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THE CRISIS IN IDLIB

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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THE CRISIS IN IDLIB

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA,
AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:05 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. DEUTCH. The Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism Subcommittee hearing on the crisis in Idlib will be called to order.

I will recognize myself for the purposes of making an opening statement and then will yield to Mr. Wilson, the ranking member.

I welcome everyone who is here today. I am grateful to the witnesses for appearing. We are here to hear testimony on the crisis in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria. And I will begin.

The military assault in Idlib is a painful reminder that the Syrian conflict is far from over and that the international community must act to mitigate the humanitarian disaster in northwestern Syria. Since December 1st, nearly one million people, half of them children, have been displaced, forced to flee their homes in the dead of winter. Those lucky enough to find housing live in overcrowded conditions, often without electricity. The vast majority sleep in tents or out in the open as temperatures plunge. Small children are freezing to death as families crowd into any semblance of shelter.

Assad, Russia, and Iran have violated cease-fires and have flagrantly disregarded international law in their assaults on Idlib where they have attacked hospitals, schools, shelters, health clinics, and residential areas. We have photos here today submitted by the Syrian Emergency Task Force of the destruction and devastation in Idlib. And I greatly appreciate the recent pledge of $108 million in humanitarian assistance by the United States.

The Administration must now encourage our allies and partners to increase their contributions and meet the needs of those suffering in Idlib. The U.S. must also continue to advocate for unfettered humanitarian access, including by defending cross-border aid, and enhanced diplomatic efforts to achieve a permanent cease-fire that can lead to a final political settlement in Syria.

I wrote a letter to Secretary Pompeo emphasizing these points and offering congressional assistance in prioritizing the humanitarian crisis in Idlib, and I encourage all of my colleagues to join me in signing it.

There are innocent people suffering in Idlib. And I want to use my time today to let members hear directly from them.

And with the ranking member's consent, I would like to play a message that we received from Idlib. Ms. Moumena Al Qassem is an English teacher at a school for orphan children in Idlib, supported by American communities in Arkansas and Pennsylvania. Moumena recorded a video for this hearing to share the pain that Syrians are experiencing every day. For her safety, she has chosen to cover her face. She is sharing her own words and her own thoughts with us today.

[Video shown.]

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Moumena, for her bravery in recording this message.

As this conflict enters its tenth year we have a lot to discuss today about how the United States can best assist in ending this war and bringing peace to Syria, and addressing the dire humanitarian crisis that Moumena spoke of, that the world must take note of.

And, again, I am really grateful for our witnesses for being here to lead us in this important conversation. And I yield to the ranking member for his opening remarks.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, very much, Chairman Ted Deutch, for calling this important hearing on the ongoing developments in Idlib, Syria. I especially appreciated hearing from the educators you just provided and, indeed, Mr. Chairman, your leadership on bringing this to the attention of the American people.

It is sad to me that as we begin it is very clear the American media has not covered this with the urgency that it should, as indicated by the empty table where they should be located. And it is just horrifying. And that is why I appreciate Stephanie Pendarvis and her office who has brought just in the last 24 hours information to me that I want the American people to know. That the persons affected in the Idlib area are 3.5 million people. That is inconceivable, that many people at risk.

Additionally, the regime's attacks on the Idlib area have displaced a million people. And it should be noted that most are women, 21 percent; and children, 60 percent. This is such a crisis, and so obvious in the picture of the children.

And I visited a, in Jordan a camp to see the children there who have fled. The two-thirds of the entire refugee population in the world are now in Turkey. And they are taking care of 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey, as well as 5 million Syrians that are under the Syrian side of the Turkish border.

Additionally, the humanitarian crisis and the attacking by Russian aircraft killing Turkish military personnel, and again it is sad to me—I am not critical as much as I am sad—the American media when they present it it is unintelligible who is good, who is bad, leaving out the alliance of Assad, Moscow, and Tehran. But, indeed, the strong efforts by our NATO ally Turkey to try to protect the public, and the strong humanitarian aid, Mr. Chairman, that you mentioned that President Trump has authorized, too, on top of all that we all have already provided, as evidenced by the video that we just saw.

In nearly a decade, the world has stood by and watched as the barbaric Assad regime and its backers in Russia and Iran indiscriminately butchered the Syrian people in order to cling to power. They have killed nearly half a million Syrians, permitted countless atrocities, and perpetrated egregious war crimes.

As has been said before, we need to say again that we should be very clear that Bashar Assad must go. The Assad regime is illegitimate. It has barbarically used chemical weapons to murder its own citizens. And the United States must unequivocally demand Assad leave as the first step to the future of a new Syria.

For months now we have seen the situation in Idlib Province in Syria go from bad to worse. It is perhaps the greatest human rights atrocity since the beginning of Assad's genocidal campaign. Hospitals, schools, and humanitarian aid workers have been targeted routinely. Nearly one millions refugees have fled Russian and regime aerial bombardments, precipitating which could be the biggest refugee crisis in European history.

And response to months of pro-regime escalation in Idlib have culminated in the Russian air strike that killed 33 Turkish troops in late February. Turkey has launched Operation Spring Shield in northwest Syria. According to Turkey, this operation has led to the killing of over 3,000 Syrian soldiers and significant destruction of Syrian regime military hardware provided by the Russians, including 3 jets, 3 UAVs, 8 helicopters, 135 tanks, and 5 air defense systems.

And we need to be clear, the United States has many challenging and persisting—persistent disagreements with our ally Turkey. But I commend the Trump administration for supporting the Turkish operation to beat back the Assad regime. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clearly stated that the U.S. stands with Turkish efforts to stop the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran in Idlib.

It was heartening to see the Trump administration's Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft, along with U.S. Special Representative for Syria Jim Jeffrey in Idlib just last week meeting with the White Helmets, the Syrian defense, civil defense. That meeting sent a strong message of support and solidarity to the people of Syria. It also facilitated important ammunition and intelligence cooperation between the United States and Turkey.

Another senior Trump administration official, Joel Rayburn, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant, met with the Saudi Arabian Minister of Sate for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir, clinching Saudi support for the Turkish operation in Idlib.

These diplomatic developments may be discounted, but they carry a lot of weight with the Syrian people who have been targeted for a decade as the world debates on what to do next. These actions are also monitored in Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran.

I am grateful that in recent weeks the governments of both Germany and The Netherlands have expressed support for a no-fly zone or a protected area in Idlib, as has been provided in Irbil and northern Iraq previously. We need to support efforts that could lead to a safe haven for peaceful Syrian civilians and save countless lives.

Additionally, the most humanitarian solution for Idlib and Syria is to help people return and stay in their homes. This cannot occur

so long as Assad is in power. And we should insist that the regime be held to account and, ultimately, removed.

I am really grateful to see that politics is stopping at the water's edge, led by Chairman Ted Deutch. We will be working together to support the people of Syria against the Assad regime and its backers in Russia and Iran. And I look forward to hearing from our experts today.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

And before we turn to the witnesses, we are grateful the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Eliot Engel has joined us. And I would be glad to yield to him for any statement he wishes to make.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted very much to come here because I think this subject is just so important. So, thank you for calling this hearing today and for the opportunity to say a few words. And I heard what you said and what Mr. Wilson said. I certainly agree with everything that both of you have said.

I have been doing a lot of work vis-a-vis Syria, and it breaks my heart to see what the Syrian people have gone through. I know there are many good Syrian American groups that are working very, very hard. And I commend them and I work with them.

It is really hard to believe what is happening today. It is hard to believe it has been nearly a decade since the civil war erupted in Syria. And that's when many of us began focusing on the conflict, looking for a way to end the bloodshed and put the Syrian people on a path toward a brighter future.

And there is no other way to put it, those efforts have really been a failure: a failure of American leadership, a failure of countries around the world. The Syrian people deserve better. Instead, 600,000 have lost their lives—600,000. Think about that. It is almost unthinkable. Millions more have lost their homes, and the violence goes on, and on, and on.

Assad, and Iran, and Russia, are undeterred. Assad's military and Russian forces continue to target hospitals, relief centers, and other civilian infrastructure. People flee and go into hospitals, and then they bomb the hospitals. It is just, it is horrific. And we watch in horror at what is happening now in Idlib where over 500,000 people have been displaced in the last 2 months alone and entire neighborhoods turned to dust.

We see the humanitarian crisis, it is just heartbreaking. It is infuriating. It is frustrating.

Ranking Member McCaul and I together have pressed Secretary Pompeo to take steps to push for a stop to the violence and demand accountability for what is happening in Idlib. While I appreciate Ambassador Jeffrey's announcement on Tuesday of a small amount of additional humanitarian aid to the area, this does not address the needs of the hundreds of thousands still fleeing the Assad regime's brutality, or help bring about a lasting end to this heinous conflict.

And I must be honest, it is frustrating, there has been bipartisan support in Congress for dialing up pressure on the Assad regime and to crack down on its enablers. Finally, last year after years of

effort, we passed the Caesar Syria Sanctions Bill, my bill, and it became law. We have given the Administration the tools, now we simply want them to use those tools. But the Administration, unfortunately, is sitting on its hands and we have seen no real strategy, no real vision to how this horrific crisis could be brought to an end.

I refuse to give up hope. And as long as I am a member of this body I will continue to push for the end to the violence and suffering, and to demand that those responsible face justice.

I am very grateful to this distinguished panel for sharing their time and their expertise. And, again, I thank our chairman for the time and for bringing this subcommittee's focus to such an important matter.

I am pleased to be the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We have members on both sides of the aisle who work together, who understand that American cannot abandon things that happen in the Middle East or anyplace else. We need to be right up there front and center, and call it what it is. It is a genocide. And it is a terrible, terrible thing that is going on. The world is just sitting by. America has to continue to take a strong stance. And I will be there every step of the way.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Chairman Engel.

Members of the subcommittee can give opening statements of up to a minute, if they choose. Mr. Chabot, you are recognized.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank you for holding this hearing.

We are witnessing the latest crisis in the Syrian civil war as Assad tries to retake Idlib. I happened to be chairman of this subcommittee when this war began back in 2011–2012. And watching this thing unfold has just been horrific. And Assad has gone to totally barbaric lengths to regain his hold on power. Whether it is bombing hospitals or using chemical weapons against civilians, it goes on and on.

And as members have stated, fortunately this committee has acted in a bipartisan manner. Unfortunately, you know, the world to a considerable degree has stood by and watched and not been willing to aid in any serious way.

Since the beginning of December, Assad's assault on Idlib has sent almost a million people fleeing toward the Turkish border. They are living in desperate conditions, without proper shelter, heating, food, medical care, harsh winter coming. The situation there is absolutely reprehensible and needs to change.

For these reasons, the United States must continue to push for a political solution and commit to achieving a humanitarian outcome.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Mr. Cicilline, you are recognized for a minute.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. I thank the chairman and the ranking member for holding this important hearing.

As we enter nearly the ninth year of the Syrian civil war, it is apparent that the presence of foreign proxy fighters has further complicated the situation and resulted in a significant escalation of

this conflict. Of course, the recent deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers and the ongoing fighting in Idlib Province further reinforces our need to increase efforts to work with our partners to bring an end to this conflict.

The human costs are difficult to exaggerate. The suffering of the Syrian people will of course be exacerbated by further fighting.

According to the State Department, nearly a third of the population of Idlib has been displaced as a result of this crisis since December 2019, calling it, and I quote, "the largest internal displacement of people that we have seen in such a short period of time in Syria in the whole war."

This is unconscionable. As Congress continues to assess U.S. policy in this region it is critical that we bear in mind the vulnerable populations affected by these actions.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your views on what we can do as Members of Congress to help bring an end to this conflict.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Any other members wishing to make opening statements?

Seeing none, we will turn to the witnesses.

Ms. Dana Stroul is the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow in the Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics. She previously served for 5 years as the senior professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and in 2019 served as co-chair of the bipartisan Syria Study Group which released its final report on U.S. policy toward the conflict in Syria in September.

Before working on Capitol Hill, Ms. Stroul served in the Middle East Policy Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Mr. Hardin Lang is the Vice President for Programs and Policy at Refugees International. He has served in a number of United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian field missions, including in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

In Iraq he served as Chief of Staff for the International Organization for Migration's humanitarian and stabilization mission. Prior to joining Refugees International, Hardin was senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

And, finally, Ms. Jennifer Cafarella is the Research Director at the Institute for the Study of War. She previously led ISW's Syria team from 2014 to 2017, before becoming ISW's Director of Intelligence Planning from 2018 to 2019. She is a graduate of ISW's Hertog War Studies Program. She has written extensively on Syria, Iraq, Al Qaida, and ISIS, and regularly briefs military units preparing to deploy on a range of subjects, including Syria, ISIS, and Russia.

Thank you all for being here today. Let me remind the witnesses to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes. And without objection, your prepared remarks will be made part of the hearing record. Thank you again so much for being here.

Ms. Stroul, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF DANA STROUL, SHELLY AND MICHAEL KASSEN FELLOW, BETH AND DAVID GEDULD PROGRAM ON ARAB POLITICS, WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

Ms. STROUL. Chairman, Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for holding this hearing. I am going to use my 5 minutes to do two things:

First, situate the Idlib crisis in the broader context of U.S. interests and policies on Syria;

Second, identify the risks and opportunities for the United States in Idlib.

Idlib is the crucible of the war in Syria with implications for all strategic challenges to U.S. interests: competition with Russia, countering terrorism, denying Iran's bid for a long-term entrenchment, mitigating the Syrian refugee crisis, and protecting the rules-based international order.

The Administration's Syria policy ostensibly remains focused on three objectives: defeating ISIS, expelling Iran, and supporting a political process to end the war. Yet, Syria has not been prioritized diplomatically. And the means to achieve these objectives has systematically been taken off the table: the cutoff in stabilization aid, blocked actions at the United Nations, and a reduced U.S. military presence in the northeast.

The Administration has not changed its goals, but they are unachievable with less attention and less resources. In Idlib, the stated U.S. objective for a cease-fire is critical but lamentably narrow. The March 5th Russia-Turkey cease-fire agreement will not prevent further violence in Idlib, failed to mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe, and does nothing to address the underlying causes of the Syria war: Assad regime's brutality toward its own people.

One standout trend of the war is Russia's consistent failure to compel Assad to adhere to any agreement. In Idlib the question is when, not if, the violence will reignite. Also, the humanitarian crisis is intentional. Assad and Russia are weaponizing refugees in order to force European and Arab governments to fund reconstruction of the Syrian State absent any meaningful reform.

But, a strategic inflection point in the war might soon present opportunities. Considering the following:

The Turkish military inflicted devastating damage to Assad's forces in Idlib. Going forward he will be constrained in launching new operations.

Russian and Iranian support may be impacted by black swan events. The coronavirus outbreak and the Russia-Saudi OPEC feud have collapsed oil prices. Both of these trends will hammer the oil-dependent economies of Assad's backers.

Anti-regime opposition is again stirring in the south. Regime-controlled areas are unstable. Russia and Iran do not have the resources to stabilize or rebuild Syria.

Finally, Syria's economy continues to spiral downward, accelerated by the economic crisis in Lebanon and the U.S.-led sanctions regime. Here is the opportunity. We should start planning now for

how we might leverage the next outbreak of violence to reinvigorate a political process.

To do this, the U.S. should seek rapprochement with Turkey on Syria and continue to hold the line on political isolation, economic sanctions, and denial of reconstruction aid. Only if the regime credibly changes its behavior, including meaningful participation in the Geneva process, should we consider incremental steps to end Syria's diplomatic and economic isolation. With Turkey, now is the time to pursue a pragmatic solution to the S–400 issue.

The Turkish military ably performs in Idlib, but Ankara still sees diplomatic and operational demonstrations of American and NATO support. Our consultation should focus not only on northwest Syria but also the northeast where the anti-ISIS mission remains incomplete.

The risks:

In Idlib, the conflict will be frozen or Idlib will collapse. The cease-fire has created an open-air prison along the Turkish border housing extremists and civilians. Also, Assad's symbiotic relationship with Al Qaida is well known. We should expect that if his regime takes Idlib, extremist elements there will be co-opted and weaponized at a time of his choosing. Regime victory in Idlib enabled continuity in Iran's strategy for entrenching long-term interests.

And, finally, the path to a negotiable, durable solution to the war is over if Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, believes he can win militarily in Idlib.

In the medium to long term, at risk is the U.S.-backed global order. Putin aims to weaken and ultimately destroy this rules-and norms-based system. We know what a Russia-dominated Middle East looks like: Idlib, autocrats terrorizing their own populations, chemical weapons, mass casualty bombs, routinized torture, harboring of extremists, cooperation with Iran, and weaponization of refugees, all while enjoying protection from accountability at the U.N. Security Council due to the Russian veto.

Russia is not a partner for peace. Yet, the trend remains—diplomats, military officials, businesspeople in the region flocking to Moscow and welcoming Putin at home. This trend will not be reversed, or at best slowed, if the U.S. is not prepared to seize opportunities in Syria.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Stroul follows:]

The Crisis in Idlib

Dana Stroul
Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

March 11, 2020

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this critical issue. The war in Syria enters its tenth year this month and Idlib is the crucible of the conflict. The outcome of this chapter of the war has implications for virtually all strategic challenges to U.S. interests: Russia's role in the Middle East; counterterrorism threats; Iran's projection of power; the Syrian refugee and IDP crisis; and the war crimes committed not only by Assad and Iran, but also by Russia—a member of the United Nations Security Council.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Trump administration's Syria policy ostensibly remains focused on three goals: (1) defeat ISIS, (2) remove all Iranian and Iran-backed boots from Syria, and (3) support a viable political process to end the war under the auspices of the UN. All of these objectives are unachievable if the regime regains control of the province.

- *Counterterrorism.* Assad's symbiotic relationship with Al Qaeda is well-established, and there is every reason to expect that if his regime regains control of Idlib, extremist elements there will be coopted and weaponized by Assad as leverage against Arab neighbors, Europe, and the U.S. ISIS is already regrouping in regime-held areas, and a Russia-Iran-Assad victory in Idlib will fan the flames of extremism in Syria, the heart of the Middle East.
- *Iran.* A regime victory in Idlib will enable continuity in Iran's strategy for entrenching long-term influence in Syria. Tehran is working to minimize disruption in its bid for long-term influence through proxies and weak governments after the death of Commander Qassem Soleimani. Given Iran's goal of expelling U.S. forces from the region and Assad's goal of retaking all Syrian territory, it will be an easier shift from northwest Syria to northeast by the Russia-Iran-Assad axis in order to counter the U.S. military still active east of the Euphrates River.
- *Political process.* A return to conflict will prompt all stakeholders to seek military solutions rather than a political outcome at the negotiating table. The path to a negotiated, durable solution to the war in Syria would effectively be over if Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, continues to resist any concessions under the UN process. Assad's strategy of mass terror and his weaponization of refugees is designed to force Europe and Arab governments to reintegrate him into the international community and fund reconstruction of the Syrian state, absent any changes in his regime.

These outcomes threaten U.S. interests in the Middle East, the security of NATO ally Turkey, and stability in Europe. Yet Syria has not been prioritized in Washington, and resources continue to be taken off the table, from stabilization funds to U.S. military boots on the ground. Local, regional, and European partners question U.S. commitment, and are looking to Moscow for leadership in Syria.

BACKGROUND

Idlib has long held strategic importance of the province to all the stakeholders involved in hostilities there. Idlib's population was an estimated 1.5 million in 2011. The UN estimates it has more than doubled over the course of the Syrian war, as the Assad regime methodically relocated waves of Syrian civilians and opposition fighters there from other parts of the country following local ceasefires and "reconciliation agreements." Essentially, Syrian civilians and fighters faced a choice after the latter lost on the battlefield, presented to them by Russia and Assad: submit to the regime or relocate to Idlib. These agreements were designed to bring opposition-held areas under Assad regime control and cleanse them of the largely Sunni population. Rather than face the likelihood of conscription, forced disappearances, and the daily humiliations and deprivations of regime-controlled life, hundreds of thousands of Syrians moved to Idlib.

Concurrently, non-ISIS terrorist groups made Idlib the center of gravity for their activities. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras ad-Din are both extremist groups that have resisted Al Qaeda's attempts to unify them despite overlapping ideological affiliations/bents. Hurras ad-Din continues to plan external attacks and is thus considered a high priority threat by the United States, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham established an Islamist government in Idlib whose practices have led to the flight of humanitarian actors, violent suppression of civil society activists, and forced conscription of children.

As part of the effort to forestall a broader Turkish military incursion into Idlib and prevent another humanitarian crisis on Turkey's border, President Putin agreed with President Erdogan in September 2017 to a "de-escalation zone." Putin and Erdogan followed up in September 2018 with the "Sochi agreement," whereby Turkey would remove 'extremist elements' and Russia committed to prevent further offensive operations by the Assad regime. But the Assad regime—supported by Russian air power and Iran-aligned ground forces—launched an offensive to retake Idlib in early 2019. Assad and his backers initially achieved only minimal progress, largely due to push back from Turkish-supported opposition forces and Al-Qaeda linked fighters. Turkey, already under tremendous domestic strain from hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees in its territory, views an additional influx of refugees as an existential threat given its domestic economic downturn and rise in anti-refugee sentiment.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

The Assad-Russia-Iran offensive kicked into high gear in the past three months, causing the most severe humanitarian crisis of the entire nine-year war and violating the terms of the Sochi agreement. The fighting reached its boiling point on February 27, when Turkish forces were attacked with precision munitions leading to 33 Turkish deaths and 60 injured. Though Assad's forces were initially blamed for the attack, the precise nature of the operation, at night, indicates Russian Air Force—Assad regime forces lack the capability for such a strike, especially at night. Turkey responded decisively, destroying Assad aircraft, ground vehicles, and artillery pieces; targeting regime personnel; and attacking the Assad's Russian-provided air defense system. There are also reports of Lebanese Hezbollah casualties in Idlib. The Turkish counter-offensive, at least temporarily, shifted the military balance on the ground against Assad and his backers Russia and Iran.

Assad regime losses and Turkish willingness to use military force prompted Putin to seek a ceasefire agreement, rather than risk additional losses on the battlefield. Putin is also motivated to keep Turkey oriented toward

Moscow, and not push Turkey back toward the U.S. and NATO after years of tension. Despite Erdogan's demonstrated willingness to use military force, the agreement negotiated with Putin favors Assad's territorial gains. While it provides a temporary respite for terrorized Syrian civilians, it is unlikely to hold and there are already reports of Assad regime violations.

The Russia-Turkey ceasefire agreement will not prevent further violence in Idlib, fails to address the humanitarian catastrophe, and does nothing to address the underlying causes of the Syrian civil war: the Assad regime's brutality toward its own people. It has already been rejected by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras ad-Din, and enables a "Gaza Strip"-like situation on Turkey's border with Syrian civilians and Al Qaeda-linked groups pushed up against the Turkish border. Syrians cannot return to their homes under this agreement, which perpetuates the human suffering and instability.

The question is when—not if—violence will reignite in Idlib. Russia is both unwilling and incapable of compelling Assad to adhere to any ceasefire or de-escalation agreement. Although Assad should recognize the devastating losses to what remains of his military should he restart the offensive in Idlib, Putin is undeterred in ensuring the regime's survival.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Given the near-certainty of return to conflict in Idlib, the U.S. should start planning now for how it might leverage that next outbreak of violence to move all parties toward a political process. Aiming for a ceasefire—which is the administration's current objective for Idlib—is critical, but too narrow a goal given the strategic risk to broader U.S. interests.

This opportunity for a strategic pivot will present itself given the following factors:

- Assad's forces suffered significant material and personnel losses at the hands of the Turkish military in Idlib. They will be constrained in their ability to launch new operations in other parts of Syria not under regime control. Russian and Iranian operational support may be more tenuous given a set of black swan events the Corona virus, which is sweeping through Iran, and the spectacular Russia-Saudi OPEC feud which has collapsed oil prices both of which are likely to hammer the oil-dependent economies of Assad's backers.
- Assad is constrained in his ability to maintain control over areas of Syria currently under regime control. Anti-regime opposition is stirring again in southern Syria. This is another example of failed 'reconciliation' agreements with the regime, which lacks the resources and manpower to counter the rising insurgency in the south, and is unwilling to deliver on the commitments it made under the terms of the reconciliation deal.
- Syria's economy continues its downward spiral, accelerated by the economic crisis in next door Lebanon as well as the impact of the U.S.-led sanctions regime. Additional sanctions from the Congressionally-mandated Caesar Civilian Protection Act will come online soon, and the U.S. and Europe are still standing together in denial of any reconstruction aid to Syria absent meaningful reforms. The regime is economically starved, and Russia and Iran cannot bail Assad out.

The convergence of these developments offers the United States, in concert with the United Nations, and European and Arab governments, an opportunity to use the economic pressure and battlefield realities inside Syria to refocus on the political process. The leverage if the U.S. remains opposed to using military force in Syria other than to defeat ISIS is the ongoing political and economic pressure on Assad, and increasing sanctions on his backers in Tehran and Moscow. Easing of sanctions and discussion of reconstruction assistance should only be on the table if the regime credibly changes its behavior, including meaningful participation in the

Geneva political process.

Leveraging this strategic window, however, will require confidence-building and coordination with Turkey. The goal should be rapprochement on Syria policy and driving a wedge between Ankara and Moscow. The bilateral discussion should be expanded beyond a narrow focus on the Patriot missile defense system. It should focus on reaching a mutually beneficial consensus with Turkey on the way forward in Syria, including how to complete the anti-ISIS mission in northeastern Syria. It will be counterproductive to U.S. efforts in Syria if the aperture with Turkey is widened to encompass every problematic policy of the Turkish government, but a pragmatic solution on Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 system should be part of the consultations.

Other efforts that the U.S. should undertake before the Russia-Turkey ceasefire collapses altogether include:

- U.S. diplomacy at the United Nations Security Council should be supercharged with like-minded Council members to renew full cross-border access for humanitarian aid delivery. In January, Russia and China vetoed renewal of Resolution 2449, which enabled cross-border humanitarian aid delivery at four points without Assad regime approval, and the current reduced mandate expires on July 10. With reduced cross-border access, the UN has struggled to reach Syrians in need. According to Interaction, 70% of the population of Idlib are women and children, and the cross-border system is the only way to deliver urgent humanitarian assistance including food, shelter, and healthcare. The U.S. signaled support for mitigating the humanitarian crisis in Idlib by pledging an additional $108 million. That aid is meaningless without viable mechanisms to deliver it in a timely manner, free of manipulation and intervention by those responsible for the conflict.
- The U.S. should sanction Russian individuals for the commission of war crimes in Syria, and should coordinate with European allies to do the same as one step toward accountability. The recent report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry specifically assigns culpability to the Russian Air Force for the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas. Executive Order 18394, issued on October 14, 2019, provides significant latitude to the administration to impose sanctions on Russian persons, and those that work directly or indirectly on behalf of Russian persons, who have committed serious human rights abuses in Syria as well as prevented efforts to promote a political solution.

Begin consultations with Ankara on various options for support in defense of Turkish security when the Idlib ceasefire collapses. The Turkish military clearly defended its interests in Idlib, but Ankara will seek diplomatic and operational demonstrations of U.S. and NATO support. Options for assisting Turkey should be on the table—such as intelligence support but broadened to address the unstable situation in both northwest and northeast Syria.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Stroul.

Mr. Lang, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF HARDIN LANG, VICE PRESIDENT FOR PROGRAMS AND POLICY, REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Mr. LANG. Thank you. I would like to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing today. I will spend my 5 minutes addressing the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, its implications, and prospects for a new cease-fire.

As the committee well knows, President Erdogan and President Putin reached a cease-fire in Idlib on 5 March. While there have been reports of sporadic fighting along the front line, the cease-fire seems largely to be holding. The agreement brings a badly needed respite to the civilian populations of Idlib, however, few expect for it to hold for long.

President Assad remains committed to regaining control over the entirety of Syria's territory, and Russia has demonstrated little interest in restraining its client in Damascus. That said, we must do everything we can to strengthen the cease-fire, prolong its duration, and ease the conditions of millions of suffering in Idlib. Civilians in the province tell us that they see the Turkish intervention and the ensuing cease-fire as their last hope. We should listen to their voices.

While the cease-fire has curbed the fighting, this humanitarian crisis continues to have devastating consequences. Over the course of 3 months almost one million people were forced from their home. That is more people than the Rohingya Muslim displaced in Myanmar over the last 5 years. Simply put, this is as bad as it gets.

The recent fighting aggravated a dire situation where almost three-quarters of the population were already in need of humanitarian assistance. Food prices have increased 120 percent in the last year. Displaced are trapped in makeshift camps along the Turkish border where they struggle to have access to even basic assistance.

Access to health care is a major challenge. The targeting of hospitals has significantly hampered care. The United Nations reports that 84 hospitals and clinics have suspended operations in Idlib in recent months. This means that next month alone an additional 100,000 people will not get medical care.

But shelter is perhaps the most acute need of the displaced. IDPs are living in schools, mosques, unfinished buildings. Many families are sharing a single tent. Others are sleeping on the ground in very harsh winter conditions. And children have literally frozen to death.

Humanitarian organizations are struggling mightily to respond. In January, food assistance for some 1.4 million people was delivered, along with health supplies for about half a million. All this is made possible by the U.N. cross-border mechanism. People in Idlib cannot be reached at this scale through any other means.

The past year, Russia successfully pressured the United Nations Security Council to drop two of the cross-border points, and Russia

may very well seek to cross—close the remaining two from Turkey into Syria. And this cannot happen.

In addition, funding for these humanitarian relief operations currently falls short of what is required. In late February, the Secretary General told us that he needed half a billion to assist the displaced for only 6 months. The United Nations reports that we have about half of that so far.

Throughout the campaign, Russia, and Syria, and the Syrian regime, have purposely targeted schools, hospitals, and civilian facilities. This past week a U.N. investigation accused Russia for the first time of direct involvement in war crimes in indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas. Make no mistake, these are war crimes and they demand accountability.

So, what is the way forward? We have six key priorities.

First, the United States should surge diplomatic support for the Turkey-Russian cease-fire and encourage our European and NATO allies to do the same. While we are a humanitarian organization, we are persuaded that strong pressure must be exerted on Russia and Syria if the cease-fire is to have any chance of lasting for any significant period of time.

Second, we would encourage Turkey to protect civilians in the areas under its control. With 20,000 troops in Idlib, turkey has more boots on the ground than the U.N. stabilization and peacekeeping forces in Mali or Somalia. Turkey should leverage its significant presence and take measures to protect civilians at imminent risk of harm.

Third, the United States should launch a full court press at the U.N. Security Council to ensure the renewal of cross-border resolution and the reopening of the crossing points from Jordan and Iraq into Syria.

Fourth, the United States should mobilize other donors to close the remaining gap of 250 million required for the humanitarian response. Donors should prioritize support for shelter, and they should look for creative ways to channel funding to local relief workers and to NGO's, local NGO's who are on the front line of this response.

Fifth, the United States should use their tools set out in the Ceasar Act and other legislation to aggressively target those responsible for atrocities in Idlib.

The United States should pressure other members of the United Nations Security Council and the European Union to follow suit with measures of their own.

And, finally, we need to take steps to prepare in the event of the collapse of the cease-fire. This means surging aid into northwest Syria now while we can get access, and helping Turkey to prepare potentially for a new wave of refugees. The United States should rally European and other national donors to provide Turkey with the necessary support if it called upon to shoulder this burden.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lang follows:]

Testimony of Hardin Lang
Vice President for Programs and Policy
Refugees International

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee: Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism

"The Crisis in Idlib"

March 11, 2020

I. Introduction

I would like to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of this subcommittee for holding this timely hearing on Idlib. My name is Hardin Lang. I am the Vice President for Program and Policy at Refugees International. In my testimony today, I will address the crisis in Idlib, its humanitarian implications and prospects for the current ceasefire recently agreed between Turkey and Russia. My team and I have visited northern Syria and the Turkish border with Idlib repeatedly in the last few years. We have had the opportunity to investigate the nature and scope of the what has become the worst humanitarian chapter of Syria's longstanding brutal war.

Refugees International is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in parts of the world impacted by conflict, persecution, and forced displacement. Based here in Washington, we conduct fact-finding missions to research and report on the circumstances of displaced populations in countries such as Somalia, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and the Central African Republic. Refugees International has been reporting on the humanitarian crisis in Syria for the entirety of the conflict. Refugees International does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which helps ensure that our advocacy is impartial and independent.

II. Background

This latest phase of humanitarian crisis in Idlib can be traced back to 2017. That year, Turkey, Russia, and Iran reached a de-escalation agreement that covered four zones throughout the country.[i] In the years that followed, the Syrian regime and its allies violated this agreement, retaking all but one—the so-called "Idlib de-escalation zone" in northwest Syria that includes Idlib province and contiguous areas in the northeastern Latakia, western Aleppo, and northern Hama provinces.[ii]

In September 2018, in an attempt to preserve this last "de-escalation zone," Moscow and Ankara reached a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Sochi, Russia.[iii] The Sochi deal called for removing armed groups and all heavy weaponry from a nearly 12-mile demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the front line in the northwest. It also called for two major routes for traffic and trade routes—the M4 and M5 highways—to be secured. These highways link Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia and were controlled by Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate designated as a terrorist organization by most countries. For its part, Russia committed to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib would be avoided.

In accordance with the agreement, Turkish-backed armed groups withdrew from the DMZ. However, HTS rejected the terms of the MoU and launched a sweeping attack against Turkish-backed rebels. Shortly thereafter, Russia supported a military escalation led by the Syrian regime in February 2019. By late April 2019, this escalation had turned into a full-blown offensive.[iv] In the months that followed, the offensive forced rebels from strategic positions along key roads in an apparent effort to retake some of the area's major population centers.

In December 2019, the Assad regime and Russia intensified its campaign, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians.[v] Turkey responded by deploying up to 7,000 additional troops to reinforce some 12,000 soldiers already manning Turkish observation posts in Idlib—posts established as part of the de-escalation agreements. In early March, Turkey launched a counteroffensive in response to attacks on Turkish positions that killed at least 36 of its soldiers.[vi]

In addition to the counteroffensive, Turkey also announced that it will no longer abide by a 2016 deal with the European Union (EU) in which Turkey agreed to restrict migration of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe. As a direct result of this announcement, there

are now more than 13,000 refugees stuck on the Turkish-Greek land border. By Turkey's own admission, encouraging refugees—including some Syrians from Idlib, but also refugees originating from other countries—to attempt entry into the EU is meant to pressure the EU for financial and military support in Turkey's engagement with Idlib.

III. The March 2020 Ceasefire

On March 5 in Moscow, President Erdoğan and President Putin reached agreement on a ceasefire.[vii] The deal took effect the next day. The agreement calls for the establishment of a 6 km "security corridor" to be established on either side of the M4 highway. Specific parameters for the functioning of the security corridor are to be worked out between the Turkish and Russian defense ministries. Turkish and Russian forces are then slated to begin joint patrols on March 15 along this stretch of the M4. The deal allows the Syrian government to keep territorial gains its forces made since April 2019.

While there have been reports of sporadic fighting along the front line, the ceasefire seems to be largely holding. No airstrikes or major clashes between Russian-backed government forces and Turkish-backed rebel fighters have been reported since the truce went into effect.

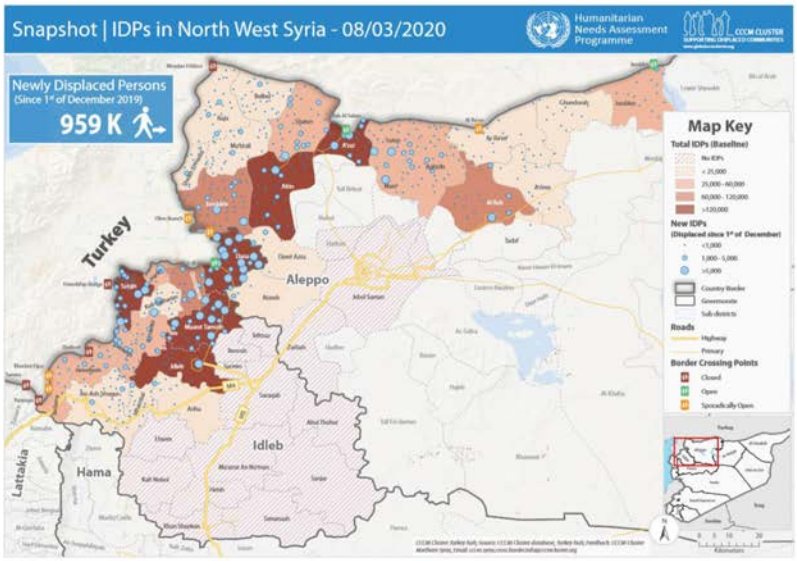
The deal brings a badly needed respite to the civilian population of Idlib. However, few expect the ceasefire to hold for long. The terms of the agreement do not address the original Achilles heel of the 2018 Sochi deal according to which Turkey was expected to expel or defeat jihadist groups in the zone. This was a commitment that Ankara was either unable or unwilling to fulfil.

Under the most recent ceasefire, Turkey must once again take on these extremist groups. Furthermore, President Assad remains committed to fully restoring his control of the entirety of Syrian territory. For its part, Russia has demonstrated little interest or capacity to restrain its client in Damascus. Indeed, most of the Syrians we have spoken with worry that it is only a matter of time before the deal falls apart.

That said, we must do everything we can to strengthen the ceasefire, prolong its duration and ease the conditions of the millions of civilians in Idlib. This should be our immediate and overriding priority. Civilians in Idlib tell us that they see the Turkish intervention and the resulting ceasefire as their last hope. We should listen to their voices.

Recommendation: The United States should provide diplomatic support for the Turkey-Russian ceasefire and encourage our European and NATO allies to do the same. While we are a humanitarian organization, we are persuaded that strong pressure must be exerted against Russia if the ceasefire is to have any chance of succeeding.

Recommendation: Turkey should live up to its responsibilities under International Humanitarian Law and protect civilians in areas under its control. With 20,000 troops in Idlib, Turkey has more troops on the ground than the UN stabilization force in Mali or the AU stabilization mission in Somalia. Turkey should leverage its significant presence and take measures to protect civilians at imminent risk of harm.



Source: United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idp_map_08-03-2020.pdf

IV. Conditions in Displacement

While the deal has curbed the fighting, the humanitarian crisis in northwest Syria continues to have devastating consequences for the 3 million civilians in Idlib and neighboring areas affected by the fighting.[viii] From December 2019 to February 2020, almost one million people were forced from their homes to escape from the violence.[ix] In other words, more people have fled in Idlib over the past three months than all the Rohingya Muslims displaced in Myanmar over the past five years. Over 80 percent of the displaced are women and children.[x]

Life in Idlib remains nasty, brutish, and short. The recent fighting has aggravated an already dire situation in northwest Syria, where almost three-quarters of the population were already in need of humanitarian assistance.[xi] Now, hundreds of thousands of civilians are starving. Food prices have increased by 120 percent since last year. The displaced are trapped in makeshift camps along the Turkish border, where they struggle to access even basic aid and endure freezing temperatures with no real shelter. These informal encampments are not officially run or supported by the United Nations. Humanitarian NGOs try to fill some gaps, but this assistance remains insufficient to the task. Conditions in the camps do not meet the minimum humanitarian standards for access to basic services or protection.

Shelter: Shelter is perhaps the most acute need of the displaced. Some 338,000 people are currently staying in camps and individual tents making up 35 percent of those displaced in the past three months, while 173,000 people are in unfinished houses or buildings. Every single inhabitable space is occupied by internally displaced people (IDPs).[xii] Single family apartments or homes are hosts to at least two or three families, and sometimes more. IDPs are sheltering in schools, mosques, unfinished buildings, garages, and even animal pens and stables. Privacy is impossible for most. Many families are crammed into single tents. In some cases, two or three families share the same tent, separated only by sheets.

Those not fortunate enough to find shelter are sleeping in the open air and under olive trees under very harsh weather conditions. In several cases, children have frozen to death.[xiii] Almost none of the remaining land is suitable for setting up camps. Local NGOs are taking individual initiatives to build camps. However, the topography requires greater efforts and resources to prepare the ground and then build new shelter.

Health: Access to healthcare is another major challenge. The United Nations reports that conditions have significantly worsened following unprecedented levels of displacement in recent weeks. The constant influx of internally displaced people moving into an increasingly shrinking area has put an enormous strain on what remains of the healthcare system. Health workers are struggling to meet even the most basic needs.

The targeting of hospitals has significantly hampered healthcare services. When health workers try to rehabilitate a medical facility, it is targeted again. As a result, the United Nations reports that some 84 hospitals and clinics have suspended operations in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. This means, for example, that over the next month some 100,000 medical outpatient consultations and 1,700 major surgeries will not take place.[xiv]

Women and Girls: Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis. The widespread absence of men—many of whom are on the frontlines of the fighting or were killed, disappeared, or imprisoned—has left many Syrian women as heads of households. According to some estimates, more than half the population in Idlib is headed by females. In many cases, this has left entire families without their primary source of protection and provision. Moreover, the vulnerability and insecurity due to the conflict and displacement have exacerbated social problems. Early marriage among girls, not completely strange to the rural society in Idlib, has reportedly become more prevalent. Sexual and physical abuse has also been on the rise, further compounded by economic hardship and other conflict-related problems. Many recounted their hardship because of repeated displacement, the lack of dignified conditions for women inside the camps, fear for their children, and the struggle of moving them to safety.

On a brighter side, the disruption of social and family structures has pushed women to step up to fill the void. Many have become their families' main or sole breadwinners. Thus, they have invested in their skills and entrepreneurial spirits through trainings and workshops. Many have also defied the ever-constraining environment imposed by radical military groups.

- **Recommendation**: Given the overcrowding and harrowing living conditions in Idlib, it will be extremely challenging for responders to accommodate additional large numbers of IDPs. If violence resumes, the United States should support Turkey in establishing IDP camps in safer Turkish-controlled areas in northern Aleppo to alleviate civilian suffering.

- **Recommendation**: Refugees International has repeatedly called for Turkey to open the border and allow Syrians to seek refuge. In the event of the collapse of the ceasefire, such a measure would be particularly critical. If Turkey opens its borders, the United States should help Ankara increase the capacity of existing refugee camps to temporarily accommodate tens of thousands of civilians fleeing violence. The United States should rally European and other international donors to provide Tukey with the necessary support to host these additional refugees.

V. The Humanitarian Access and Assistance

In response, humanitarian organizations have struggled mightily for months to mount a massive humanitarian operation in northwest Syria. In January, food assistance for some 1.4 million people was delivered, along with health supplies for almost half a million people, and non-food items for more than 230,000 people.[xv] All this is made possible by UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165 adopted in 2014, which allows cross-border assistance to be delivered into nongovernment-controlled areas without the government's authorization.

Cross-border Assistance: In January 2020, the UN Security Council renewed the cross-border mechanism.[xvi] However, at Russian insistence, the Council dropped two aid delivery crossing points into Syria from Iraq and Jordan. It also only renewed the operation for six months instead of a year. There is considerable concern that Russia will seek to close the two crossing points from Turkey into Syria at Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama. If Russia is successful, an essential humanitarian lifeline for the people of Idlib would be cut.

The cross-border modality is absolutely essential to the international humanitarian response in northwest Syria. In February alone, nearly 800 hundred trucks transported UN humanitarian assistance into northwest Syria via the Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama border crossings, providing vital humanitarian assistance to more than 2 million people.[xvii] People in need in Idlib cannot be reached at this scale through any other means.

Funding: In addition, funding for humanitarian relief operations currently falls far short of what is needed. In late February, the UN Secretary-General has called for a total of U.S. $500 million in order to provide basic humanitarian support to the roughly 1 million people who are displaced or at risk of displacement in the greater Idlib area and northern

Aleppo for the next six months. So far, the United Nations reports that roughly half the funding for this emergency appeal has been raised. [xviii]

On March 3, the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Kelly Craft, announced $108 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Syria in response to the ongoing crisis caused by Assad regime, Russian, and Iranian forces. This includes nearly $56 million from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and more than $52 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Local Groups: The humanitarian response in Idlib depends almost entirely on Syrian relief workers. Local groups have demonstrated a great commitment to serve their communities, from evacuating people under bombardment, to building camps, distributing food, providing healthcare, and all other services. In doing so, these relief workers often put their lives at risk. Last June, our team met with an organization, Violet, whose three paramedics and a patient were killed in a strike targeting their ambulance. We met with Violet again in Turkey two weeks ago. They told us that the one paramedic who survived the attack last year was back to helping evacuate and assist civilians, although his hand was amputated in the strike. This is just one example of many amazing local organizations in Idlib whose contribution and dedication could not be stressed enough.

- **Recommendation:** The United States should launch a full diplomatic press at the UN Security Council to ensure the renewal of the cross-border resolution and the reopening of the crossing points from Jordan and Iraq into Syria.
- **Recommendation:** The United States should mobilize European, Arab, and other humanitarian donors to close the remaining gap of $250 million required for the humanitarian response in Idlib over the next six months.
- **Recommendation**: The United States should increase its funding to local organizations in Idlib and continue supporting the capacity building of their staff.

VI. Targeting of Civilian Infrastructure & Accountability

Throughout the campaign, the Russian and Syrian regime have purposely and repeatedly targeted schools, hospitals, and other civilian facilities. Pro-Government forces have carried out aerial and ground attacks in southern Idlib that decimated civilian

infrastructure, including through the use of cluster munitions. Attacks on health facilities have been particularly brutal and, most recently, included the bombing of Idlib's central hospital on February 25.[xix] These strikes have often forced relief groups to suspend operations.

Make no mistake – these are war crimes, and they demand accountability. Indeed, this past week a UN investigation accused Russia for the first time of direct involvement in war crimes for indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas.[xx] The latest report from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria found substantial evidence that Russian aircraft were directly involved in the bombing of civilian areas.[xxi]

The UN Security Council should move quickly to hold a session on the findings of the Commission of Inquiry. The United States has substantial tools at its disposal to bring economic pressure to bear on those responsible for war crimes and other atrocities, and it should move aggressively to exercise these tools. In addition, as David Miliband of the International Rescue Committee has pointed out, the members of the European Union have yet to impose sanctions on Russia for its actions in Syria.[xxii] A move to achieve meaningful accountability for crimes committed in Syria must be a shared endeavor, and the Europeans have an important role to play in that regard.

- **Recommendation**: The United States and other members of the UN Security Council should pressure Russia to ensure the protection of humanitarian infrastructure and personnel, and relentlessly denounce attacks on humanitarian facilities as war crimes.
- **Recommendation**: The United States should use the tools set out in the Caesar Act and other relevant legislation to target those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law in Idlib. The United States should pressure other members of the UN Security Council and European Union to take similar steps to sanction such violators.

I would like to close by saying that American leadership and support by Congress for humanitarian and development programs helping those displaced inside Syria and in the region have saved countless lives. We have seen it for ourselves in the numerous Refugees International missions to the field from the start of the Syria crisis nine years ago. We thank members of Congress for their support and concern for the people of Syria, and we hope and expect the United States to play a critical diplomatic and humanitarian role to help this vulnerable population.

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Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Lang.
Ms. Cafarella, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF JENNIFER CAFARELLA, RESEARCH DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you. Thank you. Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for inviting me today. I am honored by the opportunity to testify on a critical national security issue facing our Nation.

It is difficult to talk about opportunities to make a difference in Syria, we have missed so many, and Syrians have suffered so much that it seems almost unreasonable to talk of possibility, of hope. But I am going to anyway because the story of Syria is one of unreasonable bravery, of civilians so courageous that they dared to stand up to a tyrant they knew would kill them.

We have become numb to it, to the bravery, the suffering, the unimaginable toll of this war. But our exhaustion does not change the reality. This war is far from over. Syrians have not given up. And there are still opportunities to change the trajectory of this conflict.

As has already been mentioned, the recent mass displacement caused by the military campaign waged by Russia, Iran, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is the largest of the war to date. The humanitarian crisis that it has caused is an unsustainable problem for Turkey, which cannot accept more refugees and is instead trying to repatriate the refugees it does have into other parts of northern Syria. Turkey launched a major military intervention in late January to prevent further civilian displacement, coming to blows with Russia despite their past collaboration in Syria. It is the largest rift between Turkey and Russia in Syria to date.

Turkey deployed as many as 20,000 troops to establish a defensible front line against Assad, Russia, and Iran. Those troops are now establishing the start of a safe zone along the border, but lack the resources to address the humanitarian crisis in that zone. Turkey's military pressure did succeed in forcing Putin into a new de-escalation agreement in Idlib, which was Erdogan's initial goal, but it will not last. Turkey likely knows as much.

Reports of pro-regime forces violating the cease-fire have already started to emerge. Al Qaida-affiliated forces have also unsurprisingly rejected the deal, and have the ability to spoil its turn. The escalation cycle in Idlib will repeat again in coming months.

There are good reasons not to want to help Turkey in Idlib. Turkey is not behaving like a NATO ally, and should not be treated like one until that changes. Turkey has conducted ethnic cleansing of Syrian Kurds along the border and purchased the Russian S–400 missile system. Turkey is now deliberately sending vulnerable Syrian refugees to Greece in an attempt to force Europe to support Turkey in Idlib.

The United States should not look past this behavior however. Turkey's intervention creates an opportunity to help ameliorate a devastating and dangerous humanitarian crisis while accomplishing broader strategic interests. The U.S. should step in to support Turkey but with serious conditions. It is time for Turkey to

step away from its relationship with Russia and re-commit to the NATO Alliance.

The support the U.S. should offer Turkey in Idlib includes:

Patriot missile systems to help establish a no-fly zone and deny the aerial campaign that has killed so many civilians;

An immediate surge of vital humanitarian aid, including necessary supplies and equipment to react to any outbreak of the coronavirus or other diseases among this extremely vulnerable population;

The U.S. should also lead a new fundraising effort to generate a humanitarian assistance fund to provide basic relief aid for a period of multiple years. This is a long-term problem.

Finally, the U.S. should provide diplomatic pressure against Russia through the U.N. Security Council by submitting a resolution that specifies and condemns the war crimes in Idlib, including Russia's direct role in those atrocities. Russia will veto it, but forcing Russia to do so will set political conditions that strengthen Turkey's defensive position.

The U.S. must be careful not to set unrealistic expectations for a Turkish-controlled zone in Idlib. It will not be fully stable, and it will not be fully secure. It will be penetrated by Al Qaida-linked groups that are already operating within this vulnerable population and attempting to recruit them.

However, stepping in to save Syria's most vulnerable population is the most effective way to dampen Al Qaida's recruitment and to help preserve vital sources of social pressure against its maligned ideology.

As I have mentioned, stepping into Idlib at this time will also help disrupt Russia's campaign in the Middle East, which is essential to preserving and strengthening the NATO Alliance.

In return for American support, the U.S. should demand that Turkey agree to three terms:

First, return or destroy the Russian S–400 air defense system;

Two, leave the Russia-led Astana process for negotiations in Syria, and recommit to a U.N.-led process, and;

Three, agree to start a new process of bilateral negotiations with the United States over the outcome in northeast Syria where U.S. forces continue to operate with our local partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces.

These are big asks, but now is the time to make them. The scale of Turkey's military intervention in Idlib demonstrates the priority Turkey's President Erdogan places on preventing a further worsening of the refugee and humanitarian situation on the border. He has stepped up. It is time for the United States to do the same.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Cafarella follows:]

Prepared testimony of:

Jennifer Cafarella
Research Director, Institute for the Study of War

For the hearing:

"The Crisis in Idlib" March 11, 2020

Before the:

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

The U.S. has an opportunity in Syria's Idlib province to ameliorate a devastating and dangerous humanitarian crisis while accomplishing broader American interests. The recent mass displacement caused by the recent military campaign waged by Russia, Iran, and the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad is the largest of the war to date. Roughly 1 million Syrians fled toward the Turkish border from the offensive from December 2019 – March 2020, overwhelming a border zone that was already saturated with internally displaced persons (IDPs).[1] The concentration of displaced Syrians is an unsustainable problem for Turkey, which refuses to accept more refugees and is instead trying to repatriate its refuges back into other parts of northern Syria. Turkey launched a major military intervention in late January to stop Russia, Iran and Assad and prevent further civilian displacement, significantly changing the military balance in northwest Syria.

Turkey's intervention in Idlib creates an opening for the U.S. to step in and change the trajectory of the conflict. Turkey needs help to mitigate the worst of the humanitarian crisis and to hold the line against further military advances by Russia, Iran, and Assad. The U.S. should provide Turkey with this support but should do so with serious conditions: it is time for Turkey to step away from its relationship with Russia and recommit to the NATO alliance.

Background: the 2018 Russia-Turkey Deal in Idlib Breaks Down

Turkey and Russia are fundamentally on opposite sides of the war in Syria but have prioritized maintaining a positive strategic relationship in order to pursue a shared desire to constrain the U.S. Since Russia's intervention in 2015, they have engaged in a series of limited and iterative negotiations to reach interim agreements that balance their competing interests and sometimes align their efforts. It is a dynamic and confrontational process. Turkey and Russia each take military action in Syria to shape their negotiations. They have come to blows directly and indirectly multiple times since 2015. So far, they have always managed to de-escalate through new framework agreements for cooperation in the near term. Their success in doing so has precluded the U.S. from exploiting the underlying divergences between their interests. Their alignment has severely undermined America's interests in Syria, including by enabling Turkey's invasion of northeast Syria in 2019. In Idlib, their agreements have become increasingly fragile, however.

Idlib became a focal point for the Russo-Turkish relationship in late 2018 as Russia, Assad, and Iran pivoted northward to attack Idlib after seizing the opposition stronghold in Dera'a and Quneitra provinces in southern Syria. They attempted to advance into Idlib at minimal cost due to their combined manpower and financial constraints.[2] Russia attempted but failed to persuade Turkish-backed opposition groups in Idlib to surrender to the Assad regime, the tactic Russia had used to great success in southern Syria. Russia opted to reach a negotiated agreement with Turkey to de-escalate in Idlib rather than launch a major military campaign in the near term. Russia and Turkey agreed to a memorandum of understanding on Idlib titled the 2018 Sochi Agreement in September.[3] It committed Russia and Turkey de-escalate militarily and cooperate to reopen two key highways connecting Aleppo to the Syrian coast and Damascus, which pass through terrain held by Turkish proxies. Turkey and Russia both sought the limited but important economic benefit offered by renewed trade along these routes. Both actors have since violated the terms of the agreement, but both continue to reference it as the basis for their policy.

The key provisions of the 2018 Sochi Agreement were:[4]

- Establish a demilitarized zone of 15-20km depth from the front line. They did not establish agreed-upon boundaries, instead leaving it open to "further consultations."

- Remove all tanks, rockets, and artillery from the zone by October 10 and "radical terror groups" by October 15. They did not agree upon the classification of "radical terror groups
- To conduct separate, coordinated patrols and UAV monitoring of the zone by the Turkish Armed Forces and Russian Military Police "with a view to ensuring free movement of local residents and goods"
- To reopen the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial trade. The de-escalation zone covered some but not all of the M5 Highway and none of the M4 Highway based on front lines at the time.

Turkey and Russia failed to implement the agreement, in part due to a spoiling role by al Qaeda affiliated groups who refused to withdraw from the demilitarized zone.[5] Assad was also not party to the agreement and remained committed to recapturing all of Idlib. The agreement was thus inherently weak because it failed to address the two largest spoilers and drivers of instability in Idlib. Nonetheless, it represented an attempt by Russia and Turkey to prioritize a shared objective, in this case limited economic rehabilitation, while mitigating (and in some cases ignoring) underlying unsolved obstacles. This approach to achieving limited and near-term goals amidst high complexity continues to define how Turkey and Russia negotiate over Idlib.

Russia opted to launch a pro-regime military offensive to advance north into Idlib up the M5 Highway from Hama in May 2019 after attempting but failing to reach a new agreement with Turkey to implement the terms of the original deal.[6] Russia claimed that its offensive constituted an implementation of that agreement. Turkey fought back, providing weapons and ammunition to its proxies to enable them to impose high costs on the advancing pro-regime forces. At the time, Turkey maintained a limited contingent of forces deployed to Idlib but did not engage militarily. Roughly 1,200 troops Turkish troops were scattered across isolated outposts as "observers," lacking the capabilities and authorities to intervene.[7] Pro-regime forces began besieging these positions along the way. After nearly a year of grueling fighting, Russia enabled a final major breakthrough push in January 2020 that seized the last three urban centers along the M5 Highway in quick succession, consolidated full control of the M5 Highway, drove a massive wave of refugees to the Turkish border, and besieged a fourteenth and final Turkish military position.[8]

TURKEY'S 2020 MILITARY INTERVENTION

The January 2020 pro-regime push up the M5 Highway triggered a major change in Turkey's policy and involvement in Syria. As pro-regime forces advanced, Turkey deployed roughly a division of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) plus additional Special Forces units to Idlib from January 30 to March to establish a defensible front line west of the M5 Highway to prevent further losses.[9] The deployments brought the total of Turkish troops in Idlib to 20,000 and significantly changed the military balance.[10] Turkey also began sending ammunition and anti-tank guided munitions (ATGMs) to its Syrian proxies in order to enable them to fight more effectively against pro-regime forces.[11]

Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, sought to use his military leverage to compel Russian President Vladimir Putin to accept a new deal in Idlib. On February 5, Erdogan threatened that Turkish forces would launch offensive operations if pro-regime forces did not "retreat from Turkish observation posts in Idlib" by the end of February.[12] To do so would require pro-regime forces to withdraw from multiple key areas it seized in its offensive from April 2019 – February 2020. Turkish and Russian officials began discussions over Idlib immediately on February 8 but did not make progress.[13] On February 10, Erdogan held an

emergency security meeting with senior Turkish officials to coordinate and approve the next stage of a military response to add pressure on Russia.[14]

In the ensuing month, Turkish combat operations in Idlib successfully compelled Putin to accept a new deal. Erdogan applied this military pressure in phases, triggering a kinetic response from Putin each time but continuing to escalate nonetheless. In each phase, Turkey conducted a flurry of diplomatic engagements with Russia at different echelons, attempting to reach an agreement. He finally succeeded on March 5 but only achieved a limited deal with Putin, as the next section will discuss.

The U.S. missed an opportunity in Idlib during this time. Erdogan reached out repeatedly to Europe and the U.S. for diplomatic and military support. He received little, due in large part to the resentment his behavior and alignment with Russia has generated in the West. U.S. officials engaged only the margins and without substantive new commitments, failing to make an impact on the outcome. Europe likewise did little, choosing to follow America's lead. While these responses are understandable, it is a mistake on pragmatic grounds. Turkey has decided to own an extremely difficult problem in Idlib that deeply affects both Europe and American interests. The U.S. and Europe should not pass up this opportunity to make a difference.

THE NEW TURKEY – RUSSIA DEAL IN IDLIB

Erdogan and Putin reached a partial deal in Idlib on March 5, which they framed as an "additional protocol" to the 2018 Sochi Agreement.[15] It is a limited but important victory for Erdogan. It freezes front lines in Idlib, precluding further pro-regime offensive operations that would worsen the humanitarian disaster. It thereby accomplishes Turkey's primary defensive goal. It will likely succeed in achieving a near – term de-escalation, which could last weeks or months. It will not stabilize Idlib, however.

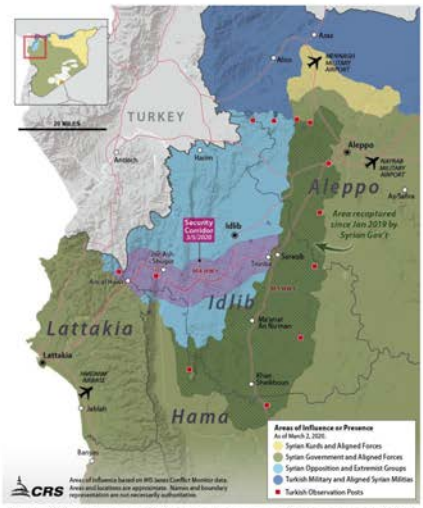
The additional protocol stipulates:

- The "targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext"
- Russia and Turkey will "cease all military actions along the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation area" effective at midnight on March 6
- Russia and Turkey will establish a "security corridor" of 6km depth both north and south of the M4 Highway and for their respective defense ministries to agree on the "specific parameters of the functioning of the security corridor" within seven day
- Russia and Turkey will begin joint patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway on March 15

These terms are positive for Erdogan. The language regarding targeting civilians is an important concession from Putin. Russia is highly unlikely to refrain from targeting civilians as the deal requires or to compel Assad and Iran to do so. The ceasefire is also highly unlikely to hold for long. But the agreement bought Erdogan important time and a way to justify subsequent military operations if – but almost certainly when – pro-regime forces violate its terms. It also provides Erdogan an opportunity to re-approach the U.S. and Europe to gain support for resolving the humanitarian crisis.

In return, Erdogan agreed to enable Russia to extend its military presence in Idlib through the joint Russo-Turkish patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway. This concession exceeds the coordinated patrols previously agreed upon the 2018 Sochi Agreement. Turkey is taking a risk in granting it, as al Qaeda-affiliated groups have adamantly opposed joint patrols in the past.[16] The details of the "security corridor"

north and south of the M4 Highway are not yet resolved, moreover, and could incur additional risks for Turkey. Russia will likely push for the exclusion of al Qaeda-affiliated groups from this zone, which Turkey may again fail to deliver. Russia could even insist on establishing Russian military positions in the area, undermining Turkish control.



Map: Situation in Idlib Province as of March 5, 2020[17]

Key issues that are not addressed in the additional protocol include:

- ***The unsustainable refugee burden along the Turkish border.*** Turkey is now perpetually responsible for the huge concentration of roughly 1.5 million displaced Syrians along its border. It is an unsustainable burden, even with the limited financial assistance provided thus far by the U.S. and UN. Turkey's options are: to accept the refugees into Turkey, which Erdogan will likely never do; to get international assistance to build up settlements with basic services for this population on the Syrian side of the border, which is Erdogan's desired outcome; to attempt to resettle these refugees in other Turkish-held zones in northern Aleppo or northeastern Syria; or to facilitate the travel of large segments of this population to Europe, legally or illegally.

- ***Turkey's 14 besieged outposts in regime-held areas.*** These forces remain highly vulnerable to attack by pro-regime force. They outposts are thus a source of leverage for Russia, the regime, and Iran. The outposts do enable Erdogan to retain the option of justifying future military operations to liberate these besieged soldiers, however. This unresolved issue will factor into subsequent rounds of negotiations and could become a focus of Turkish military operations.

- ***The reopening of the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial traffic.*** The regime and its backers will likely now open the M5 Highway from Aleppo to Damascus for commercial trade.[18] Erdogan and Putin did not reach an agreement on a new framework for economic activity between Turkish zones and areas under Russian/regime/Iranian control, however. It is a notable gap given the purpose of the original 2018 Sochi Agreement. The economic benefit of reopening the M5 Highway is limited without an agreement with Turkey to resume trade. The regime and its backers can now transit from Damascus to Aleppo and back but do not yet have access to Turkish markets or Turkish proxy areas.

- ***Al Qaeda – linked groups***. The language of the additional protocol made a vague statement about fighting "all forms of terrorism" but included no new agreement regarding combatting al Qaeda-linked groups in Idlib. Russia will continue to use the presence of al Qaeda in Idlib to justify military operations and any departure from the agreed-upon de-escalation. Al Qaeda-linked groups may violate the deal first. Al Qaeda also poses a threat to Turkish forces deployed in Idlib, which will affect Erdogan's calculus in subsequent phases.

WHAT THE US CAN DO

The U.S. should provide financial, humanitarian, and limited military support to help Turkey establish a defensible zone of control on the Syrian side of the border in which international aid organizations can provide humanitarian relief for the vulnerable IDP population. The U.S. should:

- Provide Turkey Patriot missile systems to help Turkey establish a no-fly zone over Idlib. The U.S. should ask Turkey to identify additional military support it might need, and should evaluate the request
- Lead a new fundraising effort to generate a humanitarian assistance fund to provide basic relief aid to the displaced population for a period of multiple years
- Work with the U.N. and other humanitarian organizations to surge vital humanitarian aid into Idlib including necessary supplies and equipment to react to any outbreak of the coronavirus or other infectious diseases within the displaced population
- Provide necessary support to assist U.N. agencies in establishing additional and more durable IDP shelters
- Apply diplomatic pressure on Russia through the U.N. Security Council by submitting a resolution that specifies and condemns the war crimes in Idlib, including deliberate civilian displacement. Russia will veto the resolution, but forcing Russia to do so will set political conditions that strengthen Turkey's defensive position

The U.S. need not do so alone. An American commitment in Idlib would likely generate substantial European support, given the significant risk Europe faces from another refugee wave. Germany and the Netherlands have already expressed timid support for such a "safe zone."[19] More would follow a U.S. decision.

In return, The U.S. should demand that Turkey:

1. Return or destroy the Russian S-400 air defense system and do not bring it online
2. Leave the Russian-led Astana process for negotiations in Syria and recommit to the UN – led process
3. Agree to a new process of bilateral negotiations with the U.S. over the outcome of northeast Syria

These are big asks, but now is the time to make them. The scale of Turkey's military intervention in Idlib demonstrates the priority Erdogan places on preventing a further worsening of the refugee and humanitarian situation on his border. He needs a solution. Putin has refused to grant him one. The U.S. should step in while the Russo-Turkish ceasefire agreement still holds to strengthen Turkey's position and improve the humanitarian situation before Russia, Iran, and Assad resume operations.

The U.S. must be careful not to set unrealistic expectations for a Turkish-controlled zone in Idlib, however. Idlib is far too complex and volatile to stabilize in the near term. A Turkish-held border in Idlib will not be stable or secure. It will be penetrated by al Qaeda-linked groups, which will use it as a support zone to support military operations elsewhere. The U.S. should set limited objectives to mitigate the worst of the humanitarian crisis and to gain leverage over Russia, Iran, and Assad by driving a wedge between Turkey and Russia.

Al Qaeda's presence along the Syrian-Turkish border is a large but unavoidable risk at this stage in the war. The U.S. and Turkey cannot exclude al Qaeda from a border zone without major military operations, which would likely spill over into Turkey. Conditions are not set for such a campaign. Instead, the U.S. should focus on setting longer-term conditions to dampen al Qaeda's influence to make future pressure against al Qaeda more likely to succeed. Taking action to protect vulnerable civilians in Syria is essential. Al Qaeda benefits from international inaction to stop the war crimes of Assad and its backers, which allow al Qaeda to portray itself as the defender of Syria's population.[20] Stepping in to save Syria's most vulnerable population in Idlib would dampen al Qaeda's recruitment and help preserve sources of social pressure against its ideology.

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Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Ms. Cafarella.

We will now turn to member questioning. I will defer initially and I am pleased to recognize the Ranking Member Mr. Wilson for 5 minutes.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And for everyone here, it is extraordinarily significant that Chairman Eliot Engel was here. It is also a credit to Chairman Ted Deutch to get the big chairman to come to be with the subcommittee chair, and it shows indeed how significant this issue is and how helpful your comments are, and how we have such an opportunity for bipartisan cooperation to support the people of Syria.

And I, again, was so grateful that the Trump administration Ambassador to the U.N. Kelly Craft, along with the U.S. Special Representative for Syria Jim Jeffrey, I just cannot even imagine, they were in Idlib last week. I appreciate their courage. I appreciate their being there as a show of support to the people of Syria, where at least they knew about it. Somehow it was not covered here.

Additionally, very significant for the Trump administration with Joel Raybu8rn, the Deputy Secretary of State for the Levant, to meet with the Saudi Arabian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to clinch Saudi support for the Turkish operation in Idlib. That is another extraordinary step as you all are recommending actions to be taken correctly.

As we proceed with this, American taxpayers have provided more than $6 billion since 2011 to support the United Nations' humanitarian programs in Syria. Yet, instead of giving aid and comfort to the millions of Syrians in desperate need of assistance, a substantial percentage has gone to line the pockets of the brutal Assad dictatorship. And that is why I introduced H.R. 4868, the Stop U.N. Aid for Assad Act of 2019.

Do you support the idea of pushing for accountability at the U.N. so that the Assad regime stops stealing from the victims? And what are the most important steps that the U.N. can take to ensure that the aid programs are run in an accountable and transparent manner? Beginning with Ms. Stroul.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you for that question and for your leadership on this bill.

My view is that we are reaching a very serious point this July, when in January Russia and China together vetoed Resolution 2449 which allows four cross-border access points into Syria. In January that was vetoed. There is not a 6-month Security Council resolution for only two cross-border points. The Secretary General provided a report to the Security Council about ways around that. They are not very promising.

Come this July, Russia is aiming to close all cross-border access, which means that all U.N. aid and humanitarian operations will have to go through Damascus. And we know what the Assad regime does: he weaponizes that aid and steers it to communities not based in an unfettered, need-based way but based on who he wants to benefit. And it has lined the members of—the pockets of members of his regime.

This is a really ugly choice for the United States in terms of how do we continue to provide funding to the U.N. when there may not be any way to reach the populations that we want to reach. I think

we should begin exploring if there are ways outside the Security Council, given the fact that it has been rendered ineffective in holding Russia accountable for its actions in Syria.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you.

Mr. LANG.

Mr. LANG. Thank you for the question.

Just to echo Dana a bit on this, the bottom line is that assistance is being channeled in through the regime in Damascus and flowing through U.N. offices in Damascus. That assistance, the chances of it making any significant difference in the situation inside of Idlib are slim to none. Right? The aid corridor that facilitates that kind of assistance getting in is the cross-border mechanism

Aid that is going to be sent through Damascus in all likelihood is simply going to be hijacked for the purposes of bringing additional pressure to bear on the civilian population inside of Idlib. And we have seen this sort of tool used repeatedly in the starve or kneel tactics that the regime has deployed.

So, simply for the purposes of providing humanitarian assistance for the population in Idlib, I do not see that as a significant solution.

Mr. WILSON. And Ms. Cafarella.

Ms. CAFARELLA. I would endorse all the comments already made by my colleagues, and simply add that I do think that this is a vital issue for the United States. It speaks to Russia's wider efforts not only to keep the Assad regime in power, but to renormalize it among the international community, as well as to co-opt and degrade international institutions, including the U.N.

This is about far more than just Syria, it is therefore vital that the United States hold this line or risk setting additional precedent that I guarantee Russia will attempt to use elsewhere. It is important not only, therefore, to preserve as many of the lives as possible that are at risk in Idlib, but also to preserve the rules-based international order, as Dana has already mentioned, that Russia is trying so hard to degrade.

It is important. I applaud the Administration for what they have already done to prevent the renormalization of the Assad regime. And we need to do far more, as you have rightly noted, to hold accountable the U.N. and other aid organizations for not enabling this regime and its backers.

Mr. WILSON. I thank each of you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks very much, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Cicilline, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses.

I want to speak a little bit about Turkey's capacity to accept additional refugees. They are currently host to almost a little over 3.5 million Syrian refugees. And, you know, what are the implications of another exodus of refugees into Syria both politically, in terms of the conflict, and just in terms of the humanitarian capacity? Ms. Stroul or Mr. Lang.

Ms. STROUL. I will take the political and Mr. Lang——

Mr. CICILLINE. Perfect.

Ms. STROUL [continuing]. Can take the humanitarian.

So, clearly, Turkey and President Erdogan see this as an existential issue, both the economic downturn in Turkey and rising anti-Syrian, anti-refugee sentiment. I was just speaking to someone the other day who said regardless of political party or ethnic affiliation in Turkey, one unifier is everyone hates Syrian refugees in Turkey.

So, this is a political winner for Erdogan. And Turkey clearly backed up its line about not having more refugees flood into Turkey, given the capacity and generosity it has already exhibited, and in pressuring Europe in the way it did by sending busloads toward Greece.

Mr. LANG. There is no doubt that the government in Turkey is under tremendous popular pressure not to receive additional refugees and, in addition, to pressure refugees who are currently there to return into deeply unsafe circumstances. And we do have some examples for where the Turkish Government has in essence refouled refugees who are currently in Syria—currently in Turkey back into Syria.

That said, the question that presents itself is if and when the cease-fire breaks down, and if the Assad regime with Russian backing is able to continue its campaign. You already have a situation which is the best analogy is a Gazafication of the border and the displacement camps along that area in highly untenable circumstances.

So, you know, just in terms of in line with humanitarian principles, we would urge the Government of Turkey to be able to open that border and allow some to come through if and when we could make additional humanitarian support available to those refugees when they come across.

I mean, in many ways, you know, Syrian refugees, if they are confronted with the option of hundreds of thousands of people pushing up against the wall that they have built, trying to struggle to get over, flanked from behind by bombing campaigns by the Russians or Syrian troops, you know, that is going to be a tremendous amount of pressure on the Turks to allow folks to come in.

Another option, and we will probably see this if the campaign resumes because we will see a movement of IDPs, not up against the line or the border with Turkey, but increasingly over into Afrin Province where they control the territory, where Turkey controls the territory significantly, and so there could be a push to, in essence, provide additional humanitarian assistance in Afrin because it is probably a place that will be a little bit more secure than Idlib should the offensive undertake again.

Again, the key point here is that we should do everything in our power to maintain the cease-fire as it currently stands, but it will be a devastating humanitarian situation if the offensive resumes and Turkey does not open the border.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

Ms. Cafarella, you listed three things the United States should do in exchange for additional support of Turkey, or should demand rather: you know, the return of the Russian weaponry; leaving the Russian-led process, and agreeing to a process led by the United States. Those seem like almost unachievable with respect to the current thinking of Turkey and President Erdogan. What prospects

do you think exist really, and what could we do to make that more likely to make those three objectives potentially achievable?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you for the question.

In think in some respects the United States actually needs to learn from the Russians in this case. Putin has strong-armed Erdogan into multiple agreements that favor Russia and disfavor Turkey because Russia has leverage over Turkey and knows how to use it.

I am recommending that we start doing the same. We start putting options on the table that include inventive or good behavior from Erdogan, which does need to include not only addressing the humanitarian situation but also not using the refugee population to accomplish its objectives in ethnic cleansing by resettling Arab refugees in Kurdish areas. And we need to put coercive leverage on the table because Erdogan is not behaving as an ally, and he is not going to start to.

But the scale of the demands that I am recommending we make of Erdogan are consistent with the scale of the demands that Putin has continued to make of Erdogan. It is time that we begin to play the actual great power politics that are underway in Syria and have been underway in Syria since 2015, instead of watching from the sidelines and hoping and wishing for enduring cease-fires and a political solution to the war.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you very much.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

And I apologize, Mr. Malinowski, for not glacing at the monitor.

Mr. Kinzinger followed by Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for being here. We are all kind of exhausted of this conflict, and nobody is more exhausted than the Syrian people. And the problem is, I think, we sometimes need to be reminded of what is really going on.

You know, the media will cover when there is a picture of a kid in the back of an ambulance. And that gets about a week or two of attention. And then it gets overtaken by whatever drama is going on here that really in the grand scheme of things does not matter. And people just get bogged down in that.

We have a candidate for U.S. president that still is repeating Putin's talking points that Bashar al-Assad never even used chemical weapons. And there are a group of people out there that actually believe that because they read certain websites, and this person is running for president and therefore they must have great knowledge.

This is a bipartisan failure. This was a failure of the last Administration in stopping Russia from even being involved in Syria in the first place, from the red line situation, from saying good words with no action. And it has been a failure of this Administration for making claims that we need to be out of everywhere in the Middle East, bring everybody home, let the world burn; from the view of, you know, two different proclamations that we are leaving Syria, only to confuse our allies and excite our enemies; a lack of articulation of what our interest is in Syria; and the reason that it matters to us.

It is not just because we see a picture of a kid in the back of an ambulance and we feel bad, but it is because it is in the United States' interests not to cede that ground to Russia, to Iran, and to allow that evil to exist.

You know, President Clinton once said his greatest regret was inaction in Rwanda. And I think this generation will look back and say our greatest regret is inaction in Syria, not just because of the human toll, which is devastating, but because of the politics that will follow here.

As Ms. Cafarella said, you know, we have basically every—we will call it an empire—but every large nation that has some presence in Syria right now, and we see with the exchange of fire between Turkey and Russia that we are always on the verge of some major conflict. And, yet, the world is at sleep at the switch.

You know who else bears a lot of blame is the entire continent of Europe that is feeling the effects of this and doing nothing, and looking to the United States to solve all the problems. I am for a strong U.S. foreign policy but I also think our allies need to have some skin in the game as well.

We have more outrage here sometimes over what is going on in Yemen than we do over the 500,000 people that are dead in Syria. The United States accidentally bombs a hospital in Afghanistan and it is all over the news for 2 weeks. We do a debrief in the military, we find out everything that went wrong, we apologize, as we should. And every day Russia, backed by Iran, and backing the Assad regime, bomb hospitals and nobody cares. And people talk about maybe we need to talk with Russia. Maybe we need to be friends with them.

That is the problem we see in Syria.

And it would have been much easier to intervene earlier, but I will tell you that our worst case scenarios of Syria with intervention, that we said if we intervene look at what happened in Libya. Libya is far better off than Syria by the way. But everything we said was the worst case scenario has actually been tripled by inaction.

And by the way, it is only going to get worse. This does not burn itself out. It is a fire in an apartment complex, not a fire in a house out in the country; it will catch and it will spread.

Ms. Cafarella, this is obviously the worst humanitarian crisis since the start of this conflict. What would you say was the turning point in this conflict? And how did we let it get so bad?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you. That is an excellent question.

In my view there have been multiple turning points since we are entering our tenth year of the war. But I would point to the Russian intervention in 2015. But I think the actual turning point was a decision, a passive decision that we made to cede Syria to the Russians.

There was no reason we needed to do that. We continue to act like the Russians are 10 feet tall, even though the Russian commitment to Syria is actually quite limited and Russian capabilities are actually far, far smaller than the Russians claim and that the world seems to see.

The Turks are demonstrating, actually, the limits of Russia's leverage and military capability in Syria through the Turkish cam-

paign in Idlib, which has imposed costs on the regime but also on the Russians, because Turkey has attacked Russian proxy forces and destroyed Russian-provided air defense systems.

So, in my view it is our inaction actually that was the turning point and especially with respect to the Russians. We are ceding, we are ceding a entire theater to a man, Putin, who considers the United States his top enemy. We are duping ourselves.

Mr. KINZINGER. Mr. Chairman—Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back but I do want to make a quick comment in closing to leverage.

Mr. DEUTCH. Please.

Mr. KINZINGER. Every time the Russians come up to a red line and they are pushed back—you can think of when we killed the Wagner Group, folks in Syria, and every time when Turkey—as Ms. Cafarella mentioned very well—they back off. Putin will advance as far until he hits a brick wall. The problem is we have not put too many brick walls in front of him.

So, sorry, I had more questions for all you guys, but we have limited time. I thank you all for being here. And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. Malinowski, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As usual, I agree with Mr. Kinzinger on this. I agree with Mr. Wilson that it is a shame that we do not have that many members of the press. And I am struck by just how much less attention this crisis is getting than I guess the last crisis that everyone paid attention to in Syria, the Turkish incursion into the northeast, which all of us rightly condemned. It was a horrible thing. It had terrible humanitarian and human rights consequences, but not nearly as great as what is happening in Idlib.

And I think my observation on that would be that I guess it was easier for a lot of us, particularly, admittedly, people on my side of the aisle to scream and shout over what happened in the northeast because it was a case of Trump reversing an Obama policy. Whereas, in this case for us to be really, really angry at the Administration would require acknowledging that Obama also failed because the Trump policy is essentially identical to the Obama policy when it comes to how we deal with the Assad regime and Russia.

I wanted to ask first of all, tell us a little bit—and this can go to anybody—tell us a little bit about the civilian population living in and around Idlib. And I think what I want to particularly bring out here is that this is a place of last resort from people from every part of Syria. Isn't it true that there are people who were bused and moved to this area from other parts of Syria, often at our encouragement because this was the last place in the country where they might be safe?

Ms. STROUL. Yes, thank you, you are exactly right. The population of Idlib in 2011, before the war started, was 1.5 million. It has doubled today. And it has doubled because all over Syria whenever there were de-escalation agreements or cease-fire agreements negotiated by Russia on behalf of the Assad regime, sometimes the United States was a party to those cease-fire agreements, not one has Assad adhered to.

But in the context of those agreements, opposition and civilians were offered a choice: submit to the regime or be bused to Idlib. And everyone knew what life under the regime was like.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. I know. And now we are basically, you know, in a situation where they have to submit to the regime or flee in the place where we said that they would be safe.

Well, let's get down to brass tacks. Ms. Cafarella, I thought you laid out the choices in a very honest way. No one wants to help Turkey, but Turkey is the only power willing to help civilians here. And so, perhaps we can leverage that.

You mentioned deployment of Patriots. Most people think of Patriots as a defensive weapon against incoming missiles, but I think you were implying that the Patriots in northern—Patriots placed along the border in southern Turkey could be used to enforce a no-fly zone.

Could you explain how that might work?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, Thank you.

The Turks have already established some of the conditions necessary for a no-fly zone. The guns shooting Syrian jets out of the sky, the guns shooting Syrian helicopters out of the sky, they are likely responsible for providing manpower that have also shot additional Syrian jets out of the sky and which have forced Russia's jets to fly at even higher altitudes, disrupting their effectiveness.

My general proposal is that we back Turkey in what Turkey is already doing, and that we provide Turkey the form of military support that it has requested right now, which is Patriot systems. That can help Turkey prepare for when, in my view and not if, the Russians decide to start hitting back against the Turks and punishing them for the intervention or trying to change the military balance.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Including potentially on the Turkish side of the border. I mean, Turkey would be vulnerable to rocket, missile attacks the Patriots could defend against, thus giving them greater confidence to do what they are doing.

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, absolutely. Also be important to show solidarity.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Right.

The Administration I think has suggested, or at least some people we have spoken to, that all the Patriots are being used elsewhere, including defense of U.S. troops deployed in the Gulf. What would be your answer to that?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Sure. I would simply say that we are the United States of America and we are capable of making these decisions. The Pentagon may not want to do it, but this a matter of prioritization. I would never, of course, condone putting American troops at risk; that is not what that States here. There are options.

And I think the key here is that we see Syria not only as a humanitarian catastrophe but the front line of NATO against Russia. And I find it hard to believe that there are—that there is reason to doubt that the front line against Russia is inappropriate use of those kinds of weapons systems.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. Well, let me just say I agree basically with your proposal. I think there is—we should be willing to make that commitment. And because Turkey has a desperate need

for it there is a moment of leverage that we should use to deal with the S–400 issue, to deal with the way in which they weaponize refugees to pressure other countries, and all of our other concerns. And I hope that the Administration is listening.

Thank you so much. And I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

As Mr. Kinzinger leaves I just want to take a moment just to express my gratitude for the members' participation today. And in particular, I am reminded by Mr. Kinzinger and Mr. Malinowski how fortunate we are to have thoughtful voices on this committee. So, I thank, I thank you thoughtful voices on this committee.

Which is an appropriate time for me to turn it over to you, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. You are so kind, Mr. Chairman. Thank you so much, and thank you to the panel for being here. I am sorry I am late. I had a hearing on my other committee on coronavirus.

Maybe I should start with that. Ms. Stroul, what is your sense of how the Iranian regime has managed coronavirus in Iran? And has it done further damage to credibility of that regime with the Iranian people?

Ms. STROUL. Well, I think, my view is that the Iranian regime has—sorry; good? Thank you for the question.

The Iranian regime has done tremendous damage to its credibility, both with the Iranian people in the region and globally, starting with lying about the downing of the Ukrainian airliner, and now in its handling of the coronavirus. If you look at some of the maps of where coronavirus is apparently not: nothing in Syria, very little in Iran, also no good reports coming out of Turkey. What do some of these different capitals have in common: a tendency toward authoritarianism.

And specifically in Iran, the mismanagement and suppression of information both to its own population and globally I think has tremendous implications both for the Middle East more broadly, and this is another increase in economic pressure on the Iranian regime given the protests and given the Administration's policy of maximum pressure.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes. Speaking truth to the people about a difficult situation, however painful it might be, is good advice for every country, would you not agree?

Ms. STROUL. I wholeheartedly agree.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Including our own.

Mr. Lang, 40 percent of newly displaced people have settled in open fields, tents, makeshift shelters, and the like. What is the risk of coronavirus just, like wildfire, spreading to that kind of situation where you have, at best, rudimentary hygiene, sanitary conditions, and virtually nonexistent medical services?

Mr. LANG. Thank you very much for the question.

In a word, high. In fact, very high. I think and the situation is not only complicated by the fact that you have so many people living in such close proximity to one another with so little infrastructure, so little sanitation, so little basic services that are being provided, but because the health care system in Idlib has been decimated, largely at the hands of Russian aircraft, the kinds of mech-

anisms that would normally step in to provide basic support for those kind of populations simply are not there.

So, we are going to have to get extremely creative about how we support local aid workers, local aid groups, local NGO's, and even some aspects of the local health system that still remain, to try to get the kind of technical capacity that is needed to at least educate the population about how to comport themselves.

But, in a nutshell, you are dealing with very little capacity at this stage in a population that is highly, highly vulnerable to this virus.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I really think this is something that deserves some attention, although there is no press here at all. In a highly sophisticated country like Iran where, you know, at a thousand cases, and we just had a hearing where Dr. Fauci said it is going to get worse, flat out, it is going to get worse, our systems are tested. We do not have enough test kits. Our ERs are overwhelmed. And we do not have a vaccine or any kind of real efficacious treatment.

But for a vulnerable population on a field, in a tent or makeshift shelter of some kind, it is ready made for a virus like this. And it could absolutely have an impact on the entire region.

And I do not know if anybody has even rung the alarm bells that if you do not care about refugees for their own sake, for their humanity and their situation, you might want to care about it because of the spread of a viral, and I mean that in both senses, infectious disease that could affect you.

Mr. LANG. Absolutely. And, in fact, most of the conversation so far that has happened around the coronavirus with respect to refugees has been to weaponize in terms of using it as a reason to close borders and not to allow refugees to cross borders. And I think at the end of the day that is going to have very little to do. I mean, the doctors will tell us, the CDC will tell us it has very little to do with how you deal with containing the spread of a virus like this.

And it is just hard to imagine that once it makes its way—and it probably already is in a number of these displaced communities—that it is just not going to spread like wildfire.

It is not hard to imagine also that even the sort of international humanitarian apparatus that is in place to try to manage the basic relief effort, I know at least in some theaters, you know, the international offices are making decisions about rotation plans and schedules, and whether or not people can be maintained in these areas because of the heightened risk. So, the entire system is going to be tested by this effort.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And, Mr. Chairman, my time is up, but just an observation.

You know, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from the Spanish influenza of 1918. And the way that spread was through military combat. It started here in Kansas and it spread through training camps where we were mustering large groups of men—they were men then. And of course, when they were transported to Europe they brought the influenza, a transmuted lethal form of influenza, to Europe on both sides. And 50 million people ended up dying, with a mortality rate that is the same, over 3 percent, as

the current mortality rate with this virus, even though we have had medical advances.

So, presumably, the combat going on in the region could also be, in addition to refugees, a way of spreading the virus.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. Sherman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHERMAN. Today's hearing reminds us that when Assad was close to losing power and the ability to kill hundreds of thousands of people, the Government of Iran rushed in, and that the proper image of the government in Tehran is not the dapper Foreign Minister Zarif but is rather Alan Kurdi, that boy on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, 2 or 3 years old, a picture that brought home to the world the catastrophe which continues in Idlib.

We have millions of people displaced in Idlib. We need to make sure that our humanitarian aid goes directly to them, that it is not purloined by the Syrian Government. Has Turkey been cooperating in recent months to ensure that humanitarian assistance actually reaches Idlib Province?

Ms. Stroul.

Ms. STROUL. Hardin will be in a better position to answer the specifics of Turkey's provision of humanitarian aid. The two cross-border areas that remain open right now are along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The challenge, of course, is the completely non-permissive environment of Idlib. So, it is incredibly difficult to deliver aid across the borders given the fact that you have Al Qaida, Al Qaida affiliates, and an active hot war with Assad backed by Russia and Iran every single day, not to mention the infrastructure and the civilian infrastructure of Idlib being constantly bombarded and bombed by Russia.

Mr. SHERMAN. Are we sending—and I will ask anyone on the panel—are we sending any donations in cooperation or through the Syrian regime? I assume not, but I am going to ask.

Mr. LANG. Sir, to the extent that our international assistance is channeled through the United Nations, there are elements of that assistance then that are worked through Damascus. That much is clear. Very little of that assistance—in fact none—is making its way in a significant fashion to have impact in the situation in Idlib right now.

Mr. SHERMAN. So, the U.N. is giving valuable assets to the war criminal in Damascus and we are contributing toward that?

Mr. LANG. My sense is the United Nations is laboring under extremely difficult circumstances in Damascus, and that as part of the process we are trying to deliver humanitarian assistance to areas under government control.

Mr. SHERMAN. Look, Hitler killed a lot of people, but delivering food to Hitler was not a way to——

Mr. LANG. Right.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. To ameliorate the harm he was doing.

And we continue to contribute toward U.N. programs that send the assets to Assad.

Mr. LANG. We continue to——

Mr. SHERMAN. And none of, and virtually none of that actually reaches the people, reaches the people in the province. Is there any good thing that happens with that U.N. aid?

Mr. LANG. Sure. I would say this, and it is an extremely good question, and it is a very difficult set of circumstances. There are many populations in areas under government control that require humanitarian assistance. And some of that assistance from the United Nations is making its way to those populations. The question is——

Mr. SHERMAN. Providing those populations swear loyalty to Assad?

Mr. LANG. Or at least they are not in open dissent with Assad; correct.

Mr. SHERMAN. Since the signing of the cease-fire agreement on March 4th, do we expect Turkey's troop levels to remain the same?

And what is the likelihood that Turkey will be able to successfully maintain the agreed security corridors surrounding the M4 highway?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, I do expect that Turkey's military posture will remain. They have established the kinds of positions that indicate that they are in this for the foreseeable future.

I do expect that the Turks can deliver on their side of the agreement with Russia. I do not expect that Russia will deliver on its side, in part because Russia has demonstrated an inability and, in some cases, an unwillingness to compel Assad to abide by such agreements.

Mr. SHERMAN. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Sherman.

I yield myself 5 minutes. Mr. Lang, can we take a step back for a minute. In a decade now, how many Syrians has Assad slaughtered either directly or with the support of the Russians and Iranians?

Mr. LANG. We are approaching the half million mark, if not over.

Mr. DEUTCH. Right. Half a million, 600,000, it is hard to even keep track.

How many people have been forced to flee Syria?

Mr. LANG. Over 5 million.

Mr. DEUTCH. And how many have been internally displaced?

Mr. LANG. At this stage, over 6 million.

Mr. DEUTCH. Five million have fled, 6 million internally displaced, over half a million dead. How is it that we are numb, Ms. Cafarella? How is that?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Well, it is unacceptable that we are numb, in my view. But I think that we have lost sight of who we are, in my view, as a Nation. We have lost sight of what we can do in this region. And that is partly because we have made some mistakes. But we have deluded ourselves into thinking that we cannot stand up against this guy.

Mr. DEUTCH. Now, you, Ms. Cafarella, and Ms. Stroul both made references to this tenuous moment for the rules-based order. Isn't the rules-based order since the end of World War II, isn't the United Nations the place where the rules-based order should be on full display? Isn't that the, isn't that a safeguard?

And isn't the United Nations Security Council the place that ought to be able to come together in moments like this, Ms. Stroul?

Ms. STROUL. Yes.

Mr. DEUTCH. And is it appropriate for us to simply say, ah, we are going to go to the U.N. Security Council and the Russians are going to veto, that is not the best use of our time? Is that—should that be our approach?

Ms. STROUL. My personal view is no. I think it is worth the hard stakes diplomacy of forcing the Russians to veto to protect their——

Mr. DEUTCH. Because everything we have talked about in terms of potential solutions, the way that we are going to approach Turkey, whether it is pressuring Turkey to leave Astana, return or destroy the S–400, work more closely with us, whether it is as you talked about the need for them to engage, for Turkey to engage more broadly. We are trying to pressure, we are trying to get to Geneva and move away from Astana, all the things we are talking about, whether it is Turkey, whether it is Russia, all of that can be brought together at the Security Council, cannot it?

I'm just, look, I do not know, I have all kinds of questions about the specifics and cross-border points, and the specifics of the humanitarian crisis, and the needs that we—the needs that have to be met, and the way to protect the border. And those are all really important.

But the big picture here, if we are numb to it, if we do a hearing on this dire crisis in a country where Assad has slaughtered over half a million people and there is no one who cares, with kids freezing to death right now, isn't, isn't the one idea to pull this all together and marshal our resources at the U.N.?

And if Russia wants to veto a Security Council resolution that lays out the need not just to address the humanitarian crisis, not just to address everything that you so eloquently have spoken to, but to preserve the rules-based order, then let's make them do it. Isn't that right?

Ms. STROUL. Putin's goal is not to preserve the rules-based order. He thrives, he wins, he succeeds when that system breaks down. He is working with Turkey to erode NATO. What he is doing in Ukraine, what he did in Georgia, what he is doing now in Syria, all of these policies are designed to break the rules-based order, as well as the norms-based order, so the future of conflict in the Middle East looks like Idlib. That benefits Putin and it disadvantages us and our European partners.

Mr. DEUTCH. I completely agree.

And to that end shouldn't we be making that case not just here and not just in Congress, and passing sanctions is important, but should not we be making that case in front of the world, and in front of, in front of Putin? Isn't that—If we are at a moment, and again it is one thing to be numb to a humanitarian crisis, and there is never an excuse for that, but if we are at a moment where the rules-based international order is at risk, and it is at risk because of what you just described, and what Putin has tried to do in Idlib at the same time that they are trying to undermine democracies all around the world, if that is the case isn't it time that we rally the world to that cause?

Ms. STROUL. Yes. And that would require, with all respect to Jim Jeffrey, the Special Envoy for Syria, not just Jim Jeffrey, it would mean every cabinet-level official,——

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes, it would.

Ms. STROUL [continuing]. The President of the United States——

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes, it would.

Ms. STROUL [continuing]. Holding Russia accountable in every international forum, every international conference, making the case publicly in foreign policy speeches to the American people, and we are not doing that.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right. Ms. Cafarella, your thoughts on that?

Ms. CAFARELLA. I would simply add that what happens when the United States brings the full weight of this incredible country against the Russians is that Putin starts losing. He is only succeeding because we are not even showing up to the fight. It is time to show up. And it is actually time to win it because far more is at stake than the lives of these Syrians.

We are talking about global conditions toward disorder. We are talking about another kind of catastrophe, probably on the scale of Syria, elsewhere in the world if these trajectories continue. It is time for us to hold the line.

Mr. DEUTCH. And, Mr. Lang, when that happens what is the result from the work that you do?

Mr. LANG. The lack of U.S. leadership at the international level on humanitarian issues and the rule-based order by and large the impact of that cannot be underestimated. We are seeing across the globe the failure, our inability to engage in a way that we used to engage on humanitarian issues, on these issues of peace and security.

We have always traditionally been the large tent pole in this tent. And when we pulled back from that role it has a cascade of impacts and effects, not just in Syria, but across crisis zones across the world. And that lack of leadership, our abdication of leadership in that area, the price in humanitarian terms simply cannot be underestimated.

Mr. DEUTCH. I want to thank the witnesses for being here today. I want to thank you for reminding us of what is at stake in Idlib and in Syria. I want to thank you for not allowing this subcommittee to be numb.

And, in particular, I want to thank you for where we ended, which is the very fact that if we are to address this humanitarian crisis and lead in addressing humanitarian crises worldwide, and if we are going to take on this critical moment where the rules-based order is very much in jeopardy, it requires American leadership, not just Ms. Stroul, as you said, from Jim Jeffrey, who is doing great service for his country, but by everyone at the highest level in this Administration, including the President of the United States, and at every meeting.

And it cannot, it cannot leave any question after any meeting that the President has with Vladimir Putin about what was said, what was discussed. We should not have to guess, because every meeting like that, and every statement should focus on American leadership, defending the rules-based international order, and always standing up to protect the most vulnerable.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here. Thank you for your testimony.

Members?

Mr. WILSON. And, hey, it is amazing.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. I want to thank the chairman, Okay. This really is bipartisan. And, indeed, I want to commend Jim Jeffrey but also Ambassador Kelly Craft. The thought of her being in Idlib is unimaginable, but it shows again the concern of the American people. But we need your assistance and the leadership of Chairman Deutch.

And it was tremendous to have Chairman Eliot Engel here, too. That was a very significant move. And I look forward in a bipartisan manner as we proceed further on behalf of the people of Syria.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you. I thank the ranking member. I thank you for your leadership and your commitment.

Members of the subcommittee, I would remind the witnesses, may have some additional questions. We ask the witnesses to please respond to those questions in writing.

I would ask my colleagues to submit any questions that they have within 5 business days.

And with that, and without objection, the subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:26 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chairman

March 11, 2020

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 by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/):

DATE: Wednesday, March 11, 2020

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: The Crisis in Idlib

WITNESSES: Ms. Dana Stroul
Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow
Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics
Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Hardin Lang
Vice President for Programs and Policy
Refugees International

Ms. Jennifer Cafarella
Research Director
Institute for the Study of War

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 SUBCOMMITTEE ON ***Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism*** HEARING

Day ***Wednesday*** **Date** ***03/11/2020*** **Room** ***2172***

Starting Time ***10:04 AM*** **Ending Time** ***11:26 AM***

Recesses ***0*** (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Theodore E. Deutch

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☑
Executive (closed) Session ☐
Televised ☑

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☑
Stenographic Record ☑

TITLE OF HEARING:

The Crisis in Idlib

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)*

Eliot Engel, NY

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 - Rep. Gerry Connolly

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED ***11:26 AM***

Subcommittee Staff Associate

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND NONPROLIFERATION

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
	Dina Titus, NV
X	David Cicilline, RI
	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
	Ted Lieu, CA
X	Andy Levin, MI
	Colin Allred, TX
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
	Tom Malinowski, NJ
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	William Keating, MA
X	Juan Vargas, CA

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
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X	Joe Wilson, SC
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X	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
X	Lee Zeldin, NY
	John Curtis, UT
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Steve Watkins, KS

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Statement for the Record
Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia

The Syrian government offensive in northern Idlib has displaced nearly a third of the population of Idlib – approximately one million people, more than 80 percent of whom are women and children – since December 2019. These displaced civilians are freezing, hungry, and in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Dozens of Turkish soldiers have been killed in recent weeks as a result of ongoing fighting between armed opposition groups backed by Turkey and Syrian government forces backed by Russia and Iran, raising the specter of direct armed conflict between a NATO ally and another major military power. While the United States has condemned the attacks on Turkish forces in Idlib and offered some humanitarian assistance to alleviate the crisis, the Trump Administration's retreat from U.S. leadership in Syria has left us with little leverage and empowered our adversaries to shape Syria's future.

Last week, Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan reached an agreement in Moscow to address the conflict between their two militaries in Idlib. The accord includes a ceasefire along the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation area, a security corridor north and south of the M4 highway, and a commitment to begin joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4 highway this week. Importantly, this agreement does not explicitly halt military activities by each state's proxy forces in Idlib, and there is no mention of relief for the hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced by the Syrian government's recent offensive. In response to Turkish appeals for support, the United States agreed to provide Turkey with ammunition, military equipment, and intelligence, as well as additional humanitarian assistance, but declined to transfer Patriot surface-to-air missiles due to Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

The displacement of nearly one million people in makeshift camps near the Turkish border prompted the Turkish government to announce that it could no longer uphold its agreement with the European Union to stop individuals seeking to cross into EU territory as of February 27, 2020. The Turkish border has remained closed to Syrian refugees since late 2015, but as the Syrian government offensive pushes displaced civilians into an ever shrinking area between brutal regime control and another country that doesn't want them, there are no good options for those caught up in this crisis. Before December 2019, there were already close to two million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in northwest Syria. The more than 950,000 newly displaced people are extremely vulnerable due to harsh winter conditions and lack of proper shelter, with an estimated 40 percent settling in open fields, tents, or makeshift shelters.

Last fall, President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, greenlighting a planned Turkish operation to clear U.S.-backed Kurdish forces from near the Turkish-Syrian border. Critics from both sides of the aisle warned that doing so would not only abandon our allies, the Syrian Kurds, but also push them into the arms of Assad's regime, creating a power vacuum that could benefit Assad, his Russian and Iranian backers, and the Islamic State. Each of these concerns was

borne out in real time. The Kurds announced an agreement with Assad, brokered by Russia, that paved the way for Syrian government forces to return to the country's northeast for the first time in years. After a Turkish airstrike near a camp holding families displaced by the violence, more than 500 female detainees connected to the Islamic State reportedly escaped in the ensuing mayhem.

With that incomprehensible and indefensible decision to retreat, President Trump upended U.S. policy in Syria, breathing new life into the Islamic State and handing a major victory to our adversaries, Russia and Iran. That withdrawal also further compromised U.S. leadership and hampered our ability to address the ongoing crisis in Idlib today. Our calls for an immediate ceasefire and cessation to the violence ring hollow when we don't have a seat at the negotiating table. 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.

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