4:40 p.m., the subcommittee proceeded in closed session.]

A P P E N D I X

SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

Statement from Chairwoman Vicki Hartzler
House Armed Services Committee Oversight & Investigations Subcommittee
Hearing: U.S. Strategy in Syria

September 26, 2018

The Oversight and Investigations subcommittee convenes this morning to take testimony on the U.S. strategy in Syria.

Just weeks ago, our nation commemorated the somber anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Among the many consequences of that strike on the United States was the increased recognition of the dangers posed by a violent ideology targeting our nation and its allies and partners.

Those dangers remain.

For decades, the Syrian regime has been known for its barbarity and support for terrorism. But, five years ago, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIS kills and pillages. The goal of ISIS is to develop Syria as a base of operations for a global terrorist network. ISIS had some initial success. The group quickly seized territory, including in Eastern Syria.

While the United States continues to speak out against the atrocities of the Syrian government, ISIS poses the possibility of a ruthless anti-American terrorist group controlling a large and important region. Therefore, the United States has assisted some of those fighting ISIS.

There have been important victories. Since March 2017, significant territory has been liberated from ISIS. Nonetheless, it continues to pose a threat. The Department of Defense has declared that ISIS "is well-positioned to rebuild." ISIS could recapture lost territory.

The goal of the United States is to prevent this possibility. But, it is essential that our nation carefully calibrate its response.

The Syrian situation is extraordinarily complex. Turkey, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan are profoundly affected. The fact that Russia and Iran vigorously support the Assad regime also greatly complicates our efforts.

In recent weeks, the administration has suggested that some US military forces will remain in Syria. Furthermore, while Assad, Russia, and Turkey contemplate military activity in and around Idlib over the last week, press reports have discussed how the U.S. might respond if chemical weapons are used again.

Today we will hear more about these topics. We will consider the Administration's strategic objectives in Syria and the relevant authorities and resources required to achieve them. We will hear about efforts to achieve a political resolution and the status of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. We will also consider the humanitarian crisis in the region, and the reestablishment of governance in areas liberated from ISIS.

I'm pleased to introduce our witnesses:

Mr. Robert Story Karem is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and U.S. Marine Corps Brigadier General Scott Benedict is the Deputy Director of Political-Military Affairs for the Middle East with the Joint Staff."

Ranking Member Moulton - "U.S. Strategy in Syria"
Opening Remarks

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman, and thank you to our witnesses.

Today, we're seeking clarity on the Trump Administration's strategies for achieving U.S. political and military objectives in Syria.

While long overdue, today's discussion is timely given heightened intervention in the region by the Syrian regime's top allies, Russia and Iran. Just this Monday, the Russian Defense Ministry announced plans to equip Syrian air defense forces with the S-300 anti-missile system, a move characterized by U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton as a "significant escalation" in the seven-year civil war.

In August, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami confirmed Iran's commitment to the Assad regime, affirming Iran would have a "presence, participation, and assistance" in the reconstruction of Syria. Increasing military escalation by Russia in the Idlib Province, which has been temporarily averted by a Russia-Turkey agreement, threatens to exacerbate an already devastating humanitarian crisis with over 400,000 Syrians dead and over 6 million displaced.

My question to the Trump administration is this: what is your strategy? Moreover, we don't even know what your objectives are. I'm alarmed that the President's statements, regarding his strategy on Syria, have been so overwhelmingly at odds with statements from his senior cabinet officials.

Earlier this year, President Trump stated that the United States would be coming out of Syria "like very soon" and that we should "let other people take care of it now," naively asserting that the ongoing conflicts in Syria and the resulting humanitarian crisis there will no longer be of concern to the United States. In April, after ordering missile strikes in

Syria, the President tweeted "Mission Accomplished!," although the accomplishment remains unclear.

In an abrupt reversal of course, senior Administration officials recently walked back previous plans of an "imminent pullout of U.S. forces in Syria." Earlier this month, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley warned Russia and Iran of "dire consequences" if they continue military strikes in Idlib. But what exactly does this mean?

This week, John Bolton suggested that the United States envisions a permanent presence in Syria to counter Iran, while Secretary Mattis insisted our forces are only there to counter ISIS. When asked about the inconsistency, Secretary Mattis told press they are "on the same sheet of music." But it is clear this is not the case.

I am also disappointed that we will not have an opportunity today to directly engage with the Department of State to examine the Administration's plan to support a political settlement in Syria. U.S. Special Representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, recently called for a "major diplomatic offensive," however, specific details have been sparse. Defeating terrorist groups with no long-term plans for political stabilization will only serve to perpetuate the cycle of violence and of repeatedly sending U.S. troops into conflict zones. It troubles me that much of what we accomplished in Iraq has been undone because we did not have a solid, comprehensive plan to stabilize the region and "secure the peace."

I will add that this is not about partisan politics. I was equally critical of the previous Administration for what I viewed as a lack of clarity on the U.S. strategy in Syria.

I've met with troops fighting on the ground in Syria and have asked them, earnestly, what they're fighting for, only to find that many of them do not have an answer. It is unfair to our troops to continuously ask them to put their lives on the line without a mission or clear objectives.

Although I did not agree with the war in Iraq, at least I knew what the plan was when I went on patrol at night as a Marine infantry officer.

In today's hearing, we will attempt to secure answers to an array of open questions such as what are the capabilities and activities of our partners in the region, including the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. I look forward to hearing what progress, if any, the Administration has made towards putting forward a comprehensive strategy on Syria.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Hearing on Syria Strategy
HASC Oversight and Investigations Sub-Committee
September 26, 2018
Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs, Robert Karem

Chairman Hartzler, Ranking Member Moulton, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing. Because this hearing is open, I will not be able to discuss many details of our military operations in Syria, as doing so could undermine these operations, and put forces at risk. I will be happy to address such issues in closed session, but must err on the side of caution in open session to avoid disclosing classified information about our sensitive activities.

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The U.S. Government's objectives in Syria remain unchanged. In Syria, the United States seeks to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qa'ida, and its affiliates; deter the use of chemical weapons; and counter Iran's malign, destabilizing influence. The United States also seeks a peaceful resolution of the multifaceted conflict in Syria in a manner that protects U.S. interests, preserves a favorable regional balance of power, protects our allies and partners, and alleviates human suffering.

The Defense Department's role in Syria is limited. We are pursuing the enduring defeat of ISIS with a relatively small U.S. military footprint and a "by, with and through" strategy that relies on local partners. While we are not intervening in the Syrian civil war because our combat operations target ISIS, this underlying conflict inevitably affects our efforts. The Assad regime – with Russian and Iranian backing – has retaken significant swaths of territory from the moderate Syrian opposition, which it subjects to violent repression. This behavior imperils international efforts to facilitate an enduring, peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Although our military efforts and those of our vetted local partners have hastened the territorial defeat of ISIS and advanced U.S. national security interests, we believe broader U.S. objectives are most effectively pursued through negotiated political resolution of the Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis, consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. As we have previously emphasized, we look to our colleagues at the State Department to work in parallel with the United Nations and our international partners to forge a lasting settlement of the Syrian

conflict that includes full representation for all Syrians, including the people of northeast Syria now recovering from the ISIS occupation.

The U.S. government remains committed to the critical diplomatic efforts underway to end the war on terms that protect the rights of Syria's people, and enable the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of IDPs and refugees to their homes. The recent appointments of Ambassador Jim Jeffrey as the State Department's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Joel Rayburn as Deputy Assistant Security of State for the Levant highlight the renewed U.S. focus on diplomatic engagement. The Defense Department is eager to support their efforts.

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In close coordination with and under the authorities granted by the Congress, the Defense Department has made significant progress since 2014, when ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria and terrorized hundreds of thousands of civilians. My staff briefs HASC committee staff on our activities on a regular basis, and we appreciate these opportunities to solicit input and feedback from the committee as we work through difficult and complex challenges.

As you know, Coalition-backed efforts have contributed to the liberation of more than 99 percent of the territory and more than seven and one-half million people from ISIS control in Iraq and Syria. Despite this progress, we assess that even after the defeat of its physical caliphate, ISIS remains stronger now than its predecessor – al-Qaeda in Iraq – was when the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011. Tough fighting remains in the lower reaches of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and our hard-won gains in Iraq and Syria remain vulnerable.

The enemy is adaptive. Even though offensive operations against the last pocket of ISIS-held territory in Syria are underway, ISIS has begun its transition into an underground insurgency. A sustained, conditions-based U.S. presence will enable us to pressure the terrorist insurgency and prevent an ISIS resurgence, while simultaneously facilitating diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. We seek to avoid telling the enemy when we will withdraw, or leaving before the job is done. We do not want to repeat mistakes that created conditions for ISIS's emergence in the first place.

We are not alone. We are working by, with, and through a range of partners to defeat ISIS. In Syria, we are vetting, training, and equipping local Syrian forces,

such as the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces, who are leading combat operations against remaining ISIS holdouts. We are also supporting vetted Internal Security Forces drawn from local populations to hold and secure ISIS-liberated territory.

The 79-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS remains committed to the challenges in Syria and Iraq, and is adaptive to ISIS's evolving ambitions and tactics. Our allies and partners are increasingly sharing the burden for ongoing defeat-ISIS operations, stabilization, and humanitarian assistance.

Since April, the U.S. Government has secured approximately $785 million in contributions committed from Coalition partners to UNDP's funding facility for stabilization efforts in areas liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria – including €70M from France; $18.6M from the UK and €10M from Germany toward explosive remnants clearance plus €235M in humanitarian support from Germany. We applaud these contributions and encourage our partners to seek additional ways to step up their support for stabilization and diplomatic efforts to ensure a safe and stable Syria.

In eastern Syria, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are leading early recovery and stabilization efforts designed to consolidate military gains and stabilize liberated areas. With support from the Department of Defense, the State Department and USAID are addressing humanitarian needs, removing ISIS-placed mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), supporting local early recovery efforts, and helping establish the security, economic and political conditions that will help allow for the safe and, voluntary, and dignified return of displaced Syrians to their homes. The ability to co-deploy State and USAID civilians next to our military forces to plan and monitor these activities with local partners remains a key aspect of our success.

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In Northern Syria, the United States is working with our NATO ally and Coalition partner, Turkey, to ensure stability and security in the region. We remain committed to a sustainable arrangement in Manbij that ensures continued stability and addresses Turkish concerns. The United States is working with Turkey to promote local governance and security elements acceptable to all parties, including the people of Manbij. We respect Turkey's legitimate security concerns, and are aligned in seeking an end to the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254 that respects the rights of all of Syria's citizens and addresses the

humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict.

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We welcome recent reports of a Turkish-Russian agreement to form a demilitarized zone in Idlib, but nevertheless remain gravely concerned over the potential for a major military offensive by the Syrian regime – backed by Russia and Iran – that could increase the prospect for use of chemical weapons and put civilians at grave risk. Turkey shares these concerns. It remains to be seen whether Turkey's efforts to dissuade Russia from supporting a major regime offensive will hold, and we note that previous ceasefire agreements have been used as an opportunity for Russia, Iran, and the Syrian Regime to rest, refit, and resume an offensive whenever it suits them. Putin's continued support for the regime and willingness to partner with Iran in Syria reveals the stark divergences between Turkish and Russian objectives in Syria. A regime offensive in Idlib would represent a dangerous escalation of the conflict and will threaten, not facilitate, diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Our position on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons remains unchanged. As we have demonstrated, we will respond swiftly and appropriately to further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime to defend the international prohibition against the use of such weapons and deter future use. We urge the regime and its Russian sponsors to refrain from using chemical weapons or risk the international consequences of doing so.

Our resolve is shared by the United Kingdom and France, and we encourage others to join our diplomatic and political efforts to deter Assad from using chemical weapons. We continue to support international efforts to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use – namely the decision taken by the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention to establish a new arrangement to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria. This important decision counters Russia's repeated use of its veto power at the UN Security Council to dismantle the impartial UN-and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Joint Investigative Mechanism, which found the Assad regime responsible for chemical weapons attacks four times – including the April, 2017 chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun that killed and injured hundreds of civilians.

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We remain concerned by Iran's significant military, paramilitary, and proxy involvement in Syria. Iran's introduction of sophisticated military equipment into Syria, along with the entrenched Iranian and Hizballah presence there, directly threatens important partners like Israel and Jordan, and risks dangerously escalating tensions in the region. Iran is no friend of the Syrian people and if its behavior in Iraq is any indication, its militia proxies and aggressive agenda will only further marginalize Syria's Sunnis, enflaming tensions and sowing the seeds of radicalism.

Despite these challenges, the United States is taking steps to strengthen our partners and create opportunities to counter Iran's destabilizing actions. We are working closely with the Department of State to expose Iran's regional destabilizing influence through our Iranian Materiel Display where representatives from over 66 nations have viewed Iran's proliferation of advanced conventional weapons. We continue to shore up the defenses of our Israeli and Gulf Arab partners while working to improve their military defense capabilities against a range of Iranian threats. We also continue to take steps to reinforce vulnerable and fragile regional states. We maintain a regional force posture and military plans designed to deter and, if necessary, respond to aggression. We are not seeking war with Iran. That said, we will take steps to defend ourselves and work with regional and global partners and allies to address the full range of Iran's destabilizing and malign activities.

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DoD's engagement with Russia in Syria remains focused on military de-confliction efforts – conducted via military channels – to prevent miscalculations and accidents involving our respective forces which operate in close proximity on the ground and in the air. Although this tactical de-confliction has been a success, unfortunately, Russia's overall behavior has been at odds with our core objectives. Russia has enabled Assad's use of chemical weapons and continues to hamper efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement to the conflict.

Russia has recently launched a concerted disinformation campaign to discredit the United States and international partners, flooding the media with fake stories to sow doubt and confusion about realities in Syria and hide Russia's role in the Assad regime's campaign of murder and brutality. The United States is working with its partners across the world to expose and counter Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

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Finally, I want to thank the Congress for the advice, funding, and authorities provided to the Department in this endeavor. Though the scope of our mandate is narrow, we have together dealt with the scourge of ISIS and will together do right by our troops in ensuring its lasting defeat.

Robert S. Karem
Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

Robert Story Karem is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. In this role, he serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense on policies relating to the Middle East, Europe (including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), Russia, Eurasia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere. From June to November 2017, Mr. Karem performed the duties of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Prior to his nomination, Mr. Karem served on the Presidential Transition Team as an advisor to Central Intelligence Agency Director, Mike Pompeo. Previously, Mr. Karem was the principal foreign policy advisor to Jeb Bush.

From 2011 - 2015, Mr. Karem served as the national security advisor to Congressional House Majority Leaders Eric Cantor and Kevin McCarthy, where he was responsible for managing a wide range of foreign policy, defense, and intelligence issues for the House Republican Conference.

From 2005 until 2009, he served as a Middle East policy advisor on Vice President Richard Cheney's national security staff. He subsequently served as an advisor to the former Vice President, assisting with research and editing of the former Vice President's memoirs. He concurrently served as a Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Prior to working at the White House, Mr. Karem was a Legislative Assistant for foreign policy in the office of Senator Mitch McConnell. He has also worked as Research Assistant at the Center for Strategic International Studies. Mr. Karem is a graduate of Columbia University.

Brigadier General Scott F. Benedict
Deputy Director Politico-MilitaryAffairs, Middle East, Joint Staff J-5

Brigadier General Benedict is currently serving as the Deputy Director Politico-Military Affairs, Middle East, within the Joint Staff J-5. He has served as a Marine Corps Officer and Naval Aviator for more than twenty five years.

Brigadier General Benedict has commanded at the Marine Air Ground Task Force and Squadron levels. From 2013- 2015 he commanded the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) during which time he led two overseas deployments; one while serving simultaneously as the Commanding Officer of Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force – Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) during its first full rotation supporting the Africa and European Commands areas of responsibility, and the second with the MEU to the Africa, European, and Central Commands. From 2006 to 2008, Brigadier General Benedict served as the Commanding Officer of Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 367, including operations in Iraq.

His staff appointments have spanned the operational, planning, policy, diplomatic, and acquisition arenas. Previous General Officer assignments include service as the Director of Manpower Plans and Policy, where he was responsible for determining total manpower needs, and preparing plans, policies, programs and instructions on manpower matters; as the Assistant Deputy Commandant for Aviation, where he provided support to assist and advise the Commandant of the Marine Corps on all matters relating to Aviation. Other senior staff assignments as a Colonel included: Military Secretary to the Commandant of the Marine Corps where he served as the Director of the Commandant's personal and extended staff group; Special Assistant to the Assistant Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff where he traveled as part of the Secretary of State's travel team; and Military Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Acquisition, and Development, supporting the Department of the Navy's Acquisition Executive.

Other assignments included: Chief of Policy and Assessment Branch, Joint Staff J-5, Joint Operational War Plans Division; Head, Future Operations Group, Current Operations Division, Plans, Policies and Operations, HQMC; Squadron Operations Officer for 22d MEU; Squadron Logistics and Operations Officer for HMLA-167; and Operations Officer and Air Officer for 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion.

Brigadier General Benedict has served overseas in support of several combat, contingency, and support operations. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Naval War College, the Marine Corps War College, and the MIT Seminar XXI fellowship program.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING

SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. SUOZZI

Mr. SUOZZI. What are we doing to update and modernize DOD's policy and guidance pertaining to information operations so that commanders in the field have clear guidance on what they can do to influence the information environment? We are losing the information war because of bureaucracy—there are fewer rules and regulations governing a commander's decision to use of munitions than send a tweet. What is being done to fix this problem and enable our commanders on the ground to more effectively conduct full-spectrum operations?

Secretary KAREM. As part of the execution of Section 1637 of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2018, the Secretary has designated the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (USD(P)) as the Designated Senior Official to oversee the integration of strategic information operations and cyber-enabled operations. The USD(P) is also the Principal Staff Advisor for Information Operations (IO). In these roles, the USD(P) is assessing communication-related policy (e.g.—Military Information Support Operations (MISO) policy, IO policy, and others) to ensure DOD operations in the information environment are agile and effective, while remaining compliant with applicable laws. DOD routinely delegates authority to subordinate commanders to conduct MISO over all mediums, to include the internet. Outside of areas of active conflict, commanders must coordinate IO with relevant chiefs of mission. DOD has sufficient authorities to operate in the information environment, but will continue to adapt authorities to contemporary needs.

Mr. SUOZZI. Secretary Karem, do we have an information operations strategy in Syria? The Russians and Iranians are very active in the Syrian information environment promoting disinformation about the United States, and our allies, while promoting their activity and the Assad regime. What are we doing to counter the disinformation campaigns that the Russians and Iranians are waging against the U.S. and our allies?

Secretary KAREM. [The information is classified and retained in the committee files.]

