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SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS IN SYRIA: THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S STRATEGY

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SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS IN SYRIA: THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S STRATEGY

Wednesday, May 22, 2019

House of Representatives,

Committee on Foreign Affairs,

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:11 a.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Eliot Engel (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman ENGEL [presiding]. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

The committee convenes this morning to address the crisis that has been raging in Syria for 9 years, as well as the Trump Administration's approach to this problem.

We are glad to be joined by Ambassador James Jeffrey, the State Department's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Welcome, Ambassador Jeffrey. I have known you for many years, and I want to thank you for your time and many years of service doing a fine job.

And welcome to members of the public and press as well.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I view the crisis in Syria as one of the greatest tragedies of our time. I have dealt with the Syrian issue for the entire length of time that I have been in Congress, even when very few people were talking about Syria. But now, these past years, it is just impossible. It really makes you cry. Hundreds of thousands of innocents murdered at the hands of a brutal dictator, a butcher, Bashar al-Assad; barrel bombs and chemical weapons used against civilians. We have seen the images of his cruelty on shocking display here right in this room when we hosted Caesar, the military photographer who defected to show the world the barbarity of the regime. Millions upon millions more driven from their homes, a massive humanitarian crisis. And from the outside, a collective failure of global leadership to put a stop to the violence year after year after year. It breaks my heart. And it is a failure of leadership in this country as well as around the world.

Anyone who has followed our work knows that Syria is not a new topic for the Foreign Affairs Committee or for myself. More than 15 years ago, I authored the Syria Accountability Act to push back against the Syrian government's presence in Lebanon and crack down on a range of other harmful activities. Early in the civil war, I called on the Obama Administration to support the Free Syrian

Army in its fight against the brutal Assad regime, and I introduced the Free Syria Act, the first legislation to train and equip the Syrian opposition. I have authored legislation, named for Caesar, to crack down on Assad's enablers—Moscow, Tehran—and to make sure American reconstruction dollars do not ultimately end up in the regime's hands.

So, I bring some experience to the issue when I say how deeply I am concerned by the Trump Administration's scattershot policy—toward this war-torn country. Now, the previous Administration did not do anything, either. So, it is just a matter of nobody is doing the right thing, as far as I am concerned. And this is one of the reasons why we have gotten ourselves into the mess we are in.

I remain particularly baffled by the precipitous withdrawal that President Trump announced late last year. That would have been an utter disaster. It would have emboldened Assad, Russia, and Iran. It would have given them a license to run roughshod over the country and an unimaginable cost of innocent life. It would have signaled to the world that the United States was withdrawing from one of the most serious hotspots and leaving our partners and allies twisting in the wind.

It was remarkable to see a Secretary of Defense, Mr. Mattis, resign in protest. And I take my hat off to him for doing the only thing he could have done. That is just how ill-conceived that announcement was.

Though the Administration swiftly went into damage control and walked back the announcement, damage had already been done. But what does it say about our credibility on the global stage? What sort of signal do our friends take from this whipsawed foreign policy? Or our adversaries? It is a mess.

And I worry the Administration may now be compounding that mess by signaling to Turkey that they can wade farther into the fray. We have all seen the reports that President Trump changed his position on Syria and said that the United States would leave after he had an extensive conversation with Mr. Erdogan of Turkey. If that is true and that is the case, it is really a big mistake.

Turkey has been playing a destabilizing role with its campaign against our allies, the Kurds, in northeast Syria. Following the President's recent call with President Erdogan—another strongman of whom President Trump seems strangely enamored—Turkey seems emboldened.

We need a serious policy that pushes for a stop to the violence and a start to a political resolution. Otherwise, this cycle of carnage and death is simply going to repeat again and again and again. I have had a friend send me recent emails and other things showing me what has been happening just this week with the barbarity in parts of Syria, and the world just looks the other way and talks and talks and talks. And meanwhile, civilians are being murdered one by one or ten by ten, and it has not stopped. And it just breaks my heart.

Every March, when we mark another year of this tragedy, I wonder what more we could have done to try to prevent the next grim anniversary. The legislation I have introduced would give the Administration more tools, but the Administration needs to devise a

real strategy and flex the muscles of American leadership to help break the status quo.

Again, I am glad we have the Administration's senior official on this situation with us today. As I said before, he has a long and distinguished record of which I certainly approve, and certainly have worked with him and know how smart he is. So, I look forward to hearing your testimony.

But, first, let me recognize our ranking member, Mr. McCaul of Texas.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Today, as we speak, the State Department is investigating signs that the Assad regime used chemical weapons in an attack in northwest Syria on Sunday. If true, this is very grave, serious news. I thank the Administration for their forward-leaning statement that, if the Assad regime uses chemical weapons, the United States and our allies will respond forcefully.

Ambassador Jeffrey, I want to thank you for being here today. I want to thank you for your service. We are grateful for the leadership. You have served both as the Special Representative for Syria Engagement and the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. You certainly, sir, have a lot on your plate. And I want to thank you for everything you have done for the country.

In 2012, President Obama told the world he had a red line in Syria that Bashar Al-Assad dare not cross, or would have to deal with the United States. In 2013, Assad crossed that line using sarin gas on his own people. And I remember seeing the vivid pictures of dead men, women, and children, in hospitals and on the street, writhing in pain as they died. The world cried out against this crime against humanity. And yet, the Obama Administration did nothing.

Because we were absent, Putin was able to intervene and his Russian forces continue to enable Assad's carnage in Syria today. Under Assad's reign, buoyed by Russia, ISIS grew, millions of Syrians were forced to flee, and terrorists hidden among them attacked innocents in France, England, Spain, Turkey, and Northern Africa; anywhere they could go to attack in the name of ISIS. Thousands of foreigners remain in Iraq and Syria. These include ISIS fighters, their families, and children born under ISIS's rule. I encourage nations around the world to bring their citizens home and deliver justice, as America has done by example.

I was greatly concerned by the announcement that the United States, as was the chairman, that we withdraw our military presence of Syria. Fortunately, the Administration has slow-walked its timeline for withdrawing. And I would argue that we cannot afford to withdraw and leave a power vacuum, just as the Obama Administration did in Iraq, which caused ISIS to rear its ugly head.

As violence and instability continue to plague Iraq and Syria, the world must support a sovereign, democratic Iraq, and counter the meddling of nations like Iran that we heard in our classified briefing yesterday. Compounding an already dire situation, Bashar al-Assad continues to consolidate his hold over Syria through unrelenting brutality. Most recently, he and his Russian backers escalated their attacks on innocent civilians in Idlib, contrary to international agreements.

Chairman Engel and I have called on Assad and Putin to stand down immediately. I am encouraged that the Senate also is marking up our Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act today. This bill holds Assad and those that back him accountable through sanctions for his brutality against innocent people. He cannot be rewarded by us offering assistance to rebuild his regime.

Millions of civilians have fled Assad's oppression and violence, causing devastating humanitarian, probably the most devastating humanitarian and refugee crisis in the world. Neighboring host countries have done their best to help, but are reeling from the influx of refugees, you know, in Turkey, in Jordan, and elsewhere in Europe.

The United States has been a key partner providing its assistance, but this crisis will only intensify under Assad's continued control. The United States cannot accept a butcher like Assad as the leader of Syria. We cannot normalize relations with him, and we should be doing everything we can to urge other countries to similarly withhold normalization, including economic ties with Syria.

Earlier this month, The New York Times published an in-depth examination of the Assad regime's vast network of prisons. Over 100,000 people entered these prisons and never came out. We saw the pictures, the chairman and I, with a man named Omar who escaped one of these prisons. And it was nothing short of a holocaust.

The world cannot and must not pretend Assad is the legitimate head of the State, and if Assad runs Syria, it should never be open for business. The problems with the regime are not only Assad himself, but his cozy relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. As this committee knows well, Iran is using Syria as part of its land bridge connecting Iran to the Mediterranean Sea. From their perch in Syria, Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, they can easily transfer weapons to Lebanon and threaten our ally Israel.

So, Ambassador Jeffrey, I look forward to hearing your assessment of these threats. What, if anything, can be done in terms of political reconciliation? And what could be done in terms of solutions?

And before I close, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask unanimous consent that Representative French Hill, an original cosponsor of your Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, be recognized to participate in this hearing, as specified in Committee Rule 4(b)(4).

Chairman ENGEL. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Well, thank you, Mr. McCaul. I certainly agree with the bulk of your testimony, and I think that this is not a partisan issue. This needs to be handled by all of us. So, I thank you for your very, very good statement.

So, Ambassador James Jeffrey currently serves as the Secretary of State's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and a Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. He has held several senior national security positions, including Deputy National Security Advisor and Ambassador to Iraq, Turkey, and, of course, one of my favorites, Albania.

Without objection, the witness' prepared testimony will be entered into the record in its entirety. And to summarize your remarks, Ambassador, I now recognize you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JAMES F. JEFFREY, SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR SYRIA ENGAGEMENT AND SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE GLOBAL COALITION TO DEFEAT ISIS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. JEFFREY. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity for me to brief you on the Administration's Syria policy today.

The policy we have laid out in my written testimony that you have just entered into the record is based upon the report entitled, "Report on the U.S. Strategy for Syria," submitted in classified form to the U.S. Congress by the President at the end of February, and is broadly consistent with voices from the Congress, including the recent letter by many Members of both Houses on how we should go forward on Syria. Our bottom line is this conflict must end and it must end now.

Committee leadership has laid out the many tragedies associated with this conflict and the many crimes of the Assad regime. There are so many; I would like to just add a few and emphasize a few others.

First of all, the refugee flow and ID, internally displaced, persons flow together has amounted to well over 11 million people. Almost half or half of the country's population have fled their homes, mainly to avoid what Assad does to his own citizenry. This has not only put pressure, as you noted, Congressman, on Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon next door, but also, by a flood of over a million refugees very precipitously toward Europe, tremendous political pressure on European States.

The Assad regime, either inadvertently or deliberately, contributed to the rise of ISIS, which we have just finished defeating as a State, but still have to deal with as a terrorist entity throughout the Middle East and beyond. This regime, as you noted, has used chemical weapons repeatedly. The regime has threatened its neighbors, all of them, but we are particularly concerned about the threat of Iranian power projection forces in Syria aiming at Israel. And I will touch on that a bit in a second.

Finally, we now have five outside military forces operating officially or unofficially inside Syria: the Russian, the Iranian, U.S., Turkish, and in the air the Israelis. Many of these forces are in close proximity to each other, pursuing differing goals. We have had some serious incidents, such as a shootdown of a Russian military aircraft back in September, and a crisis can break out at any moment. This is a new danger. We have seen many problems in the Middle East in the last 40 years, but not since the Yom Kippur War in 1973 have we had so many military forces in such close proximity in a combat environment.

So, what is the Administration strategy? We are, first, going to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We will press for the withdrawal of all Iranian forces from the entirety Syria, and we will achieve a political solution to the conflict through the U.N. process under the 2015 Security Council Resolution 2254.

Our top-line goal for a Syria that we and the international community can live with is one that does not support terror, one that does not use weapons of mass destruction, one that does not provide a base for Iran, one that does not threaten its neighbors, one that is accountable for what it and its officials have done to its own population, and one that creates an environment that allows its half of the population that has fled to come home.

So, how will we specifically try to achieve this? As the President said in the U.N. General Assembly in September, we want to deescalate the military campaign, essentially freeze the battlefield, which we have pretty well done since last August, and second, reinvigorate the U.N. political process.

We are working closely with our partners and allies to this end, offering a step-by-step implementation of the deescalation and political provisions of Resolution 2254; for example, in Secretary Pompeo's recent, very positive meetings with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. In so doing, we have broad support of the United Nations, our NATO and EU allies and partners, and Arab League States.

If the regime and its sponsors do not accept this path forward, we, aligned with much of the international community, will continue the very broad economic and diplomatic pressure on this regime. It currently occupies only 60 percent of its territory and, as I said, half its population is not under its control. It is under crushing U.S. and EU economic sanctions, complemented by the additional sanctions against Iran and Hezbollah that this Administration has put on. It faces strong U.N. Security Council demands for political change and is subject to a boycott on reconstruction assistance and on diplomatic recognition, including any return to the Arab League.

We would much prefer to pursue the positive agenda of deescalation and political reinvigoration I just described, but we are prepared to maintain our policy of pressure, including full support for Israeli actions in defense of its national security as long as required.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jeffrey follows:]

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Searching for Solutions in Syria: The Trump Administration's Strategy

Statement of

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey

Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

May 22, 2019

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, I want to thank you for your committee's close attention to this issue. Last November I testified before the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee and I'm honored to have the opportunity to be here before the Full Committee today. Our tactics have evolved over the course of the past months, but we remain steadfast in our resolve to pursue the strategic goals in Syria I outlined last time.

The Syrian conflict has raged for over eight years, fueled by the Bashar al-Assad regime's despotic and barbaric treatment of its own citizens, Russia's enabling of Assad's brutality, and Iran's malign influence in the region. The Syrian civil war has driven over half of Syria's prewar population of approximately 20 million people from their homes, killed more than half a million men, women, and children, and witnessed repeated use of horrific chemical weapons—despite Syria's obligations under Security Council resolution 2118 and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Russia has also failed to uphold its pledge to act as guarantor of the regime's compliance with the 2013 Geneva deal on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons. The regime continues to devastate its own country and oppresses its citizens. An end to the conflict should achieve justice and accountability for the Syrian people, including by addressing the regime's brutal and systematic efforts to silence Syrian calls for reform by killing, torturing, and detaining ordinary citizens.

As described in the Administration's classified Syria strategy paper provided to Congress in February, 2019, the Administration is pursuing three mutually reinforcing whole-of-government strategic objectives in Syria - the enduring defeat of ISIS, the removal of all Iranian-led forces from Syria, and the resolution of the

Syrian crisis through a political solution in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254.

In March, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS achieved an important victory with the territorial defeat of ISIS. We are inspired by the battlefield success of our own service men and women, and those of our partner forces on the ground – primarily the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). One hundred per cent of the territory ISIS held, more than 40,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria, has been liberated from ISIS control. This critical milestone represents a crushing strategic and psychological blow to ISIS, gives millions of innocent civilians a brighter future, and underscores the unwavering commitment of our local partners and our partners in the Coalition. However, the fight is not over and we understand our work is far from complete. As the D-ISIS campaign in northeast Syria transitions from liberating territory to rooting out the remaining ISIS presence and preventing an ISIS resurgence, we will work with our partners and allies to enable critical stabilization efforts and assist the humanitarian needs of displaced Syrians unable to return home in a safe manner.

ISIS remains a significant threat to the United States, to the region, and our allies and partners. We saw this in the horrific Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, which have been linked to ISIS. We continue to pursue the enduring defeat of ISIS especially denying it safe haven . The President has been clear that the defeat of ISIS is one of the Administration's top priorities.

On February 21 President Trump announced that a limited number of U.S. Armed Forces will remain in northeast Syria as part of the continued Coalition mission to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. This is in addition to our continued

presence at Al Tanf Garrison in southern Syria. The presence of these forces will help to continue operations against ISIS, prevent an ISIS resurgence and maintain stability in Syria – both of which are critical to the security of our regional and global allies, and especially to U.S. national security.

The Iranian regime's malign behavior has left us no choice but to pursue the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria. Iran's reckless behavior makes the situation in Syria more dangerous, and the vast majority of the international community agrees. Iranian-backed forces use bases inside Syria to participate in violence again the Syrian people and launch attacks against Israel. Iran and its proxies threaten U.S. national security by sowing instability in the region that exacerbates tensions between communities and provides space for terrorist groups to thrive.

The United States and our allies have talked to Russia about a path toward a Syrian political solution many times, including the meeting I attended with Secretary Pompeo in Sochi earlier this month. Despite our differences, we believe Russia's own interests are not served by a murderous Syrian regime rejected by its people and the international community or by Iranian power projected into Syria as a platform. Instead, the United States and Russia have a shared interest in a secure and stable Syria, one with normal relations with its neighbors and the outside world – a Syria in which foreign forces not there before the conflict are no longer present. If Russia wants to achieve such an outcome, it should join efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing actions and malign influence in Syria. Specifically, to use its influence with the Assad regime to bring about the removal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the country.

During our most recent trip to Russia with Secretary Pompeo we approached the Russians in a spirit of pragmatism. I returned with a sense of possibilities. Russia indicated it was willing in principle to achieve all of our goals, a political process under UNSCR 2254 reaching agreement on constitutional revision, free and fair UN-managed national elections, and governance that serves the Syrian people, encourages the return of refugees and internally displaced persons , and meets Security Council demands the Russians have committed to in order to deescalate the conflict, citing Idlib.

Despite the recent tragic offensive there, Moscow has reconfirmed, at least on paper, their commitment the ceasefire deal with the Turks. Russia also agrees in principle with withdrawal of foreign forces, including Iranian forces. It took initial measures to this end in southwest Syria in 2018. Unfortunately, Iranian-commanded forces did not truly comply. In return, we have acknowledged that the U.S. and our partners would gradually return to a normal relationship with a reformed Syrian government that honors the will of the Syrian people, but only in response to verified steps required by our sanctions and our other policies.

As the Committee knows, I have worked closely with my Turkish counterparts balancing their legitimate security concerns while working towards the defeat of ISIS. I was in Ankara earlier this month, to negotiate an arrangement regarding a so-called safe zone in northeast Syria in an effort to de-escalate any potential for violence. That diplomatic effort continues apace as we continue to focus on finding solutions.

We are seized with the situation in Idlib province, home to more than three million persons. Recent Syrian regime barrel bombs and Russian and Syrian airstrikes have killed scores; destroyed medical facilities, schools, and residences; and displaced more than 180,000 people. We also remain vigilant against any Assad regime renewed use of chemical weapons in Idlib. The United States will not tolerate the use of these heinous weapons by anyone, anywhere. If the regime uses chemical weapons again, the United States and our allies will respond quickly and appropriately. We are repeating the message President Trump gave in September concerning Idlib– that such assaults are a reckless escalation. We will employ all of our tools of national and allied power to prevent a crisis that would result in further humanitarian disaster threatening hundreds of thousands, as well as Turkey's security along its border.

Our focus going forward is to continue efforts to de-escalate the violence, with a focus right now on Idlib, and to reinvigorate a UN-led political process to end the Syrian conflict. We have committed significant United States resources into mitigating the suffering in this conflict, providing more than 9.5 billion dollars of humanitarian aid since the start of the conflict. We have also strongly committed resources to the fight against ISIS, where we have led the Global Coalition's military effort in Syria – operating by, with, and through our local partners on the ground. That military effort has been supplemented by hundreds of millions of international donations toward stabilizing areas freed from ISIS to prevent the return of that horrific terror group. For example, the Global Coalition has contributed more than $100 million to explosive remnants of war clearance since 2017, clearing more than 25,500 explosive hazards and since April 2018.

Finding a solution in Syria will not only bring a close to this bloody chapter in the country's history and allow for refugees and internally displaced persons to finally choose to return home voluntarily, safely, and with dignity, but is part of the Administration's broader Middle East strategy. A political solution in Syria will help to decrease Iran's malign influence, end the regime's sponsorship of terrorism and the power vacuum that allows it to flourish, increase the security of our partners and allies, and end the barbaric use of chemical weapons by one of the few regimes that still uses them against its own people.

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I welcome the opportunity to answer your questions.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ambassador.

Let me ask you a quick question. I am hearing from my sources that there are terrible, ongoing attacks against the civilian population every day in Syria. Mr. McCaul mentioned it in his remarks. Can you tell us what is happening? Idlib, Idlib.

Mr. JEFFREY. About 2 weeks ago, the regime launched ground attacks into Idlib. This is the first time that ground attacks have occurred, Mr. Chairman, since the Sochi agreement between Turkey and Russia to impose a cease-fire in that area back in September.

There have been both attacks by the opposition, particularly a group that we consider terrorists, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an offshoot of al-Qaeda, in Idlib against the regime and against a Russian base to the south off and on in that intervening period, and air strikes by Russian and Syrian forces, artillery exchanges. But this is the first ground defense, and it has been going on for about 2 weeks.

It has taken about 74 square kilometers of territory, not very much, actually not in Idlib, but to the south in northern Hama Province. But, right now, the opposition is reinforcing its positions. It has launched a counterattack. It has retaken some ground in the last 24 hours.

Turkey has a military presence there, observation post. Turkey has reinforced generally its positions. And so, we see a seesaw battle right along the perimeter.

DNMMeanwhile, as you noted, the bombing attacks, which have been indiscriminate and very vicious, have sent some 150 to 200 thousand people in Idlib, most of whom are already internally displaced people, to move again to temporary housing and create a huge burden on our very broad humanitarian effort that we and the rest of the international community are making.

So, we are watching this very closely; also, the reports of chemical weapons use. So far, we cannot confirm it, but we are watching it.

Chairman ENGEL. In terms of Idlib, what message are we sending to the Russians? Are they complying with cease-fire obligations or are they not?

Mr. JEFFREY. We have pressed the Russians repeatedly, including in the visit of the Secretary to Sochi last week with President Putin, to return to the cease-fire that the Russians agreed to. The Russian argument is—and it has some limited credibility—that it receives attacks from this terrorist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and that the Turks had agreed to deal with that group and they have not.

That is true, but, nonetheless, we think that these attacks are not all that significant and what we really need in Idlib and throughout the rest of the country is a cease-fire. It is called for in the U.N. resolution. It reflects the reality on the ground. These conflicts or these back-and-forth exchanges are not going to change very much in the future of Syria. They just put tremendous pressure on civilians and they raise the specter of one kind of nation-to-nation clash, as we have come close to having in the past. So, we are very much engaged in trying to get this stopped and get it back to the cease-fire we have had, basically, since September.

Chairman ENGEL. When the President mentioned that we were going to get out of Syria, which was a huge mistake and I hope they are walking it back a bit, one of the reasons that I think it is a terrible mistake is because we have had the Kurds fighting side by side with us as our loyal and faithful allies and friends. And they have absorbed lots of casualties, prevented Americans from being killed.

And so now, to leave and abandon them, I mean, bad enough that this war has taken a turn that no one here is happy about, bad enough that there are so many civilians murdered in cold blood, but now if we are going to send the message that the United States is an unreliable ally, and that we are going to abandon you the minute it is convenient for us, what kind of message does that send and why would anybody want to be our allies in the future?

Mr. JEFFREY. I think if you look at the specifics of the original decision, and then, the February modification of it, I think that we are maintaining our credibility. Here's why. The President was talking about American ground troops in his December decision. He made it very clear he wanted the coalition, the anti-ISIS coalition, under which the American forces are working, to remain on in the northeast after the defeat of the caliphate, the physical state of ISIS. We would have a different military mission. He thought that our coalition partners, many of whom are NATO States, could take on that ground role.

We never said that we would pull out our air deconfliction and, essentially, air presence over the Northeast. We said that, as the President said publicly when he was in Iraq, we are willing to go back in if there are ISIS concentrations we need to take out with our own forces, and that we would closely monitor it. And he made it clear, both publicly and, also, to our Turkish NATO ally, that he was very concerned about the situation with the Kurds.

So, we were pursuing that track, but, then, many of our coalition partners said, we are not going to remain in or go in if there is not some American presence. So, the President in February stated that, while we would continue our coordinated and deliberate withdrawal, we would be leaving a residual American force to work with what we hope will be a larger coalition presence to continue the overall stabilization mission in the enduring defeat of Daesh in the northeast. So, I think that we are in a good place with our allies on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and with the rest of the coalition.

Chairman ENGEL. Well, let me just say that you have the hand of Erdogan again. Turkey's President Erdogan has made no secret of his desire to expand Turkish control over a section of northern Syria, extending as far as 20 kilometers south from the currently internationally recognized Syria-Turkey border. Turkey claims that this is in order to ensure its security. But many view it, and I view it, as a thinly veiled attempt to suppress the Syrian Kurds, who have been our partners in fighting ISIS.

What did the President promise President Erdogan with respect to the presence of U.S. troops and our support for the SDF? What progress have you made achieving the compromise—you spoke about some of that—with Turkey? It both addresses their border security concerns, but minimizes the threat to the Syrian Kurds.

And finally, as recently as early March, General Mazloum, a U.S. ally and head of the SDF, publicly stated U.S. forces must remain in Syria and stand by commitments to Syrian Kurds. What concerns has he raised with you? I want to give you a chance to expand or expound on certain of your statements because I think this is crucial.

Mr. JEFFREY. What the President has told President Erdogan, and also what he has said publicly, is, first of all, he does not want any action taken against SDF allies, many of whom are Kurds. Second, he also does not want any attack from the SDF or from the Syrian Kurds against Turkey. The President is aware of the traditional and political links between much of the SDF Kurdish movement and the PKK, and the long and very tragic history of the PKK and its efforts to try to overthrow the Turkish government.

So, the Turks do have security concerns we recognize, but also our allies have security concerns as well, our partners in the northeast. And the way we have done this is to work with the Turks and with our local allies and partners to set up a safe zone of indeterminate depth, where only local, essentially police would be present, and the Turks would have eyes on it; we would have eyes on it. And we would work this in a way with the SDF, who we are negotiating with, and with the Turks. We do not have an agreement yet, but our position is that this is the only secure way forward for all the people involved, us and the coalition in the fight against ISIS, the SDF and the people of the northeast, and our NATO ally, Turkey. So, we will continue with that.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to associate myself with your remarks in terms of I think an American presence is absolutely essential in Syria. I think a complete withdrawal, we saw what happened when we did that in Iraq. We should learn from our mistakes and history. It would only create a power vacuum which will, then, create more chaos and destruction. The Russians and Assad would have free rein, the Iranians would move in, the Turks would destroy, absolutely slaughter the Kurds, and God knows what would happen in those prisons where we have 2,000 jihadists that are not that well-secured, in my opinion. It would be a complete disaster.

And so, my question, I think this is probably the most complicated foreign policy challenge that we face. And somehow, you got that assignment. Congratulations to you, but we have got, you know, you have got SDF; you have got Assad; you have got the Kurds, the Sunni Arabs, the Russians, Iran, Turkey, all forces, and Israel to some extent. And, of course, we have a presence.

I know there is a sort of plan for a political process, and I think in 2021 some sort of election. Can that be done with any legitimacy, and what role would Assad play in that?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you, Congressman McCaul.

It is a complicated situation. I have been involved in other ones that were really difficult as well, and for better or for worse, I was the Ambassador in Iraq in 2011, when we, I think, mistakenly, as you said, withdrew our last forces.

The political process under the U.N. has the support of almost all of the nations of the United Nations, and thus, we are able to turn to people and say, no reconstruction assistance to Assad until he allows free and fair elections. No return to the Arab League until he does far more to have his own population returned to their homes.

So, this has been working to, essentially, freeze the political side of the conflict until we do have the U.N. process move forward. At the same time, we are doing everything we can. We talked about Idlib, but throughout the whole country there are these various pockets where we are, where the Turks are, where the opposition is, and we are doing everything we can to freeze these deconfliction lines and to turn them into, under 2254, cease-fires that are administered or at least managed by the U.N. That is what the resolution calls for. And since last summer, there has been no significant change in this.

Meanwhile, we have been able to use our freedom of action inside Syria to deal a final defeat to the ISIS caliphate or State. We still have ISIS elements functioning as terrorists or similar to insurgents in the northeast and elsewhere, but it is a very different threat now.

So, we have made progress on ISIS. We have basically frozen the military conflict, and we are continuing to maintain the political and economic pressure on the regime. Is this a perfect policy? Can I promise an election in 2 years and an end to this? No, but I can promise that we and all of the people I am talking to throughout the Middle East and in Europe are pretty much committed to keeping the pressure on until we do see this political process that you described.

Mr. MCCAUL. And again, I think if there was an election today, Assad probably would win by 95 percent, and it would not be a legitimate election. And so, I guess this pressure that we continue to put on—the Senate is marking up again the Caesar bill today, which will put pressure on Assad, which is good. I just do not know how you get all these various factions in a coalition of some form of governance.

Mr. JEFFREY. We have tried in other countries with some success in some cases. Iraq is today a functioning democracy, with an awful lot of effort, to be sure.

On any election involving Assad, I think you are absolutely right, based upon history, with those areas that he can control with his secret police. But, as I said, half of the population is not under his control, and the U.N. mandates this specifically; everyone votes, including the diaspora under U.N. observation. And there is one thing the U.N. does well, is observe elections.

So, I think he would be quite surprised at the results of any election, if he behaves in the future as he has in the past. And it is one reason why we are pushing for elections. You do not get to a resolution of this conflict without 2254, and the center of that is a free and fair election.

Mr. MCCAUL. Just let me close by saying, I chaired the Homeland Security Committee for 6 years. That 2014-through-'16 period was terrifying, the number of external operations being plotted, I

would say 95 percent of which we stopped. And now, we have the collapse of the caliphate.

I want to commend you for your great work in that effort, but I do agree, while their governance has been taken away, they are still embedded and are still a threat. And I see the threat actually moving to places like Northern Africa and the Sahel region as well. So, we have to maintain a watchful eye on them.

Mr. JEFFREY. I agree. Having just had the job for 3 months, I cannot take credit for destroying the caliphate. I will say that it has been American leadership through two Administrations. It has been an 80-country, an organization coalition, a true international effort, and the courage of the people on the ground, particularly in Syria and Iraq, who have done the fighting, that has led to this result. It is a good example of how we can succeed by, with, and through the international community and local partners, and it is a good model for the future.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, sir.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Deutch.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks, Ambassador Jeffrey, for testifying, for your service to our Country. We are grateful.

As I told you when you appeared before the Middle East Subcommittee last fall, many of us were encouraged by your appointment. The Syrian conflict has led to the deaths of more than half a million people; displaced close to 12 million, both inside Syria and neighboring countries; created a humanitarian crisis that has destabilized neighboring countries in the region likely for decades to come.

The war created a vacuum that was filled by ISIS, allowed Iran to expand its influence throughout the Middle East and threaten our ally, Israel. And since its military intervention in 2015, Russia has used its foothold in this area to assert its interest throughout the region; expand its political, military, and economic influence; attempt to reclaim its status as a great power, and offer itself as an alternative to the United States leadership. And because of Russian and Iranian assistance, the Assad regime has remained in power, continues its assault on Syrians, including the reports of chemical weapons attacks just yesterday.

Preventing the return of ISIS and ending the Syrian conflict through negotiated political solutions are keys to stabilizing the Middle East. That is clear.

Mr. Ambassador, I commend your efforts to do so. I am concerned that your very serious efforts are perhaps being undermined by what appears to be a chaotic policy coming out of the White House. In your testimony before the subcommittee at the end of November, you said, "Russia presses for a premature withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces. Such an untimely U.S. military departure would enable ISIS to return, allow Iran to fill the vacuum, place Iraq's stability at risk, and increase the threats to Syria's neighbors, such as our key allies, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. Our presence enables us to prevent ISIS's resurgence. It also indirectly helps galvanize diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. By virtue

of our presence, we are making progress toward these goals, foremost among them the enduring defeat of ISIS."

But, in December 2018, just a few weeks after you testified, President Trump announced the rapid and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, giving little notice to international allies and partners on the ground. His decision, you recall, prompted the resignation of Secretary of Defense Mattis, Special Envoy Brett McGurk. And the Administration now publicly says that it plans to keep anywhere from 400 to 1,000 troops in Syria.

The question is, do you believe the current number of U.S. troops is sufficient to achieve the goals that you articulated—defeat ISIS, remove Iranian-backed forces from Syria, and achieve a political solution? And in November you argued that a military presence bolsters diplomacy. And did the President's announcement in December undermine the very serious diplomatic efforts that you have been engaged in?

Mr. JEFFREY. We continued our talks after—first of all, I stand by what I said in November—we continued our diplomatic talks with our partners and allies. Once again, we were not withdrawing from Syria or from the northeast. We never said that we would withdraw from al-Tanf in the south, for example. We were withdrawing ground forces from the northeast, but we were keeping other military and, if you will, diplomatic presence there. And our expectation was that coalition partners would, in the spirit of the burden-sharing that this Administration I think is very commendably pursuing with all of our allies and partners around the world, would take on a bigger role.

Mr. DEUTCH. So, if I may, Ambassador Jeffrey, what is the status of that 6 months later? The President announced the rapid withdrawal of our troops. The hope was that our coalition partners were going to step up. So, what commitments have we seen there?

Mr. JEFFREY. They are stepping up. We are still working, and the lead is Secretary Shanahan and Chairman Dunford. They are stepping up. We do a lot of supporting work with the foreign ministries and the chancellories throughout Europe and elsewhere in that regard. We do not have the final figure yet, but I am absolutely confident that it will be considerably more than the numbers and countries we had before, which we do not talk about personally officially here because we let them do it. But they have been——

Mr. DEUTCH. Is the current—I am sorry, Ambassador Jeffrey, I just do not have a lot of time—is the current number of troops, though, sufficient to achieve the goals that you have laid out?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mr. DEUTCH. And let me just ask about one other thing. Eleven million–12 million Syrians have left their homes, half of them, over 6 million, to other countries. We have talked a lot about the role of our military on the ground in Syria. We have not talked enough about the other kind of American leadership, which is to confront the crisis of the 6 million Syrians who have fled the country and the other 6 million who are internally displaced. Is there not a greater role for the United States to play in setting an example for the rest of the world in opening our shores to more of those refugees? Is that something we should consider? What kind of message

would that send as we attempt to work our way through this crisis?

Mr. JEFFREY. The message we are sending—and I am glad you raised this, Congressman—the message we are sending is American leadership on this crisis. Specifically, we have provided, the United States, almost $10 million since this conflict began to deal with the refugees and the IDPs. We deal with both. We deal inside Syria. We deal in regime areas, non-regime areas. We deal in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. And we are very proud of that. We are by far leading the international community in that.

We believe that it is best for these people to return to their homes, for these people to be settled, to the extent they need to be settled away from their homes, as close as possible to Syria or within Syrian safe areas. And our goal is to continue that humanitarian assistance while pressing for a way to get them back home.

Mr. DEUTCH. No greater role for us to play here?

Mr. JEFFREY. Our greater role is to encourage the international community by our example to solve this conflict and to take care of the refugees and IDPs until it is solved.

Mr. DEUTCH. Other places? OK. Thank you, Ambassador.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Deutch.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Ambassador, thank you for being here today.

Can you please describe Iran's current entrenchment in Syria? How many troops and proxies does it have on the ground? And are they participating in the Idlib offensive?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you, Congressman.

Iran has some thousands of its—they call them advisors—Quds Force elements under Qasem Soleimani of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which this Administration has recently put on the terrorist list, long overdue. And they provide in some respects the leadership of a much larger number. I do not have the specifics, but it certainly would be in the 10,000-plus category of Iranian-backed proxies from third countries. The most prominent is the Hezbollah movement from Lebanon, who have been active fighting the Assad forces.

But what really concerns us even more is Iranian power projection systems, long-range missiles, drones, radar systems, air defense capabilities, that you do not need to fight an internal civil war against a lightly armed opposition force. That is not what those forces are there for. They are there to threaten Syria's neighbors, beginning with Israel.

In terms of the Idlib conflict, we have not seen a significant Iranian presence. We have seen Russian air presence and we have seen Syrian ground presence. But the Iranians are very active in other areas, holding other parts of the overall front in the country.

Mr. WILSON. And this increasing concern about Assad's involvement and exploitation of the U.N. activities in Syria, for example, is it true that U.N. Food and Agriculture Department has given more than $13 million to the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture for seed and fodder? And additionally, is it true that the U.N. spends approximately $10 million annually for the Four Seasons Hotel in

Damascus, which is owned by the Assad regime money launderer, Samer Foz, currently under EU sanctions?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you.

I can confirm that the U.N. does have a headquarters in the Four Seasons Hotel and that Foz is the owner of it, or at least he is the controller of it. And we are looking very carefully at Foz. The EU has, commendably, already sanctioned him. I cannot commit to the $10 million figure. I will have to look at it.

The U.N. does provide some assistance to government agencies in Syria, as do other international assistance agencies; also, to the Syrian Red Cross, but in most cases these are fairly well monitored and managed to assure that it is not being diverted to the regime. But we will look into that specific contribution as soon as we can.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much.

And do you believe that we can adequately defeat ISIS operational capabilities in Syria while Assad remains in power?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. I think that I will not say Assad remains in power. While Assad's policies remain anything like what we have seen now, we will be able to sustain a ISIS stabilized area in the northeast with the policies we have now. But in the rest of the country we see ISIS quite active. They have a presence in Idlib and they have a presence in the southern desert on the other side of the Euphrates. We have seen very little capability of the Assad regime to defeat ISIS militarily, and Assad's policies to his own population are the main accelerant to recruiting for ISIS throughout that country.

Mr. WILSON. And finally, what is the U.S. policy regarding the best way to hold Assad and his associates accountable for their crimes against the Syrian people? What efforts are we making to document his crimes and hold members of the regime criminally responsible?

Mr. JEFFREY. There is a report that is coming up today from the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center. There is a U.N. independent agency that is monitoring these things. Of all of the conflicts I have been involved in, Congressman—and that is a fair number—this is the one that has the most involvement by the United Nations, by the international community more generally, and by Syrian citizens, by local citizens themselves, in trying to hold this regime accountable. The record is very clear, and this is part of the reconciliation and political process.

Mr. WILSON. That is very encouraging.

And I yield back my time.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Bera.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As the chairman stated in his opening comments, what has happened in Syria really is a tragedy. And there have been missed opportunities at the outset of the civil war, certainly a missed opportunity in 2013 when he crossed the red line. And we are now in a mess here.

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you for your service. I also want to commend our prior Special Envoy. Brett McGurk, who really dedicated a lot of time and effort into solving this issue, as well as solving ISIS.

The frustration that I have—and it is not directed at you, Ambassador Jeffrey—but I agree with the goals that you have laid out, but what we are looking at is not something that is going to happen in a year or 2 years. What we are looking at is a sustained commitment over years, if not decades. Particularly when you look at the reconstruction, if the goal is to allow the Syrians that have fled to return to their homeland, this is going to be a long, sustained, international effort. And the President's failure to engage Congress, because Presidents are here 2 years, maybe another 4 years, et cetera, but Congress will be here for a long time, and we have got to have this sustained commitment and partnership.

What frustrates me is the interagency joint decisionmaking process. I was in the region last December. We met with Brett McGurk. We met with our commanders in the field. Everything was going well. We came back the next week and a policy shift was tweeted out that said we were withdrawing. Clearly, no one knew that. To the best of my knowledge, the Special Envoy did not know that that shift was coming. Secretary Mattis did not know. General Votel has talked about the fact that he was not informed about it. And we cannot have policy that—you know, I am not questioning the decision; that is up to the President, but if we are going to do this, we have to have the full team on the same page working together. So, that is just my statement.

I think the Members of Congress here share your desire to find a solution over the long term for Syria, and it is in our interest to do that. Given where we are today, Assad currently controls about 70 percent of the country. His forces look like they are continuing to make advances. You know, this is not someone that we like. This is a brutal dictator. He should be held accountable for his crimes. But is there a solution at this juncture politically that does not involve bringing Assad to the table? And what is our strategy and how do we do that?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. Any strategy involves the Syrian government under Assad or, if they decide he has to stand for elections in 2021, somebody else to come to the table. That is how the U.N. works. But there is a big price if they do not come to the table.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, we are pretty confident that that package of measures that we and the international community are imposing on the Assad regime are making them think about options and making their supporters, both Russia and Iran, think about ways to get out of this mess, rather than stay in it, because it is dangerous and very costly for everyone, but beginning with Assad, Iran, and Russia. So, that is the general way forward.

But we will continue this pressure until we do get a conclusion that meets our and our partners' and allies' security interests. That is absolutely essential to us. I think that, again, our presence in Syria, including the northeast, while in the long run we are planning on leaving there, for the moment we are keeping a residual force. That is in response to concerns of our allies and partners, and a response, quite frankly, of concerns from the U.S. Congress. We adjusted the policy a bit and will continue to listen to both you and people around the world who are working with us in this collective effort, because there is agreement on the end-state, to try to do the best job we can.

Mr. BERA. Well, thank you for that. And again, going forward, as you go back to the Administration and share with them, look at Congress as an ally and share with the Administration that both Democrats and Republicans in a bipartisan way on this committee share that goal of trying to find a peaceful resolution here, and understand that long term it is the same commitment, and we are allies, not adversaries.

Mr. JEFFREY. We all appreciate that. Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Bera.

Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Jeffrey, over here. Thank you for your time and your lifetime of service in the diplomatic arena, sir.

I know we are all talking about this, but I want to continue with some additional questions in this arena. In September, you know, a colossal humanitarian crisis was averted when Turkey and Russia helped broker a cease-fire between the Assad regime and opposition groups still active in Idlib, the last remaining opposition stronghold. Yet, Russia and Assad escalated violence in the months since the so-called truce was agreed to, killing at least an additional 170 civilians and displacing thousands more.

A few days ago, Russia again claimed that Syrian government forces would, quote, "unilaterally cease-fire" in Idlib. But opposition forces say that shelling and air attacks have continued. And I am deeply concerned about the safety of the 3 million civilians in Idlib. What does this development mean for civilians and displaced persons?

Mr. JEFFREY. If the fighting continues and, in particular, if it gets worse, because it is only in a very small section of greater Idlib at present—in fact, it is actually, as I said, across the border into Hama Province——

Mrs. WAGNER. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. And Latakia Province.

But we are very, very concerned about this. We are concerned, first, about the use of chemical weapons, which we are still looking into, but at anytime this regime is willing to consider chemical weapons to aid its ground attacks, because it has the world's worst infantry fighting for it against people who really will fight for their lives and for their freedom.

Second, we are very concerned about the refugee flows, but, beyond that—and President Trump summed it up back in September, as you indicated, which gave impetus to the Sochi agreement——

Mrs. WAGNER. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. Because 10 days earlier Putin rejected a cease-fire. The President came out on the record and said it would be a reckless escalation of this conflict if there was a massive advance by the Syrian forces. So, beyond the chemical weapons, beyond refugees, a major military shift on the ground is not conducive to a settlement to this conflict. There can be no military solution. That is our position.

We have been working with the United Nations, two Security Council meetings in the past 10 days, a statement by the Secretary General of the U.N. The top EU three, Britain, France, and Germany, issued a statement. So, we are mobilizing the international

community. We are working closely with them and they are working closely with us to put pressure on Russia. That was a major purpose of the trip to Sochi last week. And I think it is having some effect.

Mrs. WAGNER. Well, and speaking of Russia, I know that Russia is playing a central role in the Astana talks, the regime's kind of preferred peace process. Opposition groups have said they doubt Russia's trustworthiness, but have been willing to take, I guess, the risk, in the hopes of ending the war.

Considering Russia's willingness to continue strikes on civilians during even this cease-fire, their doubts are more than, I think, justified. How can Russia credibly broker a peace agreement? And has Turkey provided a counterbalance at all?

Mr. JEFFREY. We do not turn to Russia to broker an agreement. We turn to the U.N. to do it. It is the U.N.'s job. The U.N. has appointed a Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen. We support him 100 percent. He deals with the Russians——

Mrs. WAGNER. And that is my point; they are trying to broker this deal in the Astana talks. It just seems untenable to me.

Mr. JEFFREY. We have not seen much success in the so-called Astana talks, and we continue to urge all parties to put their emphasis into the U.N. effort that is headquartered in Geneva. We work closely with the Russians. The Russians at time, for example, they did broker a cease-fire with Turkish President Erdogan over the weekend. It was violated by both sides——

Mrs. WAGNER. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. But we did see a diminution of the fighting at least. And we will probably, if experience is any guide, see several other pathetic, sorry, and much-broken cease-fires that will eventually slow down the conflict. That, for us, is what victory looks like in this awful war.

Mrs. WAGNER. It is just awful, and I know that the civilians in Idlib said that they fear mass extermination——

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mrs. WAGNER [continuing]. Again by the regime, as Assad consolidates his territorial gains.

Can you assess any more those concerns, anything you anticipate the State Department is going to be able to do to prevent these further mass atrocities, sir?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, we have our military presence in the region. And while its purpose is to defeat ISIS, our military presence inside Syria, we support the Turkish military presence in the northwest as a way to maintain stability without the regime pushing in. We support Israel's effort, very strongly Israel's efforts, including, while not official, over Syria against Iranian targets, as well as the diplomatic and economic measures that I have talked about here. It is a very broad gamut of activities that we are trying to manage and orchestrate here.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Ambassador.

And thank you for your indulgement, Mr. Chairman. My time has expired.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mrs. Wagner.

Mr. Espaillat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ambassador, for coming before us to testify.

The long, violent, drawn-out civil war in Syria and the ongoing terror campaign by ISIS is extremely concerning to all of us. I am particularly sort of concerned with the involvement of all the actors in this savage conflict that has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and unleashed a major exodus of folks that have been maimed with dirty bombs and all kinds of nasty warfare.

But, yet, there are external actors in all of this. For example, you have the Russians. Let's go through this. And the Trump Administration has a friendly, if not complicit, relationship with the Russians. You have the Iranians, who just yesterday President Trump said they have not shown any evidence of an attack, but, yet, went ahead to threaten them. You have Turkey, which President Trump just lowered their tariffs on steel from 50 percent to 25 percent, sending them to the 2018 levels. You have the Saudis and MDS. And, of course, we all know about the Khashoggi incident and how he was chopped up in little pieces. And yet, it seems to be an ongoing relationship with the White House. You have Qatar selling arms, as well as Saudi Arabia, to the rebels or if not terrorist groups in Syria. So, you have all these external actors with which we have sometimes a good relationship and sometimes a threatening relationship. This is a mess.

Now could you unravel this for us? Could you tell us exactly where we stand as a nation? You know, are the Russians our friends or our enemies? I mean, we know they hacked into our elections and may be getting ready to hack in again.

Is Iran a circumstantial ally to us and sometimes an enemy? Turkey, who has shown to be very brutal with its opposition and the Kurds? I mean, could you go down these countries, right, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and just unravel this for us? This is a mess.

Mr. JEFFREY. You have just described by workday, Mr. Congressman.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ESPAILLAT. I did not mean to start your day in a bad light.

Mr. JEFFREY. As a diplomat, you know I am going to tread gingerly into my response to your question. I will say that we believe that Russia can play an important role in resolving this conflict, just as it played an important role in making it worse. And that was the reason that Secretary Pompeo went to Sochi, and that President Putin met with him, because President Putin also, from everything I heard in the meeting—and we have seen otherwise—would like to find a solution to this conflict because it is a dangerous one for Russia. They have lost some troops. They have lost a lot of airplanes, and they are in a fairly precarious situation with a real loser of an ally in Assad.

Turkey is a NATO ally. Turkey on most issues related to Syria is pretty closely aligned with us, and that is very important. It is a country of 80 million population right in the center of the Middle East. It is the 17th largest economy in the world. It is crucial for almost anything we are trying to do in the region, and in most areas we cooperate pretty well with them, on not the domestic situation where we have had our issues, but on foreign policy. We are concerned about the relationship between Turkey and our SDF

partners in the northeast, which is why we are working this discussion or negotiation with the Turks in a safe zone. And we think we have made some progress and we are looking forward to making more.

Again, if I go down the list of allies that we human rights——

Mr. ESPAILLAT. The Saudis and Qatar, they seem to be fueling and giving arms to some of the rebel groups. What role do they play in this?

Mr. JEFFREY. Let me start with Iran because you raised Iran.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Yes, that is true.

Mr. JEFFREY. There is no doubt, including in the White House, that Iran is an extremely dangerous, expansionist force in the region. And almost everything we are doing in the region, to some degree in Afghanistan, but certainly Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere, is focused on Iran's expansionist agenda and its threat to our partners and allies.

Our partners and allies throughout the region—and you have named some of them—they all have their faults, but none of them are trying to expand throughout the region the way Iran is, and most of them are trying to do whatever desperate measures it takes to provide for the security and safety of their own populations. We disagree with their choices sometimes, but we think in all cases that we are dealing with it is sincere, with one major exception, and that is Iran.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you. In the interest of time, Mr. Chairman, thank you.

This is a mess, Ambassador. It shows how poor our foreign policy efforts are as a country. We are involved in a serious mess there. I do not know how we can unravel this.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Espaillat.

Let me just also acknowledge the many Syrian-American groups who have played such a positive role in trying to end the carnage in Syria. It has really been helpful to me and to others on the committee as well.

Mr. Wright.

Mr. WRIGHT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador, thank you for your outstanding service to our Country.

You have mentioned Israel before. I wanted to ask you about, if you could talk about the landscape of security interests in Israel, for Israel and Syria, and what we are doing to work with Israel to help them navigate those issues and protect Israel's interest? Could you speak to that?

Mr. JEFFREY. Certainly. Israel is a major player in the Middle East. Its own security and its work with other countries, for example, to defeat ISIS, and to push back on Iran, is absolutely vital for our overall strategy for the region.

By the same token, Israel is also under immediate threat by Iranian forces in Syria who, if they can be allowed to embed themselves in that country with long-range systems, would be able to open a third front on Israel next to Lebanon and Gaza. And therefore, the Israelis are determined at every level not to let that happen. We are supporting them a thousand percent.

I have met twice myself and once with Mike Pompeo with Prime Minister Netanyahu since September. So, that shows you the intensity of the meetings. Our National Security Advisor Bolton and our Defense Chiefs are constantly working with the Israelis to try to coordinate our policies. We share what we are doing with them in great detail; they do with us. They are an important player in our overall effort to try to bring this conflict to a close.

Mr. WRIGHT. Great. And I wanted to ask you, because I believe one of the great lessons of Syria is what happens when America abdicates, when we engage and, then, suddenly, disengage. And I believe one of the worst cases of absolute cowardice by an American President occurred in Syria when Obama drew a red line, they crossed it, and he walked away. And what happens when that happens, when America abdicates, is people die. Thousands died.

And so, what I want to hear from you is, does this President understand what happened there and will he keep the promises he makes with regard to any red line that might be drawn in the future?

Mr. JEFFREY. I took this job on the assumption that this Administration would stand by its commitments and would hold the line on Syria. So far, I believe it has absolutely done so.

Mr. WRIGHT. Excellent. Thank you, sir.

I yield back.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would my friend yield?

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes, I have yielded back.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would you yield to me?

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank my friend.

I just want to followup on something you said, Mr. Jeffrey, a little earlier. You seemed to be characterizing the fighting quality of the Syrian army. And I wanted to give you an opportunity to expand on that. Were you saying that, without chemical weapons, they actually would not have success on the battlefield?

Mr. JEFFREY. I think it was Napoleon who once said, "The worse the infantry, the more important the artillery," or, more generally, the fire support. Fire support can be Russian aircraft. Fire support can be barrel bombs from Syrian helicopters, and fire support can be chemical weapons dropped not only on military targets, which itself is illegal, but deliberately on civilians who create——

Mr. CONNOLLY. No, I understand that, Mr. Ambassador. What I was getting at was I thought there was an implicit criticism in what you said, and maybe accurately, about the fighting quality and readiness of the Syrian army without those things.

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, yes, they are incapable, from what we have seen, of defeating ISIS, for example. They, with much Russian help, took Palmyra several times, and then, kept losing it to lightly armed ISIS forces. They have not done particularly well in this campaign against Idlib. They are not an effective fighting force because, as far as we can tell, they do not believe in the leadership that they are supposed to die for.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I think that is really important testimony because the narrative is Assad is about to prevail, as if that army is a conquering, successful army, and it is really a much more complicated story.

Mr. JEFFREY. Every day we come to our jobs in the State Department and in the U.S. Government working on Syria, our goal is to ensure that that Assad regime does not gain another inch unless we have a political process and everybody wins, not just him.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you so much. And I want to thank my friend, Mr. Wright, for yielding.

Mr. SHERMAN [presiding]. As Mr. Wright's time as virtually expired, I will now call on the gentleman from Texas.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairman.

Since 2015, Russia has involved itself in Syria in order to support Bashar al-Assad's government. And recent reporting reveals Russia and Turkey have been cooperating in Syria to contain U.S. influence. Russian forces along with Iranian-backed Shiite militia have also succeeded in stemming local insurgent groups that the United States supports.

We have remained focused on the Geneva process as a roadmap to political settlement. But Russian, Iran, and Turkey have independently hosted their own peace talks in the Astana process where we are not a party.

So, my question is, in last week's meeting between Secretary Pompeo and President Putin, did Syria come up and, if so, what was discussed?

Mr. JEFFREY. Certainly. First of all, generally speaking, we do not see Russia and Turkey conspiring or cooperating to our disadvantage in Syria. We are aligned with Turkey on most issues. We do not like the Astana process very much because, although we are invited, we are not a member of it. But, generally, Turkey takes the side of the opposition and pretty much shares with us their positions in the Astana process. We just do not think it is an effective mechanism. It is not that we criticize Turkey's role in it per se.

In terms of Russia, what we have talked about, again, as I had outlined in my comments, is a step-by-step implementation of a constitutional process, which is under the United Nations, then elections, and then, a gradual freezing of this conflict. Again, the U.N. Resolution 2254, December 2015, calls, in paragraphs 5 through 9, for step-by-step cease-fires with U.N. monitoring and management, and then, an overall process that will bring the country back to something resembling normalcy.

That is what we have talked about with the Russians, and we have said, we are willing to work with you on this. Obviously, the Russians have had bases in Syria for a long time. Their bases are not in question on our part or anybody else's. They have an interest in a stable Syria that does not become a refuge for terrorism, nor do we. So, we have these common interests with them. Our difference is, in particular, the Iranian presence. The Russians have turned a blind eye to it. We do not see them having any interest in Iranian long-range systems or——

Mr. CASTRO. I guess a few questions. First, I think you said that you do not see Turkey acting contrary to U.S. interests. Do you believe that Russia is acting contrary to U.S. interests with respect to Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I think Russia's support for the Assad regime is a mistake. I think that there are other ways for Russia to achieve—

and this is what we talked about in Sochi—there are other ways for Russia to achieve what we consider its minimum interest, which is to maintain its long-term military presence and to have a stable Syria that is not a homeland for terrorists. We share those two latter goals. We just do not think that pursuing this via the Assad regime and a military victory is the way to go get it.

Mr. CASTRO. And you also mentioned that, I believe you mentioned that Russia turned a blind eye to Iranian activity in Syria. Is that right?

Mr. JEFFREY. A blind eye to long-range systems that, for example, threaten Israel and eventually Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey. Russia knew that Iran was coming in because Iran had already been in there when Russia intervened in the fall of 2015; that Iran would provide essentially first-class infantry to make up for the problems of the Assad fighting forces, such as the Hezbollah movement out of Lebanon and some of the militias from Iraq, Afghanistan——

Mr. CASTRO. In addition to that, and the fact that we disagree on Assad, what are the other differences between the United States and Russia with respect to Syria? Or is that it, as far as the Administration is concerned? Is that the totality of our differences?

Mr. JEFFREY. Basically, it is the future of the Assad regime. We think that this regime needs to subject itself to the U.N. process, free and fair elections, a new constitution or at least a reformed constitution, and a nationwide cease-fire. We think that that is a political result that will meet Russia's interest and meet ours. We are still trying to persuade them of that.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. SHERMAN. The chair recognizes himself for 5 minutes.

Just building on the gentleman from Texas' inquiry, I assume one of the things the Russians also want is to maintain and expand their naval base on the Mediterranean? Would that be an additional thing that Russia is trying to do?

Mr. JEFFREY. They have what we particularly see as commercial interests. The Russians have had one or another form of military presence in Syria for many decades. They have done some additional basically legal negotiations with the Syrians on extending the base and that kind of thing, activities they can do there, not all that dissimilar from what we spend our lives as diplomats trying to do for our DoD partners.

But the main——

Mr. SHERMAN. But you do not see Russia, you do not think Russia regards their presence in northern Syria as an important asset for the Russian navy?

Mr. JEFFREY. They do.

Mr. SHERMAN. Oh, they do? OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. But they have done that for many decades.

Mr. SHERMAN. And they would like to maintain it——

Mr. JEFFREY. Of course.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. And now expand it?

I think the chairman was right, in one respect he was on the right side of history when he introduced the Free Syria Act back in 2013. This was the first piece of legislation which would have armed and trained the Syrian opposition and the democratic ele-

ments thereof. We are now in a much worse position than we were then, and we are in a much worse position than we would have been, had we followed his lead at that time.

We now have the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, passed this committee, pending I believe in the Senate. And, Ambassador, I believe that the Administration generally supports this bill. It provides for sanctions on those individuals involved with Assad in construction, airline, energy industries. How strong would we expect implementation to be?

Mr. JEFFREY. We do support the Caesar Act. We are very grateful for everything that this House has done to impose sanctions on the Assad regime. This is a joint legislative-executive branch effort, and it has borne real results, as I said, in putting the regime under tremendous economic and political pressure. It has reinforced our diplomacy. And the more of it you can do for us, the better we will be able to perform.

Mr. SHERMAN. I want to return to the focus on Turkey. Erdogan seems to want a 20-kilometer strip along northern Syria. He says that is to ensure his own, the security of Turkey, but it seems to be for the purpose of suppressing Syrian Kurds, who are the bulk of the fighters for the Syrian Democratic Forces. If we actually do completely withdraw, what is the threat of a Turkish massacre of Syrian Kurds?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is not a question of a massacre of Kurds. Turkey has a very large Kurdish population that are not being massacred, many of whom vote for Erdogan and many of whom vote for people who are opposed to him. But what it is is a Turkish concern about a second, what we call in the Middle East world, Qandil Mountains. Qandil Mountains is an area in northern Iraq where the PKK, which is a separatist Kurdish and terrorist movement, has had a headquarters, supported at times from various outside powers, and projected terrorist attacks into Turkey since 1984. Turkey has a very legitimate concern about a second Qandil Mountains being created in northern Syria. We understand that concern, and the President has talked to President Erdogan about that. He has cited it publicly.

And we think that a safe zone—now the Turkish request is for 30 kilometers—we do not think that we can do 30 kilometers. So, we are going back and forth with them on how deep the safe zone would be.

Mr. SHERMAN. So, you are saying that we would recognize the right of Turkey to occupy northern Syria for how long?

Mr. JEFFREY. I did not mention anything about the right of Turkey to occupy anything. What I said is a safe zone which would——

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, everybody is for safety.

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mr. SHERMAN. That is a great euphemism, but what does it mean?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, what it means specifically is a withdrawal of those forces that are most associated in one or another way with the PKK from that zone. And then, how we and Turkey would ensure that the zone remains——

Mr. SHERMAN. So, the YPG, which have been our most essential allies against ISIS, would be excluded from this zone, but, otherwise, not massacred?

Mr. JEFFREY. The YPG, the idea would be that the YPG forces would withdraw and leave local forces and Turkey and the United States to figure out what we would do in the safe zone.

Mr. SHERMAN. I am not sure that is a workable approach, but my time has expired.

I recognize the gentlelady from Pennsylvania, Ms. Wild.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ambassador Jeffrey, for being here today.

As our chairman, Mr. Engel, often states, one of the nice things about the Foreign Affairs Committee is that we often have bipartisan consensus on issues. And I think that concerns about this region of the world, and particularly Syria, is one of those areas that we share a lot of concerns across the aisle. And I thank you for the work you have been doing.

I do have some very specific—I have a number of questions. So, I would like to kind of run through them. The first is, there has been a lot of discussion of this victory that we had over ISIS that was announced in, I guess it was March of this year. How secure do you believe that victory is?

Mr. JEFFREY. Over ISIS as a State, which at one point was as large as England with 35,000 conventional or quasi-conventional forces under its control and well more than 5 million people in its sway, that is a huge and consequential victory because it was right there in the middle of the Middle East in key areas abutting Baghdad and the oil areas in the south of Iraq, and into much of Syria. So, we should be very, very proud of the people, beginning with those on the ground who did the fighting and destroyed that caliphate. That is a very important, necessary, but not sufficient step to end the ISIS threat, because ISIS has ways, as does al-Qaeda, to infiltrate various opposition movements, Islamic groups, throughout the Middle East and beyond. And we are watching that very closely. We have a very active program of going after them wherever they are.

Ms. WILD. Is it not true that many of the ISIS fighters have moved to Iraq, where they will be able to operate more clandestinely?

Mr. JEFFREY. There are certainly in excess—and estimates go back and forth, as all numbers do—but I would say in excess of 10,000 ISIS fighters who are now operating clandestinely between Syria and Iraq. And frankly, they go back and forth without a whole lot of problem crossing that very porous border.

Ms. WILD. And how is the reduction of our troops going to assist us in identifying and doing something about those individuals that you just mentioned?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, most of our troops and most of the very important coalition troop contingent in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria are staying on in Iraq. The President made that clear when he announced in December that——

Ms. WILD. Let me just stop you there. So, how many troops are we talking about?

Mr. JEFFREY. I try to avoid numbers because I am not DoD, but I will cheat a little bit and say we have some significant thousands of U.S. troops, in the single digits, in Iraq, and our coalition presence is quite strong as well. In Syria, we do not talk about the numbers because we are in the process of a withdrawal.

Ms. WILD. I understand that, but does not it cause frustration for our European allies to commit to continuing to support our operations in the area if they do not know what our level of commitment is?

Mr. JEFFREY. In dealing very much with European partners and allies at a pretty high level, our basic commitment to maintain security and stability in the region as a whole, and pursue vigorously the fight against ISIS, nobody doubts that. We took the lead in the coalition. We did the vast majority of the air strikes. We provided at one point probably close to 15,000 troops on the ground as advisors, as special forces teams, and such. We spent many tens of billions of dollars, thanks to this House, in defeating ISIS. They all made significant and important contributions, but nothing like what we did. So, they all understand that.

Would they like more predictability? Would they like us to be more solicitous of their various concerns? Absolutely. But have I seen this in my entire career since 1977? I have also seen it.

Ms. WILD. Would you agree with me that we have to avoid abrupt statements of—or statements of abrupt withdrawal from the region in the future——

Mr. JEFFREY. I will try not——

Ms. WILD [continuing]. As we saw in December?

Mr. JEFFREY. I will try not to predict what we should do in the future.

Ms. WILD. That was not my question. My question was, would you agree that we need to avoid those kinds of statements of abrupt withdrawal?

Mr. JEFFREY. Consultations with our allies before we take decisions is always very important, Congresswoman.

Ms. WILD. Thank you.

And my last question is, what are we going to do about the tens of thousands of captured ISIS fighters in the region that are in, as I understand it, makeshift prisons?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, and that came up earlier. Having had some experience elsewhere with terrorists held in the Middle East in detention, I am pretty confident that the SDF is doing a good job holding these people in these facilities. In the facilities generally, we have eyes on in terms of humanitarian provisions and that sort of thing, both for the detainees and for the displaced people, of which we have got 74,000 in the al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. So, we watch this very carefully.

There is about somewhere in excess of 2,000 what we call foreign terrorist fighters in captivity right now. Those are people who fought with ISIS, not from Iraq and Syria. There is probably some 6 or 7 thousand more from Syria and Iraq who are also being detained.

Mr. SHERMAN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Ms. WILD. My time has expired. I am not sure that the "eyes on" is enough, but I do not have any further time to inquire about that.

Thank you very much.

Mr. SHERMAN. I will now recognize the gentleman from Michigan.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

And, Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you for your fantastic, long career and service to our Nation, and for appearing before us today.

I wanted to return to something that at least one of my colleagues asked you about, and you have talked about, which is Secretary Pompeo's meeting with Mr. Putin in Sochi, which you attended, I guess. I wanted to ask whether the assault on Idlib came up during this meeting, the Russian assault——

Mr. JEFFREY. It did. It did.

Mr. LEVIN. And how did the conversation go? Give it in ways that it is appropriate for you to describe here.

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, to the extent I can talk about confidential, diplomatic exchanges at the highest levels, it was a very strong demarche by Secretary Pompeo on the need to bring this battle to a close; the sooner, the better. We received assurances from the Russians, some of which they seemed to have been trying to carry out in the days since we were in Sochi. Trying to slow down or stop any military conflict with dozens of groups on the ground is not easy. We have had a lot of experience, much of it bad, doing it elsewhere. But we did believe that we made some progress with President Putin.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, as you know better than I, the situation there has been very bad. We have a lot of evidence that Russia and Syria together engaged in a week-long bombardment, including targeting hospitals and civilian infrastructure. And people are fleeing toward the border with Turkey. We do not see any real evidence of change here.

And then, yesterday, reports indicated that Assad may be using chemical weapons again. Is that true? Do we have evidence of that? And what can you tell us about it?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you.

We are still looking into that. We, at this point, do not have any confirmation that chlorine, which was the substance that was suggested or alleged, has been used. But, again, we have not finished our review of that.

In terms of, again, trying to measure sincerity on a battlefield, it is kind of tough. But the fighting in Idlib has generated a large movement of civilians. We are trying to get this thing stopped, but it still is a very small portion of the Idlib region that is subject to these attacks, to the ground attacks. Now air attacks are going on all over Idlib, and we have called upon the Russians to halt them repeatedly.

Mr. LEVIN. So, it is very frustrating for us here to hear this. With Mr. Espaillat earlier, you were sort of going back and forth about what a mess this is, and so forth. But this is a humanitarian disaster in a string of humanitarian disasters that have just devastated the people of Syria. What more can we do to stop this?

Mr. JEFFREY. Continue doing what we are doing.

Mr. LEVIN. And we specifically here in the Congress?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, right. First of all, pass the Caesar Act. Second, continue the very generous humanitarian spending. As I said,

it is almost $10 billion. Third, if the Administration at some point needs stabilization funds, it has not asked for them, but you have actually put it into several of our budgets. That is very helpful. Oversight is always a good thing. Meetings like this are maybe difficult for Administration witnesses, but they are very important.

But, finally, I will say, in defense of what we are doing, that at one point several years ago—in fact, pretty close to the present—you had Idlibs happening all over Syria. Right now, we have it happening in less than 74 square kilometers. That is, unfortunately, by the miserable standards of this conflict, progress, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Well, I appreciate that and I credit it.

And I want to associate myself with Representative Wild's comments about how this particular committee strives to achieve bipartisanship. And in that spirit, I will say that I feel like successive Administrations have not had the clearest policy toward Syria. Certainly governing by tweet has been a disaster. And we need to have a stronger policy toward Syria that advances U.S. interests and protects human rights in Syria, and we are not there yet.

My time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. SHERMAN. And in the spirit of bipartisanship, I recognize Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you for being here and the work you have done.

This is, again, one of those situations that you wish it would just end, and end soon, like you said. I think you said it must end, and it must end now.

My question to you is, can a political solution occur with Assad remaining in power?

Mr. JEFFREY. I tried twice to answer that a little earlier, Congressman——

Mr. YOHO. I am sorry, I——

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. Once badly, and then, I corrected myself. So, I will be careful here.

Mr. YOHO. Let me hear the "goodly" one.

Mr. JEFFREY. A political solution is highly unlikely with a government acting the way the current Assad government acts. Whatever it takes—well, whatever political process and diplomatic process is necessary to get that government to behave differently toward its own population and to its neighbors, that is an absolutely essential precondition for a resolution of this conflict.

Mr. YOHO. Is there anyone in the batting cage, so to speak, that is ready and willing to take over? And I know we were talking about free and fair elections. But, with the players, as you pointed out in your testimony when I read it, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Israelis—I am not so much worried about them or us—and I think you have got to throw ISIS in there still behind the scenes. Is it possible to have free and fair elections to where somebody could stand up that would be the future ruler of that country that would put the Syrian people and the country of Syria first?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, physically—and it gets back to our defense of what we are doing now with the Idlib thing and 74 kilometers—three weeks ago, there was essentially no fighting anywhere in Syria and only a few terrorist attacks. So, by the stand-

ards of the low standard of that part of the world, you have an environment that would allow free and fair elections in most places, certainly compared to what I saw in Iraq in 2005.

In terms of could it be carried out, the U.N. is ready. The U.S. is good at this. The U.N. certainly can carry it out among the half the population that is not under Assad's control. And doing it under those areas in Assad's control is part of the art of the negotiation, to try to get the Syrian government to agree.

Mr. YOHO. I guess my concerns are, one of the questions that I had was, when you look at when Syria was supposed to get rid of their chemicals of mass destruction, and John Kerry worked that deal out with the Russians, claimed they were all gone, but we know they are not. And Russia was supposed to be the guarantor that they were gone. Yet, Russia backs Assad and they are still being used, and this Administration is going to have to make a decision, if the report that came out that they are still using them, of what we are going to do. With people like Russia in there and Iran, the last thing they want is a democracy in that area because it weakens their form of government. And if you have players like Russia, who is a member of the U.N.—that is supposed to be part of the Security Council that is supposed to enforce these things—and we see over and over again, if we just look at North Korea, they voted with the sanctions. They do not enforce the sanctions. And so, they work against the resolve of the problem.

And so, as long as Russia is there and/or Iran, I do not see a peaceful solution coming out that is favoring stability. I do not see anybody willing to stand up. And so, I see a drawn-out conflict. And I think more importantly to me is, if we look at the Western Hemisphere—and I know that is not what this meeting is about—but I have those same players in Venezuela. And then, you throw in the Cubans, and they are propping up a Maduro like they did Assad because it worked in Syria. There was no way Assad was going to be able to stay in power with the atrocities. Over 10 million people have left, run out of that country out of fear, and over a half million have been murdered.

And there has got to be a better solution to this. I wish the U.N. had more bite in them to where we could come together and say let's bring an end to this. Any thoughts on that, a better way of doing this?

Mr. JEFFREY. In a nutshell, on Syria, the U.N. has been a good, objective, and competent interlocutory, the OPCW, on not only documenting the use of chemical weapons, but increasingly reporting on who, mainly the regime, has used them. And again, the U.N. Special Envoys, the current and the predecessors, have been very balanced.

The teeth of the U.N. is something that the international community has to give to the United Nations, and that varies from issue to issue. On this one, the international community is about as united behind the U.N. for fixing Syria as I have seen on any issue. But the problem, again, is getting Russia to go along because Russia can block any progress in the Security Council.

Mr. YOHO. Sure. Yes.

Mr. Chairman, thank you. Thank you for your time.

Mr. SHERMAN. Now I will recognize the gentleman from Minnesota.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Your career and dedication to service to our Country is remarkable. And as someone who lost his father in Vietnam in 1969, I am particularly grateful to you. So, thank you.

My first question is retrospective. And I would like to hear your thoughts on what we should have done, what we could have done, to alleviate the conditions that have led to this humanitarian disaster in Syria.

Mr. JEFFREY. My focus, of course, is on looking forward.

Mr. PHILLIPS. As is mine.

Mr. JEFFREY. And what I try to do is to draw lessons from this and try to be as apolitical in doing them as I can, because I deal with different audiences with different backgrounds.

The first one is America needs to play a leadership role as soon as possible. With a few delays, we got it with the defeat of ISIS. We mentioned Brett McGurk's work. And previously here, he was the first in the Obama Administration to get it, and you saw a quite effective, coherent, internationally well-supported campaign, backed by the Congress, that did at least the initial job of defeating the caliphate.

We have not had that same consistency, that same unity on the Syrian problem since 2011. We are trying to put it together now. That is why we are working with you. We are working with the international community. And again, I think we are making progress.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. Moving to the here and now, I would love a concrete example or examples of how our policy has been successful so far, and especially anything you may not have mentioned yet. Concrete examples.

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, I have been trying as hard as I have for the last hour to give you every single one I could think of, but I——

Mr. PHILLIPS. Anything you missed?

Mr. JEFFREY. I will start off with repeating myself. The battle lines have been basically frozen since last year, almost a year now. That was not the case before. And that underlines the argument, which even the Russians say, that there is no military solution. We were hearing that, those words, and then, we are hearing the thunder of guns and barrel bombs, indicating that Assad did think there was a military solution. He may still think there is a military solution, but we in the international community are doing everything we can to make it clear that there is not. That is the first and most important thing.

Second, we have managed to maintain this international coalition. At the end of March, the Arab League met. There was a major effort by Assad and its friend to allow the Assad regime to come back into the Arab League, where it was thrown out at the beginning of the conflict. They got nowhere. That was an example of diplomacy, beginning with our Arab League friends who did a really great job leading that effort, but that was supported by the rest of us.

Now the European Union has passed very, very tough sanctions. We heard one example of them on a notorious ally of Assad's, Mr. Foz, the owner of the Four Seasons. In that regard, they are even ahead of us. So, that is another example of concrete.

I could go on. There is a lot of concrete examples.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. My next question is, is the DoD collaborating with State and USAID to fulfill our strategic objectives in any meaningful ways?

Mr. JEFFREY. As well or better than in any other of the conflicts I have been involved with.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. Acting Secretary Shanahan and the Secretary coordinate several times a week along with John Bolton. I have a dialog particularly on the safe zone with General Dunford. And the CENTCOM Commander, first General Votel and now General McKinsey, speaks with us all of the time, yes.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. And now, prospectively, in light of this experience, where should we be turning our attention, and in what manner, to circumstances perhaps in the Middle East or elsewhere that have similarities that we can prevent?

Mr. JEFFREY. More generally, you have two basic forces in the Middle East. At the 100,000-foot level, that is what is going on in Syria. You have an American-led collective security system that is based primarily on the States of the region, preserving both our interests, anti-terror, anti-WMD, flow of oil, allies and partners. And you, then, have forces for one another region who want to overthrow that order and establish something like, in Iran's case, hegemony; in the case of the Russians, a return to the 19th century. A half dozen powerful countries—Israel, Turkey, Russia, America, Iran, Saudi Arabia—run the place and go back and forth, and everybody else gets what they can.

We are very strongly supporting this idea of a collective security system, led by the people of the region. That was the logic of the President's Riyadh speech 2 years ago, but with American leadership and American basically skin in the game, and that is what we have now.

Mr. PHILLIPS. All right. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

I yield back.

Mr. SHERMAN. The gentleman from Kansas is recognized.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you, sir. Hi.

Turkey, what are Turkey's objectives with respect to Syria, and how strong is our dialog with Turkey to coordinate our objectives compared to their objectives?

Mr. JEFFREY. Turkey's objective, like all of the countries directly involved on the borders of Syria, is to survive the horrific Syrian civil war. Turkey has been impacted, beginning with 3.5 million refugees, where Turkey has spent many tens of billions of dollars doing, by all standards, a commendable job taking care of these people that it has welcomed into its midst.

Second, Turkey has a whole series of threats emanating from, or potentially emanating from, Syria. I have discussed the threat of a second Qandil Mountains, were the PKK to establish an offensive

capability out of northeastern Syria or elsewhere in Syria, for that matter.

Second, Turkey has a very strong enmity with the Assad regime that goes back to the beginning of this conflict. And Turkey has a traditional—we are talking about many hundreds of years—rivalry with Iran for power within the northern Middle East. And Turkey is generally not very happy with Russian moves to itself.

So, Turkey has to deal with all of these things, and it deals with them in a variety of ways, using military presence in the northwest, using negotiations with us on the northeastern safe zone, negotiating with Russia, while also—and we see this in Idlib—essentially, reinforcing its positions. Turkey has troops in Idlib, not pulling them back, even though some of them have been wounded by Syrian regime fire, and generally, pushing back to what the Russians and the Syrians are trying to do, while at the same time negotiating with the Russians and Iranians in the Astana process to try to end the conflict.

Generally, Turkey supports the opposition, as do we. Generally, Turkey is trying to change the behavior of the Syrian government. We agree with it as well there. So, all in all, we coordinate with it.

President Trump has had multiple phone calls with President Erdogan. I accompanied Secretary Pompeo when we met with President Erdogan in Ankara back in the fall, and we have contacts almost monthly at the foreign minister level and at my level with our Turkish counterparts.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you.

Obviously, we know that the Assad regime is backed by Iran. How is our recent show of force—I am talking in terms of the USS Abraham Lincoln, prepositioning B–52 bombers, a couple I believe in the area, a couple more—how does that change the balance of power? How does that influence the situation?

Mr. JEFFREY. I cannot talk about the military balance of power by adding up airplanes and weapons loads, and that kind of thing. I can say that, diplomatically, every time we take a step like that, it tends to reassure our partners, and that is what much of my focus is on, is our partners and how our partners evaluate what we are trying to do. So that moves like this are generally well regarded by the vast majority of countries in the Middle East because the vast majority of countries in the Middle East are our allies and partners.

In terms of Iran's perception, we are still sorting this out. Acting Secretary Shanahan and Secretary Pompeo were up here yesterday going through this in great detail. They know better than I.

From the standpoint of Syria, anytime the United States shows a willingness, as we did, because this was clearly just retaliatory—this was not preparations for a military conflict, and I think the two Secretaries made that clear—this tends to make the other side think twice before it acts in an aggressive fashion toward us or toward our partners, and that is a good thing.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

I yield my time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SHERMAN. The chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ambassador Jeffrey, for your long career of public service in both Republican and Democratic Administrations.

As we all know, the President launched cruise missiles into Syria, and he did that because Assad used chemical weapons on civilians, and that is a heinous war crime, is not that right?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is correct.

Mr. LIEU. And the U.S. takes very seriously war crimes, whether committed by our adversaries or even our allies, is not that right?

Mr. JEFFREY. I will limit myself to we certainly took that particular war crime very seriously.

Mr. LIEU. You served in the U.S. Army and you were taught to obey the Law of Armed Conflict, also known as the law of war, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Of course.

Mr. LIEU. All right. And so, the U.S. goes to great lengths to make sure that even our own personnel do not engage in war crimes, is not that right?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is what I was trained to do, and that is what I did on the battlefield.

Mr. LIEU. And the reason we do that is not because it is just a moral thing to do; it is because if we start engaging in war crimes and violating the Law of Armed Conflict, it not only invites retaliation by our adversaries, it also is a great recruiting tool for terrorists. That would be correct, right?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am trying to see where you are going, Congressman, but I have to agree with everything you have said.

Mr. LIEU. Yes. Thank you.

So, earlier this year, Army First Lieutenant Michael Behenna was pardoned by Donald Trump. He was convicted of war crimes. He was convicted by a military jury for driving an unarmed Iraqi prisoner into the desert, stripping him naked, and shooting him in the head and chest. Do you think it was appropriate for the President to do that?

Mr. JEFFREY. I do not see a conflict between the pardoning of people who have been convicted of crimes, regardless of the crimes, and the underlying legal and moral issues.

Mr. LIEU. Public reporting is that the President is thinking about pardoning additional people who are charged with war crimes. One of them is Navy SEAL Chief Edward Gallagher. He was charged with killing, murdering an unarmed civilian girl, murdering an unarmed old man, stabbing a defenseless teenage captive, and then, indiscriminately shooting machine gun fire into a neighborhood. What kind of message does it send to our adversaries if they know that the President is going to pardon people who committed war crimes or are charged with war crimes?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, pardoning is a legal and constitutional authority granted to the President. The President is elected by the American people, and the President takes decisions——

Mr. LIEU. Yes, I get that, sir. I am just asking you the message that is going to be sent.

Mr. JEFFREY. I would decline to comment further on that.

Mr. LIEU. All right. Republican Congress Member Dan Crenshaw has stated that he believes, as I do, that a military jury should first

decide whether Chief Gallagher has engaged in these war crimes. In fact, seven Navy SEALs reported him to Navy authorities because of his alleged heinous acts. Do you believe that a military jury should have the first opportunity to look at the evidence in this case before the President pardons him?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, this is not my area of expertise, nor what I am here to talk about today. But I will say that it is my belief that we should adhere to our constitutional legal procedures and processes in each and every case as a general rule.

Mr. LIEU. Right. So, let me move on to the troops we have in Syria. How many troops do we have in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I cannot comment on that. First of all, it is a moving target, and second, we are in the process of a reduction. It is considerably fewer than we had in December when the initial announcement was made.

Mr. LIEU. It is less than a thousand, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am not going to get into numbers.

Mr. LIEU. OK. Donald Trump said he is going to withdraw 2,000 troops from Syria. So, it is less than 2,000, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. It certainly has dropped from where it was when it began. I am trying to dance around this without giving a specific number.

Mr. LIEU. Right. OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. But you know what I am trying to say.

Mr. LIEU. What is the mission of our troops?

Mr. JEFFREY. The mission of our troops is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS and to maintain in that process stability and security in the northeast and in the——

Mr. LIEU. And our troops are deployed in combat zones in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, they are drawing combat pay.

Mr. LIEU. And so, you mentioned ISIS. So, there is still ISIS in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely, thousands of them.

Mr. LIEU. OK. All right. So, when Donald Trump said, on February 22d, that ISIS is 100 percent defeated, that was not true, right?

Mr. JEFFREY. No, that was true. What he was talking about what the ISIS caliphate which was defeated along the Euphrates——

Mr. LIEU. That was not what he was talking about. He was saying he was withdrawing all U.S. troops from Syria because ISIS has been 100 percent defeated in Syria. You can say what you think he meant, but he clearly said we are withdrawing all our troops. What you are saying now is, no, no, no, we have our troops there because ISIS is still not defeated. So, I just want to know.

Mr. JEFFREY. He talked about a gradual, I believe it was coordinated and deliberate drawdown——

Mr. LIEU. All right.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. But with some residual troops.

Mr. LIEU. So, we can all read his tweets and see what he said. But let me just ask you this last question. What is the authorization for military force that the Administration is using to have our troops deployed in combat zones in Syria without any congressional action?

And I yield back.

Mr. JEFFREY. It is a congressional action based upon the 2001 authorization for the use of military force. Further, by the appeal to the U.N. under Article 51 of the U.N. Charter by the State of Iraq in 2014 for assistance and help from its partners, one of whom under the Strategic Framework agreement, the U.S. is; a memorandum of understanding written at that time between the two governments, and U.S. engagement on the ground, first, in Iraq, and then, because the threat to Iraq was coming across the border from ungoverned areas of Syria into the Syria. That is the basis for the authorization, Congressman.

Mr. SHERMAN. The time of the gentleman has expired.

I think the Founding Fathers would find it absurd to think that an action by the United Nations could shift powers from Article 1 to Article 2 of the U.S. Constitution.

I recognize the gentlewoman from Pennsylvania.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you very much for coming today.

My questions largely have to do with the displaced populations in Syria. Countries throughout the region have shouldered the brunt of the Syrian conflict and have absorbed more than 5 million refugees. And that, obviously, puts enormous economic pressure and strain on these countries politically as well. I am just wondering, what is the U.S. doing to support those communities that are hosting all of these refugees, particularly to reduce tension and ensure that the refugees are not pushed back into the country prematurely?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you.

This is a major, major effort on our part. I talked about the $9.5 or almost $10 billion that we have provided, leading——

Ms. HOULAHAN. I am sorry, was it million or billion?

Mr. JEFFREY. Billion. I am sorry. Billion dollars, leading the international community.

Second, we watch very closely—I cannot get into the diplomatic discussions or I would say more debates or disputes we have—to ensure exactly that; that nobody is pushed back against his or her will into the arms of that awful regime.

And the regime itself and some of its supporters have been trying to do that. There were at times plans for an international conference to encourage people to return and encourage States to have their people return. Our position is people have to decide themselves. It has to be voluntary. It has to be dignified. It has to be safe. And either the U.N. organs or other international agencies have to provide information on where they would be going back to. We have a whole series of criteria. And I can assure you, of the various things we do at varying levels of competence and aggressiveness, this is pretty high.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So, you cannot provide any examples or detail on how we are, in fact, making sure that those folks are able to stay?

Mr. JEFFREY. That would require criticizing countries with whom we have friendly and close relationships, and would abuse the trust they have in us. I will say that we have very tough conversations with a number of countries, and so far, they have recognized not only our interest, but their obligations under various U.N. and other international treaties and humanitarian provisions.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Are you able to elaborate at all on what we are doing specifically for women and children refugees in that region?

Mr. JEFFREY. The programs that we have, that is, the almost $10 billion—and we can get the specific information to you—has very specific provisions, very specific programs, for women, children, people who have health problems, and that sort of thing. That is simply part of the system that we and our agencies and partners who actually deliver the aid set up for us.

Ms. HOULAHAN. I would love to have that further information——

Mr. JEFFREY. Sure.

Ms. HOULAHAN [continuing]. If that would be possible.

Mr. JEFFREY. OK.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And my second question has to do with the humanitarian issues as well, and the fact that, effectively, the President's 2020 zeroed-out the economic support and development for this area. A hundred and thirty million was originally in Fiscal Year 1919; now nothing. How do you request cutoff and reconcile that with asking people in other parts of the world to support this really important area? And who else do you think will pay for that?

Mr. JEFFREY. As one of the people who goes out and does that, I have no moral, political, or diplomatic pangs of conscienceness doing, and I will tell you why. Think of what we have done in this conflict. Ten billion dollars of humanitarian aid, and that money, thanks to you as much as it is to the Administration, is continuing to flow. Diplomatic leadership of this conflict, of the efforts at least to end this conflict, and our military action and presence to defeat ISIS in the Iraq-Syria area, those are all major steps that we have made.

What the Administration is saying is, as we have with the troop drawdown in northeast Syria, as we do with stabilization funds, is, cannot somebody else step up and do at least some of this? We are only 17 percent of the world's economy. And so, why do not others? And in fact, others do. Germany, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the United Arab Emirates provided over $300 million of stabilization funding in 2018 for the northeast. We just had a stabilization conference——

Ms. HOULAHAN. So, just to be clear, you said you do not have any moral hesitation to zero-out that line item?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have no moral hesitation in asking other countries to do more and the American public to do less.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And us to do nothing?

Mr. JEFFREY. I absolutely do not.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And how would you ask other people to do that if we are, in fact, the leaders of the world? And here in this committee, in this hearing, we have heard that over and over again. When we leave, we have created a vacuum. We are the leaders, the beacon on the hill, you know, the shining light. That we go to zero and expect that we are going to find it from other people, I just do not understand how we can be the moral leaders of the world.

Mr. JEFFREY. I think it is not difficult because we are not going to zero in the Syrian conflict. We are still, again, by far, the largest contributor to the most important funds program, which is humanitarian assistance. That is a separate category than stabilization

funds. We are No. 1 in terms of the military effort we have made in Syria and in Iraq for the defeat of ISIS, and everybody knows that and nobody else could have done that. Frankly, other countries could have come up with the $10 billion, but nobody could have come up with the military effort.

So, in this one area, this Administration has said, cannot others provide a few hundred million dollars for stabilization? It is a good question, and they area.

Ms. HOULAHAN. I am sorry that I have run out of time, but I do believe that it is a real question for what the message is that we are sending to the world, and specifically to our allies, when we do things such as this.

And I appreciate your time, sir.

And I yield back.

Mr. SHERMAN. The gentlelady's time has expired. The gentleman from Massachusetts is recognized.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, Ambassador, for your service as always.

We talked on the importance of working with our European allies in terms of the military part of this, in terms of the intelligence, which is extraordinary. But, on February 16th, President Trump just tweeted out a message saying, you know, to Britain and France and Germany, and other European allies: take back your 800 ISIS fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial. The caliphate is ready to fall. The alternative is not a good one, and that will be forced to release them.

Now I happened to be in Europe at that time. And I have got to tell you, when this tweet came out, our CODEL, including the Speaker, was just deluged with the press as we were going meeting with leaders. And inside those meeting rooms, there was enormous concern from the State and diplomatic side that this is how they are getting this message and what that was doing to alarm the people that they serve in their regions, in their countries, in their districts.

You are a person well-qualified to really stress the importance of having the proper communication and how damaging something like a tweet without any foundation laid for anything, how that can alarm people. They serve constituents the way we do as elected officials. I saw it firsthand. This had a real effect and creates a greater divide with the people we count on the most. Can you stress the importance of making sure that this kind of thing does not happen again?

Mr. JEFFREY. Every President decides how he or she will communicate both to the American public and to allies, partners, and adversaries. On that particular issue, I can issue you that well before that tweet, we had made our position abundantly clear, that these countries should do essentially what the tweet said. And we also have, in the case of a certain number of Americans who are in that category, we have taken them back and——

Mr. KEATING. Then, the gap exists somewhere, because I was dealing with foreign ministers, Ambassadors, and that is who we were meeting with at that time. And their reaction was shock. So, wherever the gap is, I guess we should all work to improve it.

The second question I had was, when President Trump had a telephone conversation with President Erdogan, and in that conversation he said, he communicated to him he was going to pull out U.S. troops in Syria immediately, what I noticed during that period is this: President Erdogan and Turkey were extremely active at the time publicly talking about the need to get to the bottom and investigate and have information about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Now coincidence? Ever since that happened, I have noticed Turkey has gone so silent on that issue. Now was there any discussion in that conversation about the Khashoggi investigation at all by the President?

Mr. JEFFREY. My understanding—of course, I was not on that call—was that the conversation was about the security situation in Syria. I follow Turkish politics fairly closely because of the negotiations we are doing. And I can assure you that the Khashoggi case is raised at various levels all the time from Erdogan in his public statements on down. It remains a very important issue for the Turks.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. Last, you did talk about the issue of a security zone with Turkey, and the fact that we are in discussions about that and part of that. And one of the things I just want to get a sense of, too, is, aside from recognizing the need or the discussion or the importance from Turkey's side on that, what things can we do from a concrete nature? And are we building the ability of having something concrete about how we can protect the YPG in that region, how we can protect the Kurds in that region as part of that? I know we were talking about the other issues that you mentioned, but is there affirmatively something in discussion that you can talk about where we will make them more secure?

Mr. JEFFREY. At the end of the day, it starts with, first of all, accepting the territorial integrity and the unity of Syria. Second, a political process that sees every Syrian citizen having the same sort of rights and obligations that we take as normal here and elsewhere around the world.

The example I would give—and people just sometimes shrug and say, "Well, but this is a special part of the world. Well, Iraq is right next door." And we had very close allies and partners, the PUK and the KDP Kurds in the north, and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in the south, in that period running up to 2003. We did not give them a lifetime guarantee that we would take care of them. What we said was we will work with you to create an Iraq that is democratic, that has rule of law, and that is secure.

Now, with some problems, but still, all in all, this is what we have delivered. We have not maintained a special guarantor status over internal groups in countries. That would not be in the long run appropriate for us or appropriate to ask the American people to bear. What we do, however, do is to aim for solutions where countries are able to provide that security for their own people inside recognized borders. That is what we are doing in Syria.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you, Ambassador, and thank you for your service here. And thank you for coming in front of this committee and communicating the way you have in the past and you currently do. That is so important.

I yield back.

Mr. SHERMAN. The gentleman from Rhode Island is recognized.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for being here.

First, I want to ask you, with respect to, since March 2011, over 11 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes and more than 470,000 have been killed. After 8 years, the Assad regime has consolidated its control over a majority of the country and showed little sign of political reform or a willingness to implement any of the conditions stipulated in the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, calling for a cease-fire, a political settlement, safe and voluntary return of all refugees, and a number of other conditions.

It is not clear to me what our strategy is in Syria and what our objectives are, what are the strategies to achieve those objectives. But I am particularly interested to know how the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria and the withdrawal of U.S. assistance from Syria advances whatever the goals are. So, if you could say what the goals are and how does the withdrawal of troops and the withdrawal of assistance advance those goals?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, again, I will back into this, beginning with your final question, and then, get to the larger strategic one quickly. We are maintaining a residual U.S. presence, but, more importantly, we are maintaining a coalition overall presence in the northeast which has an air component which was always going to continue to be an American-led and largely American-supported air component, and a ground component to continue the enduring defeat of ISIS and stabilization, with a residual U.S. component and a larger coalition component.

And finally, we are working with the international community to provide stabilization funds. We got $325 million last year. We have pledges right now of somewhere between $140 and $180 million, and we are looking for other ways to fill the gap to probably $300 million more this year.

So, we are not abandoning anything. We are shifting the focus from an exclusively American-funded, American boots on the ground, or largely American boots on the ground, to a more balanced. And there is nothing wrong with that as national policy. That is burden-sharing. Every Administration for decades has pursued it.

In terms of the overall strategy, very basically, as I indicated earlier, a step-by-step implementation of the cease-fire, demilitarization, and political process under the U.N. control or the U.N. aegis as the facilitator under 2254, which everybody, including Russia, agreed to, or until we can convince everybody—and it is hard to convince Assad to do this—then, we will continue the maximum pressure campaign that is diplomatic and economic and financial.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

You mentioned our effort to defeat ISIS, and I think you will agree the most important U.S. ally in Syria has been the Syrian Democratic Forces, which has been fighting ISIS with some success. Their region includes Afrin, a city that has seen horrific human rights abuses committed by Turkish-backed forces and the Turkish military itself. Turkey is still occupying Afrin and over 250,000 people have been displaced.

And so, I really have two questions. How do you propose the U.S. Government promote peace negotiations between the SDF and Turkey when Turkey is still occupying Afrin? And you also mentioned in your earlier testimony that you would propose the creating of a safe zone, but that would require the YPG to leave the area. And I wonder, how is that possibly to be executed? Like under what circumstances is that even conceivable?

Mr. JEFFREY. I think it is conceivable to have a drawback of forces. I have seen it in a half dozen conflicts. It is a drawback of forces. It is something that is—we did this after 1973 in the Sinai. There is all kinds of examples of us drawing back forces. We pulled our own forces, for example, back from the Demilitarized Zone in Korea at a certain point. These are basically tools of the trade.

We are not trying to negotiate any peace agreement between Turkey and anybody. What we are trying to do is to set up a safe zone, so that everybody feels secure enough to continue doing our common efforts to defeat ISIS and find a solution to Syria.

Mr. CICILLINE. And my final question, Mr. Ambassador: the congressionally mandated, bipartisan Syria Study Group recommends stopping the drawdown of U.S. troops from Syria, passing and signing into law the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, resuming U.S. assistance to Syria, and resuming the presence of Syria transition assistance response teams, forward teams to assist professionals in northern Syria who are implementing programs sought to hold territory formally held by ISIS. Do you support these recommendations? And if so, why? If not, why not?

Mr. JEFFREY. I would have to review the whole report. I, and many others, of course, have met with the members of the commission. I would say we certainly support getting our START teams back on the ground, and we are working on that right now. Those are the people who provide the assistance.

We certainly support a robust stabilization program in northeast Syria. We just think that for the moment it would be a good idea if others would provide that funding, given that we have asked the American people for $10 billion, almost, in support for refugees and IDPs.

And as you know, we have every intention of keeping a coalition military presence on to defeat ISIS, which would include some form of residual U.S. force. So, I think that we are meeting the spirit of that recommendation as well. So, while there is some—again, I would have to look at the details of their recommendation. I think that we may be pursuing slightly different tactics, but, all in all, their overall objectives are ones that we are probably pretty much consistent with.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Burchett.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, sir, for being here.

There have been several reports that Iran is utilizing their soft power in Syria. And by that, I mean Iran is building Shiite meeting halls, mosques, and schools to replace Sunni communities with peo-

ple who are friendly to the Assad regime and to Iran. Do you like that is reversible?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, we have seen similar reports. Most anything in this world, Congressman, if you have enough time and effort, is reversible, other than death. But I think that——

Mr. BURCHETT. Are you meaning money? Or time and effort, does that equal money? I am not sure.

Mr. JEFFREY. All of the above.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes, sir.

Mr. JEFFREY. I think that this is a really big problem. I think it is a problem not only for us, which it is, and for Syria's neighbors, beginning with Israel, but this is a problem for Assad regime and for the Russians. It is one of the areas where we warn everybody, "Watch what you are getting in this country."

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. Do you think there is something that the State Department can do or they can implement to deter and impede Iran's goal of winning, as they say, the hearts and minds of the Syrian people?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, we have various programs for those people who have fled Assad. And we have very close relations with the political opposition, headquartered in Riyadh, with the groups in Turkey, Cairo, and Moscow. And we maintain contacts with all sorts of Syrians. We have a lot of people doing that. And we have various, both in the context of the enduring defeat of ISIS, but also in terms of our overall policies toward Syria, we have various outreach, public outreach, measures. We could always do more, though.

Mr. BURCHETT. You said, "public outreach". I am curious, what does that mean?

Mr. JEFFREY. Working with the media. We have a center, for example, that responds to extremist Islamic propaganda throughout the Middle East. We have an operation in London that is specifically focused on countering ISIS propaganda. So, there are many such activities like this.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. Also, could you comment on the situation in the Sunni Arab areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF? And do the Sunnis resent living under SDF control? And if so, could this allow ISIS to stage a comeback?

Mr. JEFFREY. There are tensions. We are watching that very closely.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the remainder of my time.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you for your service. We are very fortunate to have you there.

I do want to come back, though, to this question of stabilization funding. And I think we should start by being honest about the context. I think we all understand, though some of us may have to be more diplomatic about it, but at a certain point the President made a decision to pull us out of Syria entirely. There was significant bipartisan pushback, including in the Congress, which resulted, fortunately, in a decision to maintain at least some of our

military presence in the country. But we are still entirely pulled out as far as our stabilization. We have not yet had the same decision that was made with respect to the military mission to resume our stabilization efforts.

Now you said that you feel that at least some of this should be done by our allies. And, of course, all of us would agree. But let's just, to establish for the record, at this point we are doing none of this? All of this is being done by our allies, is that correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. I would have to check. We put about almost a billion dollars of stabilization funding into Syria, and in the northeast, which is what we are talking about now, roughly $220 million. I would have to, of course, go back and check. You know accounts in the Federal Government. We may be still spending money that is from 2016. But, basically, the bulk of our funding—and we are running low on it—is from the $325 million that we received primarily from those four countries I named earlier.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Sure.

Mr. JEFFREY. But I have no—how should I say—diplomatic or moral or political problem with us deciding in a certain campaign, given our global presence and importance, of turning to our collective allies and partners whose GDP and total forces under arms are several times ours worldwide, and saying, in this area, we want you to do more for funding; we want you to do more to put boots on the ground.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Yes, there is a difference—of course, we all want them to do more.

Mr. JEFFREY. I know.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. But the point is we are not doing—yes, we are spending old money, but there is no new money. Stabilization funding was suspended. The START team pulled out in December, as I understand it. Is that correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. We are trying to get it back in. They were pulled out not for financial, but for security reasons.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. OK. Well, that is good to know.

A significant share of the foreign funding is provided by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Do Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the same interests as ours in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. They certainly do not put any conditions on their funding, other than that it be spent wisely. And their overall goals for Syria are very closely aligned to ours, and we have seen this in the Arab League decision on Syria not coming back, for example.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, according to the OIG report on stabilization funding, "Stabilization activities such as reconciliation, social cohesion, community dialog, and civil society capacity-building are not covered under the funding provided by Saudi Arabia and the UAE." So, of course, they are happy to fund bricks and mortar, but the things that we were doing, and that we are best at in terms of actually working with the Syrian people to build democratic governance; humane, human-rights-respecting; women-rights-respecting government, it does not seem like the Saudis are interested in that. Isn't there a significant cost to our interest in subcontracting stabilization to countries that do not share our values and interests?

Mr. JEFFREY. As a general rule, you have a point, Congressman. That is, if you turn to other countries to provide the funding for a stabilization program, particularly as we still have the administrative structure, the START teams to do it, you are going to get a different perspective than ours. If you want to have the specific American goals supported, then that is an argument for providing some U.S. funding or finding other countries. For example, we have also turned to Germany and the UK. They have a very similar view of that kind of the usefulness, of the utility of that sort of program as we do. And that is where we are getting some of the funding for those programs.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, good. And we have provided funding, as you know.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. In fact, we funded the Relief and Response Fund, which is specifically designed——

Mr. JEFFREY. I know.

Mr. MALINOWSKI [continuing]. For post-ISIS stabilization. My understanding, at least as of April 5th, that not a single dollar of the $500 million that we provided in Fiscal Year or of the $200 million we provided in 2019 for this fund has been notified to Congress. That was explicitly tied to stabilization in Syria. Do you expect that is going to be notified sometime soon?

Mr. JEFFREY. We are looking into that question.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. A diplomatic answer. Please——

[Laughter.]

Mr. JEFFREY. A correct answer.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, we hope to see that soon because this was money that we specifically provided for this purpose, precisely because we agree with you that, if we want this program to be managed according to our interests and values, we should be funding some of it, even if we, of course, ask our allies to do more.

Mr. JEFFREY. We will take that back, Congressman.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, sir.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Costa.

Mr. COSTA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your patience and for this important hearing.

Mr. Ambassador, I remind you that we first met, I believe, in 2011——

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mr. COSTA [continuing]. In a very interesting meeting with Prime Minister Maliki that we can talk about later.

Mr. JEFFREY. Perhaps not. I remember that meeting.

Mr. COSTA. Right. No, so do I. Perhaps not.

Thank you for your service to our country.

And without being redundant—I had to depart for another hearing when one of our colleagues was talking about what a mess we have in Syria and how you inherited this mess. Without being redundant, I guess my view of Syria is that it is a series of proxy wars that are taking place concurrently. And we know that that has occurred throughout the history of mankind. One could, you know, say that there is maybe as many as four proxy wars that are taking place there concurrently.

And as we look for a way out of this conundrum, and the difficult job that you have, I believe that nations ultimately do what they believe is in their own interest. So, can you describe it in this way to me: what are the threads of your efforts that lead you to believe that there are some concurring interests among the nations that are most interested there; i.e., Russia, of course Syria that is engaged in the civil war, Israel, Iran, and other Sunni nation States that lead us to figure out a way out of this conundrum? What are the concurring interests?

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you for raising this.

Since I was a teenager during the Vietnam era, this question has come up of our role in the world. And I would use a reverse argument. If we do not play the kind of very costly and at times very difficult role that we play in the world, then you get a Syria; you get a law of the jungle in a very important area where you do have, as I said, five armies.

Mr. COSTA. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY. And I think your characterization of four wars within a war is absolutely accurate. That is, you get chaos and a degenerating global system. Therefore——

Mr. COSTA. Those are under the categories of lessons to be learned.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right.

Mr. COSTA. Now where do we go?

Mr. JEFFREY. Where do we go is we basically try to convince everybody that, if they all compromise and they all come together——

Mr. COSTA. And that would be in their interest, individual interest?

Mr. JEFFREY. It would be in their interest, not just ours. You inventory—and we have done this—Russia's interests; even Iran's interests, such as they are, although their main problem is that they are a threat to the entire region——

Mr. COSTA. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. And their interests are not compatible with ours, but certainly Turkey's, Saudi Arabia's, Israel's, Jordan's, Lebanon's, and then, we try to see if there is common ground, and there is. Everybody wants this war to end. Everybody wants refugees and IDPs to return, and everybody wants the fighting and this danger of an escalation to stop.

So, we pursue on the basis of the U.N. resolution, which is pretty good as U.N. resolutions go——

Mr. COSTA. Yes.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. A peace process——

Mr. COSTA. And the U.N. is playing a very constructive role.

Mr. JEFFREY. A very constructive role. We are very happy with the U.N. across the board on the Syrian portfolio. There are some complaints, but we have that with everybody.

Unless we lay out a Course A, which is to try to pursue this U.N. process step by step—that is what we pitch to the Russians and pitch to others—or we will continue the economic and political-diplomatic pressure, and Assad will see 40 percent of his territory being held by others, and he is going to have a hard time getting that back. That is our alternative strategy, if we——

Mr. COSTA. And does Assad kind of think that what the end game for him is, a retirement villa in someplace somewhere else?

Mr. JEFFREY. He has shown little willingness to be flexible on any issue, and at the moment may be concluding that it is better to sit on a pile of rubble with half his population and 60 percent of his country than to compromise. We are trying to convince him and his supporters that is wrong.

Mr. COSTA. And that cadre around him?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mr. COSTA. Which is critical.

Mr. JEFFREY. It is critical.

Mr. COSTA. Yes. And so, Russia is being responsible thus far on this effort?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is a broad adjective——

Mr. COSTA. It depends on the day you ask?

Mr. JEFFREY. Russia is listening to us, and Russia is aware of the downsides of a policy of——

Mr. COSTA. How much resources a day are they expending——

Mr. JEFFREY. It is relatively limited.

Mr. COSTA. OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. It's a few thousand troops.

Mr. COSTA. So, it is something they can still afford?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Mr. COSTA. It is not an Afghanistan?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is not an Afghanistan in the 1980's, no.

Mr. COSTA. Yes. All right. Well, my time has expired, but continue the good work.

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you.

Mr. COSTA. And we will provide whatever support we can on our end because it is truly difficult, but it is something that there are lessons to learn from here. I hope we learned these lessons in the future. I was disappointed when President Obama designated a red line that we never followed through with, but I am not so sure that our policy these days is that clear, either.

Mr. JEFFREY. It is to me.

Mr. COSTA. OK. Well, good. I feel better. I will go home and sleep better tonight. Thank you.

My time has expired.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am awfully reassured, Ambassador Jeffrey, that the policy is clear to you because some of your colleagues resigned over changes to the policy that either were not clear to them or made no sense to them; in fact, they saw as deleterious to our objectives in Syria. So, maybe you are the lone wolf. I do not know.

But let me ask about one aspect of the policy. According to CENTCOM—and I am quoting from their report—"Absence sustained counterterrorism pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within 6 to 12 months. Even without holding territory, ISIS will likely seek to increase recruitment by exploiting popular discontent over the lack of infrastructure in areas affected by the conflict, per a recent Operation Inherent Resolve IG report."

Based on those two reports and others, it is clear that a robust stabilization effort seems to be key to prevent the reemergence of ISIS. But the Administration has frozen U.S. stabilization aid to Syria and has begun withdrawing forces that would be critical to enable such aid. How do we square that with our goal to prevent ISIS from resurging?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, I agree with the CENTCOM assessment. ISIS is still there in the northeast and throughout Syria. What they are talking about is an expansion of ISIS influence, even if it does not hold territory, and it sees that, correctly, as a threat.

In terms of our stabilization, again, we have stopped our stabilization funding, but we have reached out and last year received $325 million worth of stabilization funding from other countries, notably Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Germany, and the UK, and others as well. And we are doing the same thing this year. We have pledges for Iraq and Syria of $450 million.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, your view is others can do it; we do not need to?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, we are doing it, for example, in Iraq. We just pledged at the same stabilization conference $100 million for Al Anbar Province alone. Again, this and the last Administration have put almost $10 billion for humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees and IDPs. You know the military effort we have made in the defeat of ISIS. So, I would say, on the overall gamut of U.S. engagement in the Syrian conflict, we have made huge financial, military, and diplomatic efforts.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, I understand.

Mr. JEFFREY. In these two areas, we want to get help.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I understand, but I am trying to understand this policy you support that is clear to you. So, our policy is we have done our part; we are not going to do more with respect to the stabilization fund?

Mr. JEFFREY. Our policy is to see if, on this small area of the overall coalition effort, we can get others to take those small parts of it. As we saw with the President's decision in February when we could not, when we could not get the coalition to agree to replace all of our forces that we thought would be necessary in the northeast, the President decided to slow down the withdrawal and to consider a residual force. That is, we adjust based upon the response we are getting from our partners and allies all the time. But we consider stabilization of the northeast to be a vitally important effort to defeat ISIS in the long term and to provide security and stability in Syria. So, we will look at how we are doing in this effort to get foreign troops and foreign money.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, let me ask this question, switching subjects, but following up on that: what is current U.S. policy with respect to our Kurdish allies who fought side by side with us, were trained by us, equipped by us, and actually had victories on the battlefield, unlike most other insurgents? Given Turkey's stated opposition to the continued nature of that relationship and to territorial occupation by the Kurds, what is U.S. policy with respect to the Kurds?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, the policy toward—it is not to the Kurds anyway. I mean, there are Kurds all over the Middle East.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I am talking about the fighters we have worked with——

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. And——

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. To help defeat ISIS.

Mr. JEFFREY. And over half of them along Euphrates were Arab. It is a combined force, the SDF, and that is what we deal with. We deal with the SDF as a military partner in the fight against ISIS and the stabilization of the region. We do not have a political agenda with them other than we are in an area that they control administratively and militarily. And so, we have to have reasonable relationships with them, which we do, and we have a debt to them for having fought with us against ISIS. Those are two important things. But we do not have a political future that we offer for them. The political future we offer for them is a political future we offer for everybody in Syria, which is, under 2254, a democratic, peaceful government.

Mr. CONNOLLY. If I could just followup to clarify, Ambassador Jeffrey, so the Turks have insisted that, in territory, towns and parts of regions hard fought for and won by our Kurdish allies, coalition allies, that they need to vacate that land because it is too close to the Turkish border or else the Turks would militarily intervene. Does the United States have a point of view about that?

Mr. JEFFREY. The point of view we have is that, first of all, we do not want anybody threatening Turkey, and there is a long history of Turkey not watching what happens on the other side of its border and being dramatically and existentially threatened since 1984. We take that into consideration. We also take into consideration, again, our debt to the SDF and, thus, are concerned that we have a compromise way forward, which is what we are trying to do with both the SDF and the Turks right now.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I think I am going to spend months trying to decipher that answer.

Mr. JEFFREY. I know.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Congratulations. You are a very successful diplomat.

Chairman ENGEL. Let me say to the gentleman from Virginia that I share his concern. I mentioned it before. And frankly, I hope that the things that we heard—we talked about this a few hours ago—about leaving, about our leaving Syria is not going to happen and leave the Kurds in jeopardy. It would just be the wrong thing to do morally. It would be the wrong thing to do in so many ways. It would send the wrong message, too, in the future that the United States is not a loyal and trusted ally; that you can do business with us, but when the going gets rough, you know, we are going to dump you and walk away. I do not think that is true, and I do not think it is something that we want to be known for. So, I just want, since you raised it again, I wanted to agree with you and——

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the chair.

Chairman ENGEL [continuing]. Say that this is important. It is just really, really important that we look out for the well-being of the Kurdish people in that region.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the chair and I share his concerns.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Ms. Omar.

Ms. OMAR. Thank you, Chair.

As a survivor of war, accountability and justice is really important to me. So, I wanted to talk to you about what kind of mechanisms that could be put in place to eventually find justice for both Assad and ISIS's victims in Syria. If this war ends as it seems likely to, with Assad still in power, what hope could there be for justice for these victims? We know that there is going to be a guaranteed veto from Russia on the Security Council. How is the United States planning to hold them accountable? And is there a consideration being given, early on right now, to what could possibly happen?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. This is a very important question. Of the six criteria that we say are necessary to return to a normal State of Syria and a normal relationship with us and the international community—and this is in the President's classified February report to Congress on our strategy—one of them is a State that holds itself and its officials accountable for war crimes. Given particularly the Syrian degree of war crimes, that is very important. It is also very important for getting the half the population that has fled to return, which is another one of our six goals.

So, we have a variety of mechanisms. The U.N. has an independent monitoring commission. The Syrians themselves do a great job, through a variety of organizations. And right now, the——

Ms. OMAR. I mean, if I could interject, it is rare that in a civil war usually that war ends with that head of State still in power. And so, my question to you is, with him still being in power, are we prepared to hold him accountable?

Mr. JEFFREY. We are prepared to hold the State accountable for—as is the international community, and there we have got a lot of support from the U.N. and the EU—we are prepared to hold them accountable. I would put it this way, because otherwise we go down the slope of regime change, we think we need a Syrian government and State that behaves dramatically differently to its own population and to its neighbors for there to be peace in the region. How we attain that, other than the general model laid out in U.N. Resolution 2254, is what we are doing with our diplomatic exchanges. But, yes, a regime that continues to behave like this neither deserves to, nor will, get the rest of Syria nor get its people back.

Ms. OMAR. That we can all agree on. Some Members of the Senate have proposed transferring ISIS detainees to Guantanamo. Is that still being considered? And do you believe you are going to need a congressional approval for that?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have had no discussions or heard any discussions on that. Right now, our goal is to get these detainees to return to the countries from whence they came.

Ms. OMAR. And following up earlier about sort of the expansion or the possible expansion of ISIS, according to some of the intel that we have, very shortly after the President announced the withdrawal of troops, ISIS attacked and killed four Americans. Do you think that the timing was a coincidence? Might it have been responding to us?

Mr. JEFFREY. From everything we know about that particular attack—and I was in that location fairly recently before the attack

occurred—there was no link between the two. But we did know that, after the defeat of the ISIS caliphate, that is, the physical State occupying territory, that we would have a significant terrorist and insurgency problem with ISIS elements in Iraq and Syria, and we still have it. And we have to focus on it. It is why we have thousands of troops in Iraq, for example; why the President decided to keep a residual presence in northeastern Syria for the moment.

Ms. OMAR. And it seems like the particular conflict in Syria is being birthed out of a need for the people to have freedom and to actualize democracy. And I am concerned that most of our cues right now is being taken from Russia and Turkey and Israel. And so, I am wondering if that sort of is a counter-message to what we say we are interested in achieving in Syria.

Mr. JEFFREY. Before I did Syria, I spent a decade doing Iraq, and believe me, in this chamber, there was a lot of understandable skepticism about us bringing democracy to Iraq. Well, first of all, we did not bring it. The Iraqis wanted it. And in the end, they have a constitutional democratic system. It has its faults, but it will stand up pretty well in that regard.

I think the Syrian people, when they marched in 2011, wanted the same thing, and they still want the same thing. And the United Nations, with our strong support, is committed to giving it to them through free and fair elections, monitored by the United Nations, including the diaspora. That is half the country. If we can have an election like that, I think the people will be able to speak their will.

Ms. OMAR. That is wonderful, Ambassador. I believe democracy should not be given; they should be earned by the people. And we should be in partnerships with them. So, I appreciate you for being here and for updating us.

I yield back.

Mr. JEFFREY. Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentlewoman yields back.

And, Ambassador, we are now at the end. And I want to say personally thank you for excellent testimony and for excellent knowledge. This is a terrible, difficult part of the world, but I have always had good faith in our Ambassador corps, and you certainly have proven through the years that you are A1 in my book.

So, I know that you understand the issues and understand the depth that we feel strongly here and frustrated that it has been so long and this butcher is clinging to power and might very well wind up staying in power. When we all saw the Arab Spring, and certainly in Syria, people were demonstrating for more freedom. And unfortunately, many of them were killed, and the Syrian people have just had unthinkable tragedy happen to them. So, America is important in the world. People look up to us.

And with you at the helm, I feel much more comfortable with you working on this every single day. And I thank you for your service and thank you for your testimony this morning and this afternoon.

So, the hearing is now over.

[Whereupon, at 12:49 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), Chairman

May 22, 2019

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/):

DATE: Wednesday, May 22, 2019

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: Searching for Solutions in Syria: The Trump Administration's Strategy

WITNESSES: The Honorable James F. Jeffrey
Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS
U.S. Department of State

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day *Wednesday* Date *05/22/19* Room *2172 RHOB*

Starting Time *10:11 a.m.* Ending Time *12:49 p.m.*

Recesses *0* (____to____) (____to____) (____to____) (____to____) (____to____) (____to____)

Presiding Member(s)
Chairman Eliot L. Engel, Rep. Brad Sherman

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☑
Executive (closed) Session ☐
Televised ☑

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☑
Stenographic Record ☑

TITLE OF HEARING:
Searching for Solutions in Syria: The Trump Administration's Strategy

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
See attached.

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
Rep. French Hill

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☑ **No** ☐
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*
SFR - Connolly
QFR - Engel, Yoho, Spanberger

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *12:49 p.m.*

Eva Burse

Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
X	Eliot L. Engel, NY
X	Brad Sherman, CA
	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Joaquin Castro, TX
	Dina Titus, NV
X	Adriano Espaillat, NY
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X	Susan Wild, PA
X	Dean Phillips, MN
X	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
	David Trone, MD
X	Jim Costa, CA
X	Juan Vargas, CA
X	Vicente Gonzalez, TX

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
X	Michael T. McCaul, TX
X	Christopher H. Smith, NJ
	Steve Chabot, OH
X	Joe Wilson, SC
	Scott Perry, PA
X	Ted Yoho, FL
	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Lee Zeldin, NY
	James Sensenbrenner, Jr., WI
X	Ann Wagner, MO
	Brian J. Mast, FL
	Francis Rooney, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
X	John Curtis, UT
X	Ken Buck, CO
X	Ron Wright, TX
X	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Greg Pence, IN
X	Steve Watkins, KS
	Michael Guest, MS
X	French Hill, AR

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Statement for the Record from Representative Gerry Connolly
Searching for Solutions in Syria: The Trump Administration's Strategy
May 22, 2019

Once again, the credibility of the U.S. government's response to a complex national security challenge has been eviscerated by presidential tweet. This time, we are talking about Syria, and President Trump's December 2018 missive that he would withdraw all American troops from the country immediately because ISIS had been defeated. While the Administration has tried to backpedal this stance somewhat since then, the perception remains that the United States is not committed to Syria's transition. This perception undermines U.S. leverage to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, facilitate a political solution to the Syrian civil war, and address ongoing humanitarian needs. The Administration's erratic approach and lack of a coherent strategy in Syria have emboldened President Bashar al-Assad and his patrons Russia and Iran to the detriment of U.S. national security and long-term stability in the region.

While its territorial caliphate has been eliminated, the sustainable defeat of ISIS is by no means assured. According to a recent U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) assessment, "absent sustained [counterterrorism] pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within six to twelve months." Even without holding territory, ISIS will likely seek to increase recruitment by exploiting popular discontent over lack of infrastructure in areas affected by the conflict, per a recent Operation Inherent Resolve Inspector General report. Based on these findings, it is clear that a robust stabilization effort is key to prevent the reemergence of ISIS. However, the Administration has frozen U.S. stabilization aid to Syria, and begun withdrawing U.S. forces that would be critical to enable such aid.

The lack of a high-level political commitment to Syria corrodes our ability to influence a negotiated settlement. President Trump seems wedded to a unilateral diplomatic retreat that has allowed other parties on the ground – namely Turkey, Russia, and Iran – to shape the conflict and negotiations to reflect their own interests. The President's FY 2020 budget also zeroes out economic support and anti-terrorism funding for Syria. According to the bipartisan Syria Study Group's Interim Assessment and Recommendations, Assad is unwilling to compromise and intends to retake all of Syria. With the current diplomatic process stalled and a tenuous U.S. commitment, some governments are beginning to re-establish ties with Damascus.

In addition to these geopolitical concerns, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe. There are 13.1 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, 6.2 million Syrians internally displaced, and 5.6 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. This crush of humanity has strained resources within countries hosting massive refugee populations, drastically changed regional demographics, and destabilized neighboring countries. Despite a record high number of refugees worldwide, the Trump Administration announced a record low refugee admissions goal for FY 2019. That is why I plan to reintroduce the Lady Liberty Act (H.R. 6909) to require the President to set the refugee admissions ceiling at a minimum of 110,000 refugees annually.

This Administration appears hopelessly out of its depths in Syria. Ultimately, it is political negotiations that will bring lasting relief to the millions of affected Syrians who have known only violence and displacement for more than seven years. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has been unwilling to make the diplomatic investments that would be necessary to ensure that a

negotiated settlement reflects U.S. national security interests and protects humanitarian concerns. If the Administration continues down this path, then the United States will be forced to accept a Syrian future shaped by our adversaries.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#1)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 1:

Ambassador Jeffrey, you referenced still engaging with the Turkish government in negotiations over a safe zone of 'indeterminate depth' in northeast Syria.

Where do these negotiations stand exactly and what is the plan for SDF forces, depending on the amount of Syrian territory into which the Turkish military is allowed? (Classified setting if necessary)

Answer 1:

We engage with our Turkish counterparts for a safe zone arrangement along the Turkish-Syrian border from the Euphrates east to Iraq that accounts for Turkey's legitimate security concerns while allowing for ongoing efforts to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS. The Peoples' Protection Unit (YPG), the Kurdish PKK-linked element of our anti-ISIS partner the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), would pull out its units and weapons from the zone. Current discussions revolve around the depth and control of the zone. Our intention is to find an arrangement that gives local entities control of security within the safe zone, while the SDF continues its D-ISIS mission in other parts of northeast Syria. I was most recently in Turkey in the beginning of May to continue these discussions, and I speak regularly with my Turkish counterpart on this and other issues of mutual concern regarding Syria. I am happy to keep you informed as this process develops.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#2)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 2:

Ambassador Jeffrey, you said that Secretary of Defense Shanahan is 'making progress' with coalition partners for them to contribute more military forces and stabilization forces.

a. Have any nations actually contributed additional personnel? Where do these efforts currently stand?

Answer 2:

The United States remains committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS, to include eliminating the conditions that would allow for its resurgence. As the President announced on February 21, the United States will retain a residual troop presence in northeast Syria to maintain stability and prevent an ISIS resurgence. We continue to work closely with our partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, many of whom are NATO Allies, to increase Coalition troop contributions. While those efforts are still underway, our Coalition partners are stepping up. We expect to have final troop figures from a number of nations by the end of July. However, some nations ask that their participation or numbers are not made public by the United States.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#3)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 3:

Ambassador Jeffrey, you stated that the U.S. government is currently conducting an examination into potential Syrian military use of chemical weapons in and/or around Idlib in mid-May.

a. Did the Syrian government in fact use chemical weapons?
b. What has this study revealed about Syrian regime & Russian military tactics and methods employed?

Answer 3:

We are closely monitoring military operations by the Assad regime in northwest Syria, including indications of any new use of chemical weapons. We continue to investigate the incident, and are not yet ready to make a determination. If the Assad regime credibly uses chemical weapons against its population, the United States and our allies will respond quickly and forcefully.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#4)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 4:

Ambassador Jeffrey, the congressionally-mandated, bipartisan Syria Study Group recommends stopping the drawdown of U.S. troops from Syria, passing and signing into law the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, resuming U.S. assistance to Syria, and resuming the presence of the Syria Transitions Assistance Response Team (START) Forward team - the assistance professionals in Northeast Syria who were implementing programs sought to hold territory formerly held by ISIS.

a. Do you support these recommendations? Why or why not?

Answer 4:

The United States remains committed to the Global Coalition and to the Global Campaign against ISIS. As the President announced on February 21, the United States will retain a residual troop presence in northeast Syria to maintain stability and prevent an ISIS resurgence. This is in addition to our continued presence at the Al Tanf garrison in southern Syria.

The Trump Administration strongly supports the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, and believes that its efforts will help put pressure on the brutal Assad regime in order to come to a political solution to the conflict.

The United States continues to support humanitarian aid in Syria, and has provided over $9.5 billion to those efforts throughout Syria and to neighboring countries. The Administration also supports stabilization activities in northeast Syria.

We are pursuing options to reinsert a limited number of State Department and USAID stabilization and humanitarian assistance experts back into Syria, and expect to update you on

this very soon. In the interim, State and USAID continue to perform their assistance oversight responsibilities from outside the country.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#5)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 5:

Ambassador Jeffrey, the Russians and the Syrian regime have set up checkpoints outside the Rukban camp to ostensibly screen those leaving the camp.

a. What risks does this pose to the refugee population?
b. Have they used these checkpoints for forced disappearances and forced conscription?

Answer 5:

The humanitarian plight of the Rukban population and its overall security remains a high priority for, and subject of ministerial-level discussions by, the U.S. government.

Russia and the Syrian regime have set up multiple checkpoints outside the 55-km zone surrounding the Rukban internally displaced persons camp. The checkpoints have had the effect of sealing off the 55-km zone around Rukban from most commercial traffic, which provided alternative sources of food and basic necessities for the Rukban population during the periods when internationally-provided humanitarian aid was not allowed into the area from Damascus by the Syrian regime. The last humanitarian aid delivery was in early February 2019. The Syrian regime denied the most recent UN request to deliver aid to Rukban on April 22. The checkpoints also keep the Rukban residents trapped in the 55-km zone unless they agree to Syrian regime terms for return to other parts of Syria, including security checks and enforcement of conscription requirements. The United States has credible reports from non-governmental organizations with contacts in the Rukban settlement of some Syrians seeking to leave the zone for their home areas, only to be denied and turned back because Syrian regime security checks have not been completed and/or successful.

Rukban residents are not subject to conscription unless they leave the 55-km zone. Since the checkpoints were established, there have been scattered anecdotal reports of arrest, injury, and death of some Rukban residents after leaving the encampment. Most incidents have been related to individuals seeking to circumvent the checkpoints. Russia and the Syrian regime have offered Rukban returnees a six-month grace period before required military service for appropriately aged males. There have not been other reports of forced conscription.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel (#6)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 6:

Ambassador Jeffrey, leaked documents indicate the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA) headquarters for all Syria operations would relocate from Jordan to Damascus. This would mean all aid collected for Syria through donor nations would be centralized in and delivered through regime-controlled Damascus. This not only undermines the UN's mission to deliver aid to all areas of the country – regardless of affiliation – but specifically its efforts to get aid to areas outside regime control.

a. What message would this send to the Assad regime?
b. How would this impact the ability to deliver aid to areas most in need?

Answer 6:

The United States is in discussions with other major donors and at every level in the United Nations to ensure that humanitarian aid is able to reach all areas in Syria in which it is needed. This effort includes pushing back on the Assad regime's blatant use of withholding humanitarian aid in order to make political and military gains.

We believe that the humanitarian situation in Syria remains in a critical state and that difficulties in accessing Syrian populations in need will continue to require UN OCHA to maintain a coordination office outside Syria that reports directly to UN headquarters. The UN has assured us that it will continue managing humanitarian aid deliveries to non-regime areas by means other than its Damascus office.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Ted Yoho (#1)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 1:

Is there legitimate proof that crimes against humanity, war crimes, or violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention have occurred under the Assad regime in Syria?

Answer 1:

The Department of State has assessed that the Syrian regime is responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes. This was supported by former Ambassador Haley's reference to Assad as a war criminal during a news conference on April 3, 2017.

The Assad regime's continued use of chemical weapons since Syria became party to the Chemical Weapons Convention is a violation of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, as well as its obligations under UN Security Council resolution 2118.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Ted Yoho (#2)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 2:

If the answer to the previous question is yes, does the U.N. have the ability to bring up these charges against Assad and try him at the International Court in the Hague?

Answer 2:

The UN Security Council has the ability to refer situations to the International Criminal Court or to take other measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. To date, the UN Security Council has not decided to make such a referral.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Ted Yoho (#3)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 3:

Can Assad be forced to step down based on these charges?

Answer 3:

Accountability for atrocities in Syria continues to be a priority for the Administration and is crucial to the success of any political agreement to end the conflict. We support the ongoing work to document, analyze, and assign responsibility for evidence of human rights abuses and atrocities by the regime and armed actors, including ISIS. These efforts, including those of the UN International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), create a foundation for current and future justice measures. Paragraph 13 of UNSCR 2254, the primary UN Security Council policy on the Syrian conflict, demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment; welcomes the commitment by the ISSG to press the parties in this regard; and further demands that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable. We will continue to use the political, diplomatic, and economic tools at our disposal to promote real consequences for atrocities committed in Syria.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Abigail Spanberger (#1)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 1:

The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (Public Law 107–40; 50 U.S.C. 1541) authorizes the President to use "necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."

a. Under what authorities are U.S. Armed Forces operating in Syria and what are the objectives and end states for those operations.

Answer 1:

The 2001 AUMF and 2002 AUMF authorize the use of force in Syria against ISIS, a re-named element of al-Qa'ida.

Our troops in Syria are there to accomplish the enduring defeat of ISIS, and will remain in northeast Syria in order to prevent an ISIS resurgence and maintain stability and security. The defeat of ISIS is necessary for stability in Syria, and ultimately a political solution that ends this conflict.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Abigail Spanberger (#2)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 2:

What diplomatic initiatives do U.S. military operations in Syria support and how do those kinetic actions help achieve political outcomes?

Answer 2:

Our troops in Syria are there to accomplish the enduring defeat of ISIS, and will remain in northeast Syria in order to prevent an ISIS resurgence and maintain stability and security. The defeat of ISIS is necessary for stability in Syria, and ultimately a political solution that ends this conflict.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Abigail Spanberger (#3)
House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 22, 2019

Question 3:

Is the State Department involved in decisions regarding the use of U.S. Armed Forces in Syria—to what extent and through which mechanisms? How are differences adjudicated when there are disagreements on the use of force between the State Department and Department of Defense or U.S. Central Command?

Answer 3:

The President makes decisions regarding the use of U.S. Armed Forces in Syria. This decision is informed by a whole of government approach, in which the Department of State plays a significantly appropriate role focused on foreign policy objectives and diplomatic considerations. Differences not adjudicated at lower levels are decided by the President.

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