

# SYRIA: WHICH WAY FORWARD?

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS  
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## SYRIA: WHICH WAY FORWARD?

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2018

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

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:05 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. The subcommittee will come to order. Thank you to all the members who are here already. After recognizing myself and Ranking Member Deutch for our opening statements I will then recognize other members seeking recognition for 1 minute.

We will then hear from our witnesses. And without objection, witnesses, your prepared statements will be made a part of the record and members may have 5 days in which to insert statements and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

The chair now recognizes herself for 5 minutes.

Near the seventh anniversary of the Syrian Civil War we still find ourselves calling for a clear and coherent strategy on the U.S. role in Syria and in helping bring the conflict to an end. The last administration repeatedly refused to engage with any real purpose in Syria, failing to follow through on red lines, and in effect, surrendering the field to Russia, to Iran, to Turkey to dictate Syria's future on their own terms.

By now the reasons behind President Obama's reluctance to take a stronger stance against Iran in the region and beyond and his desire to reach a nuclear accord with a state sponsor of terror are well known. His Middle East rebalance or as he famously put it, "sharing the neighborhood," no doubt also factored heavily into his Syria policy. Tragically, there has been a disastrous cost of inaction. Hundreds of thousands murdered, millions of refugees displaced. Violent turmoil spilling across borders and threatening our allies Israel and Jordan and Assad now firmly ensconced exacerbating Syria's political and humanitarian crises.

Even worse, the regime in Iran flush with cash from the nuclear deal and emboldened by the Obama administration's focus elsewhere has solidified its so-called Shi'ite crescent of influence from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut and left a greatly strengthened terrorist group Hezbollah on Israel's doorstep. Considering these costs and a clear lack of U.S. willingness to engage many people were encouraged by Secretary Tillerson's recent

speech in which he described the administration's vision for a way forward in Syria. Even if it lacked great detail at least it was a signal of intent by his administration to engage in Syria.

The Secretary laid out five broad but commendable objectives. An enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda, a stable, unified independent Syria under post Assad leadership, diminishing Iranian influence, the return of refugees and internally displaced people, and a Syria free of weapons of mass destruction. As many people have noted, accomplishing these objectives would require significant resources, resources that the Secretary failed to commit to or detail in this lofty speech.

Without these details it is difficult to see how we are going to meet the challenges ahead. Our NATO ally Turkey, who notoriously failed to stem the flow of foreign fighters and cash and weapons across its border for years is now engaged in operations against U.S. backed Kurdish and Arab forces in Syria's northwest, forces that have been essential in our fight against ISIS. And Russia, who appears determined to undermine the United States, wherever and whenever possible, has both coordinated with Turkey on its operations and commandeered the U.N. peace process in Geneva, an exercise that was always doomed as long as Russia was leading it.

Meanwhile, Iran continues taking advantage of the chaos leveraging its tens of thousands of militia fighters to displace Sunni inhabitants, manipulate the region's demographics, and consolidate its own territorial gains. Through it all, it is the Syrian people who are suffering the most in what promises to be an extremely difficult rebuilding process. The administration has begun to talk about this process in terms of stabilization assistance, a necessary piece of any strategy.

In delivering this assistance we must ensure that nothing we provide benefits Assad or his cronies, and it may be more beneficial to focus on the kind of humanitarian soft aid that will allow Syrian communities to reduce their dependence on Damascus.

With so many challenges and complications after years of inaction and allowing others to fill the leadership vacuum we cannot afford another strategy, while praiseworthy with its broad strokes, that has missing details, missing commitment, missing resources.

Our excellent panel today is designed to provide members with the full spectrum of assessments on the administration's plan, as well as their own understanding of U.S. interests and policy recommendations for Syria. And I am hopeful that this hearing can provide at least some clarity on a way forward that we so desperately need.

And with that I am so pleased to yield to my friend and ranking member, Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Madam Chairman, thank you for convening today's hearing, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us. I would like to take a moment right at the outset to acknowledge a special guest we have in our audience today. Kassem Eid was a victim of the Assad regime's horrific 2013 sarin gas attack in Ghouta near Damascus. Thankfully he survived but hundreds of innocent men women and children did not. Kassem, thank you for being here, and we appreciate your being with us very much. Thank you.

Madam Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to——

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Without objection.

Mr. DEUTCH [continuing]. Submit the statement into the record.

Thanks, Kassem, as well for being one of the many living witnesses to the barbarism of the Assad regime who have been brave enough to share your stories with us here. You helped the American people and those around the world understand the brutal reality of life in Syria today.

Three years ago a former Syrian military photographer known as Caesar testified before our committee with tens of thousands of photos documenting the Assad regime's systematic torture and murder of its citizens. We have since passed a bill bearing his name, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to hold the Assad regime and its international backers accountable for the ongoing atrocities in the now 7-year long war, a war that has displaced more than half the country and killed more than 1/2 million people.

While this conflict is not only a dire humanitarian crisis it is a deeply consequential geopolitical conflict and we cannot, we cannot ignore the impact of either. The Syrian refugee crisis is destabilizing neighboring countries and creating debates in European parliaments. Thousands of foreign fighters have flocked to Syria. Terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda have found safe haven, and foreign powers including Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have all backed competing forces. What may have begun as a civil war has morphed into a complex array of geopolitical power struggles and proxy conflicts.

Assad is only still in power today because when he was at his weakest Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia sent in fighters on the ground and war planes in the sky. And while this administration is rightly focused on defeating ISIS, we have urgently been asking the administration for clarity on its greater strategy for the future of Syria.

As the U.S. Light Coalition has liberated nearly all ISIS-held territory we need to know what comes next. Last month, Secretary Tillerson finally articulated that strategy in a speech at Stanford's Hoover Institute. He set out five objectives that the chair referenced. Number one, defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda. Number two, ensure a stable and unified post Assad Syria. Number three, diminish Iranian influence. Number four, help refugees begin to return home in Syria. And number five, prevent WMDs in Syria.

These goals are laudable, and they are important, but the speech contained little in the way of concrete strategies to actually achieve these goals. And since this administration's rhetoric has been routinely incompatible with its actions, we still need more clarity.

I am obviously not suggesting that this is easy. We have been having some version of this conversation for more than 7 years. We are discussing a crisis that former CIA Director Brennan called the most complex, complicated issue that he ever had to deal with. But I am concerned. I am concerned that current American policy has left us on the outside looking in.

Russia is already filling the void as the new power broker for the future of Syria. Russia, Turkey and Iran brokered deescalation zones in Syria that have not been deescalatory, and have disturbing long-term implications. They are policed by the Syrian

Army with support from the Russian military, Hezbollah militants, and Iranian IRGC commanders. These are the very groups who have murdered hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians, who are responsible for attacks on Americans, and who are actively fomenting sectarian violence throughout the region.

At the same time, Turkish-U.S. relations are on life support as tensions flare over our support for Kurdish groups. Turkey views the YPG Kurdish group that we support as a part of the PKK terror group and has therefore launched a military invasion into northern Syrian. This is a dangerous recipe for two NATO allies.

So with these confusing and competing elements in the Syria conflict we are fortunate to have an impressive panel to help us unpack this crisis, help us fill in the void for Secretary Tillerson.

In order to achieve his desired end states in Syria what is actually needed? How can we continue to ensure this complex humanitarian emergency is addressed. What can we on this committee do to hold the administration's feet to the fire to ensure a coherent and a consistent policy in Syria? I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I thank you, Madame Chair. I look forward to our witnesses' testimony.

I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Deutch. Mr. Kinzinger of Illinois.

Mr. KINZINGER. Well, thank you Madame Chair, and thank you all for being here, Mr. Ford, Mr. Lister, not to put the other two away, but you guys have done great leadership on these issues, and I appreciate it and I look forward to hearing from you. It is going to be a good hearing.

Look, this is 100 percent predictable where we are at right now. We predicted this years ago when this all started. What happens when you put down red lines and don't follow through, what happens, you know, there is a valuable role for the United States to play in terms of overthrowing dictators. Dictators don't work anymore in an era of information because people don't like to be oppressed. Despite what some people think, they just don't and they are going to throw off the shackles of oppression. And in that process we have an opportunity to help make a world of freedom or to let the Russians come in and do it.

And I think—I am going to speak obviously more when my question time comes up, but I think it is important to note in all of this that Bashar al-Assad, of course, has blood on his hands and he should be put in front of a war crimes tribunal if not killed.

And secondly, Russia and Iran bear the same responsibility because this man was about out of office, and they came in and stiffened his spine and his regime. His regime will fail because dictatorships fail ultimately, but the question is how much blood in between now and then.

And I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Adam.

Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Madam Chairman. Thank you Madam Chairman and Ranking Member Deutch for holding this hearing today and thank you to each of the witnesses for being



here today, for your work on these issues, and for providing your perspective today.

Syria has been an unfolding tragedy since 2011 with estimates that 1/2 million people have been killed and more than 11 million people either internally displaced or refugees in other countries. The human suffering brought by this conflict has been staggering, and the willingness of the Assad regime and ISIS terrorist to inflict pain on the Syrian people for their own purposes is astonishing.

However, I want to use my minute today to highlight the brutal attack that is under way against the Kurdish people of Afrin. And I know the chairman just mentioned this in the northwest region of Syria across the border from Turkey. This assault began on January 20 of this year by Turkey purportedly against Kurdish PKK terrorists. However, it has become quite clear that there has been a devastating impact on civilians including by Turkish bombing campaigns, as well as by terrorists associated with the Free Syrian Army.

I recently met with Dr. Idris Othman, a constituent of mine from Rhode Island who is originally from Afrin, who provided pictures and reporting directly from the field where he himself still has family who are under threat by these attacks, and I ask Madame Chair unanimous consent that this report compiled by the Kurdish red crescent in Syria be submitted for the record.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Without objection.

Mr. CICILLINE. I urge my colleagues to take the time to review these documents. The images are chilling. We cannot stand by on the sidelines as these atrocities continue. I hope that we can work together, Madam Chairman and Mr. Deutch, to bring light to this situation of the Kurdish people in Afrin and ensure that the United States is engaged to protect civilian lives and convey to our NATO ally Turkey that they must abide by international norms and conventions, which require that they protect civilians and allow humanitarian and medical assistance. And with that I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much. Ambassador Wagner, we have had two excellent opening statements. I don't want to put the responsibility on you—

Mrs. WAGNER. Put me on the spot—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [continuing]. But you are recognized.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. Welcome, witnesses.

I thank you for drawing attention to the ongoing crisis in Syria. I am beyond disheartened to hear of reports of the Assad regime's continued use of chemical weapons. Last week the administration announced that Syria is developing more sophisticated delivery mechanisms for chlorine and other chemical weapons in direct violation of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Agreement.

Last year, the Trump administration conducted an air strike on a Syrian air field 2 days after the regime killed innocent civilians and children in a chemical attack. It is imperative that the administration responds with strength and resolve to the latest chemical weapons reports. I thank you, Madam Chairman, and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, you surpassed it. Thank you very much, and amen to everything you have said.

Mr. Schneider of Illinois.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Madam Chairman, ranking member, for having this hearing, to the witnesses for joining us today.

Now in its seventh year a solution to the conflict in Syria remains elusive as President Assad continues his brutal assaults on his people. As ISIS is pushed out from the territory it controlled new challenges in scenes of conflict emerge. We are not at the end of this story but only beginning another chapter.

Meanwhile, there are four countries United States, Russia, Iran, and Turkey vying for influence in the Syrian conflict. Given the severity of this conflict and the impact on the Syrian population it is imperative that the United States makes its goals clear and shows it is committed to the resources necessary to achieve these goals. A goal without a full commitment is a pathway to failure.

What I hope to gain from today's discussion is a clear-eyed assessment of the administration's goals and strategy for the conflict in Syria and whether the current strategy is leading us down a path of success or a path of failure.

I look forward to our discussion, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much and I think that we should tell our colleagues about a wonderful op-ed that appears in today's the Hill with a coauthor of—who are those two people?

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I was very honored and pleased to coauthor with the chairman an op-ed about the need to protect the election.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, thank you so much. Our staffers work so hard in putting these hearings on, and I am so delighted to introduce our lineup today because they have so much background and differing points of views and ways that they are looking at this situation. So thank you to all the hard working folks behind us.

But I am delighted—I am not snubbing the remaining members, they said that they will hold their fire for the questions.

So Ted and I are delighted to welcome back Ambassador Robert Ford, a good friend of our subcommittee, former United States Ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014. Ambassador Ford served 37 years in the State Department and the Peace Corps, having been stationed in Algeria, Iraq, Bahrain, Morocco, everywhere. In recognition of his outstanding work and distinguished career Ambassador Ford has received too many awards and recognitions to name, including the Secretary of State's Distinguished Service Award. Thank you for your service, Mr. Ambassador. We look forward to your testimony.

Next Ted and I welcome Faysal Itani, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council where he focuses his research on the Syrian conflict. Prior to this position, Mr. Itani was a risk analyst advising governments, corporations, and international organizations operating in the Middle East. Thank you, Faysal, and we look forward to your testimony.

We welcome back Mr. Charles Lister, senior fellow and director of extremism and counterterrorism program in the Middle East Institute. Prior to this, Mr. Lister was a visiting fellow at Brookings Institution in Qatar and a senior consultant to Syria track two dialogue initiative. Thank you, Mr. Lister, for joining us again.

And welcome back to Dr. Mara Karlin, associate professor of the practice of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Dr. Karlin has served in national security roles under five U.S. Secretaries of Defense and most recently she served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for strategy and force development. What a stellar group of panelists. Thank you, Dr. Karlin, for your service as well. We all look forward to hearing your testimony, and we will start with Ambassador Ford.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT FORD, SENIOR FELLOW, MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE (FORMER UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR TO SYRIA)**

Mr. FORD. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. It is nice to see you again, and it is nice to see Congressman Deutch again. I have come down from Vermont to talk to you today, and it is a pleasure to be with this committee.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. This is like the south, right?

Mr. FORD. Yes, it is warm here. It is a delight to be here with the other members of the committee, and I am really honored to be here with terrific colleagues. It is a great panel. And I think your hearing on Syria is very well timed because the Syrian war, which has been going on now for 7 years, but it is entering a new phase. It is really in a new phase. And I think it is a great time to look at what has happened and to reassess.

So let me just quickly say a few things about the way I look at the Syrian war. First, I think it is time to think carefully about core American national interests in Syria, core American national interests.

First, obviously regional stability. We are concerned about the threat that Iran could pose to our friends, notably Israel and Jordan. And I want us to focus on that for a minute. We have left American forces in eastern Syria. The Iranians are in western Syria. Our forces are about 350 miles from the Iranians, and it is not likely the Iranians are going to leave Syria because we have troops 350 miles away. It is a mistake to think Russia is going to push them out. The Russians won't.

So I think we need high level consultations between the United States and especially Israel and Jordan to develop a menu of responses about how to deter Iran. And I am happy to go into more detail on that.

Second core interest, preventing terrorists in Syria from reaching out and attacking our allies or attacking us. We are building up a local security force in eastern Syria. I think it behooves this committee, I think it behooves the Congress. You have received requests for 430 million for this force in the fiscal year 2017 budget request, and you have received another \$500 million request in the fiscal year 2018 request. I think you need to ask what are the benchmarks and what are the timelines for setting that force up?

When I was in Iraq 15 years ago and we were setting up Iraqi security forces, with great difficulty, we could never define and we could never obtain the benchmarks and timelines. If we can't then we are in some kind of indefinite commitment. So I think you must ask for benchmarks and timelines.

Third, Congresswoman Wagner mentioned the use of chemical weapons. I think it is important to reestablish deterrence against Syrian Government use of chemical weapons. But we also must understand the Russians are going to veto anything we try at the United Nations. Whatever steps we take to deter come outside the United Nations Security Council.

Fourth core interest, it is less of a core interest frankly. Ideally, we would see a better government in Syria. It is a low bar with Bashar al-Assad's Government. We see a better government that respects human rights that can be held accountable and that treats refugees well. I noticed that Secretary Tillerson said American forces will stay in Syria until there is a national political agreement. I have to tell you, I was very surprised to see that. That is a big change in American policy.

And I have to tell you, having worked on this for 4 years, long years, the Geneva process is dead. It is moribund at best. Geneva cannot be some kind of a diplomatic strategy. It is going nowhere. So I think, again, it behooves the Congress to ask what is the diplomatic strategy if you want to tie the presence of U.S. forces in Syria to a broader political solution, what is your diplomatic strategy to get to the political solution? Geneva is a city. Geneva is not a benchmark on a diplomatic strategy.

Two other bits of advice for the Congress. First, we are now engaged in a stabilization effort in eastern Syria. I have to tell you, I don't really understand the difference between stabilization and nation building. I think the Congress needs again to ask for better definitions, benchmarks, and timelines.

And finally on refugees, the refugee situation is terrible. It is desperate. I think we need more resources devoted to refugees, especially communities in places like Lebanon and Jordan. We don't want those refugee camps to become future recruitment grounds for extremists.

But I am going to conclude with this last thought. Madam Chairwoman, I think it is time to reconsider whether or not we continue to fund United Nations humanitarian assistance programs inside Syria. Bashar al-Assad is gaming the system. He is blocking aid to desperate communities in opposition held areas, the few that are left, and we are basically subsidizing Assad by funding the United Nations humanitarian aid programs. I think that too needs a real reconsideration.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you very much. I look forward to a good discussion.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Ford follows:]

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

BY AMBASSADOR (RET) ROBERT S. FORD

FEBRUARY 6, 2018

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee,

It is an honor to appear before you today. I thank you for your invitation.

I am glad the Committee is holding this hearing about our policy in Syria. Through superb efforts led by our military and with the excellent help of our diplomatic team, America and its allies have largely seized territories the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had controlled.

The Syrian Army and its allies also took back territory, including the long-time stronghold of Deir Zour.

ISIS has not gone away entirely, but compared to even 12 months ago the ISIS picture looks far better. I suggest this Committee now consider what comes next for us in Syria.

**Where We Are Now**

As of December 6, 2017 there were about 2,000 US forces in eastern Syria. That number may have declined slightly. Our forces, including our air force, operate east of the Euphrates River which serves as an informally agreed demarcation line between our forces and those of our allies, and the Russian, Iranian and Syrian government forces operating west of the river.

The administration has stated that it intends to leave US forces east of the Euphrates to go after ISIS insurgents when they can be found and to recruit, pay, train, equip and sustain local security forces in eastern Syria to go after ISIS and to ensure stability.

The cost of US military operations in Syria between FY 2014 and the end of FY 2017 was between \$3 and \$4 billion. In addition to the cost of those military operations, the FY 2017

budget request included \$430 billion to build local security forces and the FY 2018 request was for \$500 million.

The U.S. also has deployed a small civilian team into Syria charged with initial reconstruction and building new local governance or improving on existing local governance. If it sounds like nation-building, it is but on a smaller scale. USAID and other civilian agencies have provided \$875 million in non-lethal and stabilization aid to opposition-controlled areas in Syria since FY 2012. Last year alone the US provided about \$200 million.

And of course, we are the largest humanitarian aid donor worldwide, and our humanitarian aid to Syria now totals about \$7.7 billion.

If you add all these numbers up, US military and civilian costs in Syria over the past 4 years are at least \$12 billion. That's a lot of money. And it's not clear when those outlays will stop.

Our military and civilian personnel on the ground in Syria will be targeted, eventually. The Syrian and Iranian governments, and Russia, all want us out of Syria. The Syrian intelligence network is active in eastern Syria. The Syrian Government won't risk a direct attack against us, but its more unconventional tactics from Lebanon in 1983 and 1984 to Iraq between 2004 and 2009 suggest what actions it would take against us. This could include car bombs, assassinations of our personnel and the local people who work with us, mortar hit and run attacks. It is worth remembering that the Syrian government often cooperates with terror groups against us, as it did in Iraq.

#### **Administration Lays Out Goals**

We are paying costs and accepting risks in Syria. What for?

Earlier this month Secretary Tillerson laid out a set of goals the United States has for Syria.

I'll review the Administration's objectives briefly. They are admirable goals, but I don't see how we can achieve most of them with our current resources and policies and with the larger course of events underway in Syria.

1. defeat and contain ISIS and al-Qa'ida. I already discussed the great progress against ISIS. Local forces we are building in eastern Syria might help reduce and preclude a large return of ISIS if the politics in eastern Syria are right. It is less clear when or if they could ever be self-sustaining.

As for our destroying al-Qaida in Syria, it is concentrated in northwestern Syria now, far from our forces and in an area where the Russian and Syrian air forces predominate. It is, in effect, on their side of the demarcation line.

2. resolve the Syrian conflict through a United Nations-led political process, such as the one in Geneva.

The UN process, however, is moribund; eight rounds of Geneva talks have made no significant progress on anything. Instead, Russia is now moving to establish a separate track that would amend the Syrian constitution and move the country towards sham elections that the Assad Baathist government will win handily.

The Syrian conflict, however, was never about constitutions and elections. It started 7 years ago as a problem of lack of rule of law in a vicious security state and lack of accountability for officials who treated their own population capriciously and ruthlessly. A new constitution and new elections won't remove or even change that essential security state.

Through its military advances on the ground, that Syrian security state will stay. A thousand or two thousand US forces in eastern Syria, 350 or 400 miles from the capital, will not change that. The Syrian government is not only ruthless. It is also patient. It will concede nothing of value at a negotiating table when its military position is secure and it will wait years if needed for us to leave while it constantly harasses us. Our existing policy can't deliver this second goal of reforming or changing the Syrian government.

3. reducing Iranian influence. Given the threat Iran could pose against Israel, this makes sense to me. However, the presence of a small US force far away in northeastern Syria won't hurt the Iranians in western Syria nor compel them to depart. It is wishful thinking to assess otherwise. The Iranians don't need a landbridge from Iran to Lebanon. For many years they just used Damascus airport. It is not our policy, as I understand it, to shut down Damascus airport.

4. the safe, voluntary return of refugees to Syria. This too is a laudable objective. In fact, some refugees are returning, but larger-scale returns depend mainly on a wider cessation of violence and for many of them a sense that the Government will not harass or detain them. In some cases the government is actually invalidating property deeds as part of a program to change populations of particular urban neighborhoods. Moreover, without economic reconstruction, millions of refugees have neither homes nor jobs and schools to return to. The Syrian government is attacking and advancing in northwestern Syria; this may well result in a net outflow rather than a net return of refugees. The U.S. has little real leverage over the Syrian government with its current policy, and we cannot do much to fix the problems impeding refugees from returning.
  
5. achieve a Syria without weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This is a longstanding and proper American goal. But the Syrian government is unwilling to relinquish its chemical weapons, and there is no indication that it will be compelled to do so. Russia vetoed the last UN Security Council effort to investigate Syrian chemical weapons attacks further and it would veto any UN Security Council effort to penalize Damascus for its use of chemical weapons. China likely would join Russia in that veto.

**Need Clear Strategies, Attainable Goals**

I have appeared before this Committee several times before and I repeat what I have always said: there is no quick fix to the Syrian conflict.

I would recommend the Committee focus on goals we can reasonably achieve with the resources the Congress is prepared to give for our Syria policy going forward.

Here are some specific suggestions:

**\*\* the Congress should instruct the Administration identify strategies, benchmarks and timelines for when local security forces in eastern Syria will be able to contain extremist threats in eastern Syrian and when those local security forces will be self-sustaining, including recruitment, pay and logistics.**

**\*\* if the Administration does not think that local security forces can ever be self-sustaining, then the Congress must decide if it is willing to support an indefinite U.S. military commitment and determine how many resources it is prepared to devote to that task.**



\*\* the Congress should also instruct the Administration to identify benchmarks and timelines for when political conditions in Syria are such that American forces can withdraw from eastern Syria. In the end, our Syrian Kurdish and Syrian Arab allies must strike a deal with Assad. Unless we are prepared for an indefinite military presence, that deal will largely be on Assad's terms because he will wait us out.

\*\* if the Administration cannot identify a diplomatic strategy to secure political conditions enabling US forces can leave Syria in the foreseeable future, then again the Committee, the House and the broader Congress should decide whether it wants an indefinite military presence in Syria, including an indefinite no-fly zone over eastern Syria.

\*\* I emphasize that the Congress needs to decide whether it is comfortable with the costs and safety risks of an indefinite US military commitment in eastern Syria with ill-defined endstates and strategies to reach those endstates.

\*\* in addition, the Congress should instruct the Administration to identify benchmarks and timelines for US "stabilization" efforts lest that activity become a new nation-building exercise. This should include tight definitions of the minimal restoration of exactly which services and what constitutes adequate local governance. We will always want to do more. A better question is what we can realistically do in how much time and at what cost.

I would add here that sober analysis should recall the limits to our abilities demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan.

\*\* we cannot compel Iran to withdraw from Syria but we can discuss more closely with Jordan and Israel how to reduce risks to their borders. There are multiple ways to address those states' security concerns. What is important now is to understand that our forces in eastern Syria are not part of the answer. The Congress will have to work with the Administration on the menu of options available with Israel and Jordan; they will cost money.

\*\* we should increase refugee assistance, since they are not going home in large numbers any time soon, and resources are desperately short. If we want to prevent terrorist recruitment by improving local security and "stabilization" in eastern Syria, then we also want to improve the living conditions of refugees in camps and settlements in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and in opposition pockets along the Turkish and Jordanian borders, in order to reduce the attraction of joining militant organizations.

\*\* finally, and I know this may cause some controversy: the Congress and the Administration should consider cutting assistance to UN humanitarian aid programs in Syria. For years the Assad government has impeded or entirely blocked aid to opposition-held areas. Its slogan is “kneel or starve.” The UN has made a good faith effort but could not gain access to those areas.

By contrast, UN-financed aid readily reaches government-controlled areas. It was never our aim but the UN, and through the UN we the United States, have subsidized the Syrian government with one-sided humanitarian aid even while the Syrian government flouted humanitarian law and agreements and blocked other aid to some of its own people. We are an unhappy party to what the Syrian government has been doing. I would recommend we reconsider whether that large amount of US funding from Congress for UN humanitarian operations inside Syria is really advancing the goals the Secretary laid out.

## CONCLUSION

Though Syria is not Vietnam, and our war effort in Syria is not like what we tried to do in Vietnam, we can learn lessons from our history. More than ever I think we should heed the words of former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in his book summing up what he learned from the long, failed American effort in Vietnam.

McNamara urged great caution before we get involved long-term in foreign civil wars. He stressed that we cannot fully understand the complexities of local civil wars, and some foreign policy problems have no real resolution. That certainly does apply to Syria. I don't think anyone would suggest there is a more complicated conflict than what we see now in Syria.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to discussing these issues with the Committee and the panel.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Wow, you ended with quite a bombshell over there. Thank you, Ambassador.

Mr. Itani. Thank you, Faysal.

**STATEMENT OF MR. FAYSAL ITANI, SENIOR FELLOW,  
ATLANTIC COUNCIL**

Mr. ITANI. Madam Chairwoman, ranking member, members of the subcommittee, I am honored by this invitation to speak to you about a way forward for U.S. policy in Syria. Now you have my written statement already, and it is quite detailed. What I will try to do now is bring out some of the key points I want to get across, after which I am very eager to hear your questions and feedback.

I personally believe that the five goals mentioned by the administration are valid goals. They are worthy goals. But I also believe that with the exception of one of them they cannot be achieved through the means that Secretary Tillerson outlined. In other words, I think our policy suffers from a very serious mismatch of means and ends. That is the shortest way to put it. The stated ends have been mentioned, but I want to repeat them for the sake of my analysis.

Number one, the lasting defeat of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda supposedly in the entire country. Facilitating the return of refugees. Depriving the regime of weapons of mass destruction, that is actually what it is. And the last two which are the most ambitious, which is weakening Iran and Syria and ending the Civil War in Syria by securing Assad's departure from power.

Now, to achieve all this, I want to highlight the three tools that were mentioned. The first tool was limited U.S. military deployment whose duration was tied to the achievement of these five goals. The second are the stabilization operations, which I presume mean restoring basic security and services. And third is aggressive diplomacy and finally a U.N.-backed election process that would get rid of Assad.

I believe these tools can accomplish one of the five goals, which is to keep ISIS down in eastern Syria so long as we are there. After that I am not sure what happens. And as for the others, al-Qaeda does not operate where we are in Syria or anywhere adjacent to us. It operates in areas that are contested by Turkey, the regime, Russia, Iran, and a slate of other actors. And those are things we explicitly said we don't want to get involved in, so much for al-Qaeda.

Large scale refugee resettlement is not going to happen in Syria without an actual aggressive reconstruction project in the areas we control. Secretary Tillerson has explicitly, and others, have ruled that out actually already. And Assad, you know, Assad is not going to give up his weapons of mass destruction, much less willingly leave power unless there is a military threat to his rule, he is forced out. He is not going to do it through negotiations, and he is not going to do it through elections. Iran cannot really be meaningfully weakened in Syria without a military escalation either. The Iranians are deeply committed, and they have been building assets and equities including tens of thousands of loyal fighters in Syria over the past few years.

Now, the common military thread that runs through this—the common rather missing thread that runs through this, is military

action or military force. I recognize that after 7 years of war partly because we made mistakes, partly because the situation evolved that is no longer very feasible or is much more unattractive than it ever was.

So if we leave that aside it means we have set goals in Syria that we actually cannot meet full stop. And that is a dangerous situation for us to tie ourselves in if we have troops on the ground in Syria and we have committed to those outcomes.

Now, one way out of this, if military force is not an option, is to revise the goals. And I believe we should do that at the very least. Those goals should be much more humble. The first goal is to protect the territory we hold. I think the United States Government needs to be very clear and the White House needs to be very clear that these troops are going to come under attack eventually. We are not going to be allowed to sit down in northeastern Syria as long as we want and dictate the methods and the timing of the conflict.

Second, so long as we are there and we hold this piece of land we need to engage in meaningful governance development and reconstruction beyond basic needs. Why? Because refugees are not going to come back otherwise. Because that is actually a potent counterterrorism tool if it works and is done right. And because I still believe that there is some value in propping something up in part of Syria that is semisuccessful and isn't Assad. I think that still has some value for the long-term future of the country.

Goal number three should be supporting our local partners against ISIS. And yes, that does include the Kurds that have fought with us, but it also includes, and should include, a more powerful influential era of component.

And that feeds into what I think ought to be our fourth goal as difficult and unsavory as it is, which is our restoration of our relationship with Turkey. And that doesn't mean letting the NATO ally do whatever it wants, but it does mean putting Syria's diplomatic effort into getting involved in the conflict between them and the Kurds and diffusing that and from that point using that as a starting point for repairing our alliance. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Itani follows:]

Faysal Itani  
Senior Fellow, The Atlantic Council  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
February 6, 2018  
"Syria: Which Way Forward?"

Madam Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Sub-Committee: I am honored by this invitation to speak to you about the way forward for US policy in Syria. I submit this statement for your consideration.

My statement focuses on the mismatch between the Trump administration's stated goals in Syria, and the means by which it intends to pursue them. My recommendation is that, unless the United States commits to military escalation against regime and Iranian forces in Syria, it should modify its goals to focus on fighting the Islamic State, defending US-held territory, supporting local governance, and mending relations with Turkey.

#### **US Policy in Syria under the Trump Administration**

On January 18, 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined the Trump administration's five goals in Syria in the wake of the Islamic State's defeat as a territorial entity:

1. The lasting defeat of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda
2. Creating conditions for the return of Syrian refugees
3. Eliminating the Assad regime's weapons of mass destruction
4. Weakening Iran in Syria
5. Ending the Syrian civil war through "a UN-led political process [resulting in] a stable, unified, independent Syria, under post-Assad leadership."

Secretary Tillerson identified the administration's three tools for achieving these five goals:

1. A limited US military deployment in Kurdish-controlled parts of Syria - essentially the northeast - partnered with tens of thousands of local fighters.
2. Aggressive diplomacy to advance a political solution through the so-called Geneva process and remove Assad through UN-supervised elections.
3. Stabilization operations in US-controlled areas, including meeting humanitarian needs and restoring basic services.

### **Assessing the Goals**

The Trump administration's five goals in Syria align with US national interests:

The United States has an interest in the lasting defeat of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Both pose terrorist and potential strategic threats in and beyond the region. A US withdrawal today would likely lead to the Islamic State's resurgence, facilitated by the sectarian repression of Sunnis by Iran and the Assad regime.

Creating conditions that allow Syrian refugees to go home is both humane and necessary. Partners like Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon cannot host millions of Syrian refugees indefinitely. Refugees that reach our European allies, while far fewer in number, have contributed to their social and political polarization.

Depriving the Assad regime of weapons of mass destruction is clearly a US interest, although ensuring he does not use them takes priority. Assad has an established record of gassing Syrian civilians; he continues to use chemicals against opposition-controlled areas.

The remaining two goals are diminishing Iranian influence in Syria and ending the Syrian civil war through a political settlement. Although policymakers often disagree over the goals' respective urgency and how to pursue them, they generally and rightly recognize Iran as a US adversary, and a threat to US regional interests and partners. Iran's dramatically expanded influence in Syria presents a direct security threat to Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Assad enables this Iranian influence and refuses a political compromise that might end a conflict that fuels extremism, terrorism, and mass refugee flows. Ending the war in a manner that weakens both Assad and Iran is therefore a valid US interest.

### **A Mismatch between Means and Ends**

All five goals are valid, but only a few can be achieved through the administration's strategy.

The United States defeated the Islamic State by equipping, advising, and supporting local Kurdish-led forces, deploying only a few hundred US troops. Progress was slow and the strategy was complicated by heavy reliance on the YPG. The YPG is linked to the US-designated terrorist group the PKK, which is an enemy of our NATO ally Turkey. This strategy did succeed however, and the Islamic State is unlikely to re-emerge as a serious threat amid a US military presence. That is an achievable goal. Al Qaeda however, is not present in or near US-controlled territory, but located further west in areas contested by Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. It is not clear how a US presence in eastern Syria can affect that.

The prospects of resettling refugees in Syria are mixed. Some refugees will seek safety under a US security umbrella if they can reach it. This can be encouraged by US-led reconstruction efforts in these areas, even if Secretary Tillerson has insisted the United States would limit its efforts to less extensive 'stabilization'. In all cases, refugees will weigh these benefits against expectations of how the current Kurdish-dominated, autocratic authorities in northeast Syria would treat them.

The regime has not used Sarin gas against its people since April 2017, likely due to the punitive US cruise missile strikes that the attack provoked. However it has not shown any intention of giving up these weapons. Indeed, the regime has dodged and subverted international efforts to seize them for years. A US military deployment in parts of Syria will not change that pattern. The regime continues to use chlorine as a weapon in opposition-held parts of Syria despite the robust US presence in the northeast.

The remaining two goals - weakening Iran and ending the civil war through a political settlement - are the most ambitious. They cannot be achieved through the administration's specified tools: a US deployment in the northeast, stabilization operations, and diplomacy.

For one, Iran has fought long and hard for its unprecedentedly strong position in Syria. It must secure the Assad regime to ensure a foothold and ally in the Arab world and supply its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. A US presence in the northeast may keep Iran out of that specific geography, but it would not diminish Iranian influence. Nor would it slow Iran's further entrenchment in 'useful Syria'—the country's economic and demographic core in the Assad-controlled West, or stop the continuing fall of opposition territory to regime and Iranian forces. A US presence adjacent to regime territory may trouble Iran, but that is a nuisance not a danger. Iranian equities in Syria and its nearly-perfected art of asymmetric warfare can manage it. Iran and the tens of thousands of militia fighters it controls in Syria cannot be seriously weakened without military action.

Finally, ending the civil war and removing Assad through a UN-led political process and free elections is not achievable through the stated means. Assad will not negotiate his political monopoly away after killing hundreds of thousands to preserve it. Russia has little incentive and no means to compel him to do so. A combination of Russian air power, Iranian-backed auxiliary forces, and international neglect has allowed Assad to reverse years of losses and all but defeat the insurgency. He is winning the war, and the opposition - which the administration has chosen not to support - is weaker than ever. Assad will not concede while strong what he refused to when he was far weaker. Changing the military balance could alter his calculus, but the administration does not seek to confront him or his Iranian backers, directly or by proxy. Any hypothetical political settlement would simply reflect the opposition's catastrophic military situation and favor Assad.

Elections will not oust Assad either. Even if free and fair elections were possible in Syria - which is doubtful - if Assad wins that would not change the repressive way he governs, or reconcile his adversaries to it. An Assad victory would also undermine the stated goal of weakening Iran. If Assad loses on the other hand, he would not simply concede power and the US administration would not force him to. Nor can the United States use quarrels over constitutions and electoral laws to bog down the regime, Iran, and their Russian supporters in processes and negotiations. Assad and Iran cannot be hampered by something they do not care about. Even if Russia were genuinely interested in legitimizing Assad's military victory through elections, it will always be more interested in preserving his political monopoly by ensuring he wins the war. Pursuing elections in the context of Assad's overwhelming military superiority is a distraction and waste of US credibility and resources.

A US military deployment in northeast Syria will deprive Assad of important strategic assets including water, arable land, oil, and border crossings, even as Iran is forced to subsidize his regime for billions of dollars a year. However, Assad would probably rather see Syria starve than share it with his enemies. Iran will not defund its Syrian client and destroy its regional position. Syria is the linchpin of its regional empire, and despotic regimes are resourceful when fighting wars at their peoples' expense. Economic pressure is a useful tool, but cannot achieve meaningful political change or weaken Iran in Syria without military force.

Of the administration's five identified US goals in Syria, one is very plausible, and two others might be achievable. The remaining two - pertaining to the Assad regime and Iran - are not achievable through the means specified without military escalation. The United States should not commit to policy goals it will not or cannot realize.

### **Obstacles to a Military Escalation**

Transforming the strategic situation in Syria - weakening Iran and removing Assad - is not possible without direct or proxy military action. Years of US mistakes in Syria however have made the military option exceedingly costly and risky. These mistakes have allowed Assad and Iran to accumulate advantages, including Russia's crucial entry into the war, the creation of Iran's vast militia infrastructure, and the deterioration of US-Turkish relations. The United States should not have allowed Assad to commit mass murder for seven years, or use weapons of mass destruction. It should have intervened forcefully to end the war, rather than let it continue long enough for Syria to become a full Iranian client state. Failing to support the moderate Syrian opposition against both Assad and extremists was also a serious error, as was undermining the US alliance with Turkey through neglect and over-reliance on the YPG. These mistakes have narrowed US options and raised the cost and risks of military action in Syria.

With the moderate opposition's defeat and our Arab and Turkish allies' giving up on fighting Assad, the United States has no ready anti-Assad equivalent to Iran and its militia proxies to turn to, and no regional partners ready to fight in Syria either. Saudi Arabia is no longer engaged in Syria. Egypt is more a friend of Assad's than an enemy. The US alliance with Turkey is in shambles. Indeed, every major state actor in Syria - Iran, Russia, and Turkey - is now hostile or distrustful toward the United States. There is no pro-US equivalent to Iran's local militias either: the YPG was effective against the Islamic State with heavy US support, but is not an appropriate tool for confronting Iran or the Syrian regime. The YPG's enemy is Turkey, its priority is regional autonomy, and it has repeatedly cooperated with regime and Iranian forces to further those interests.

Additionally, the latest US National Defense Strategy document identifies great power competition with China and Russia as the principle priorities of the United States. The nuclear threat from North Korea presumably looms large in US strategic thinking as well. Confronting Iran in Syria would require resources, personnel, bandwidth, and domestic political capital, and compete with stated US global priorities. These tensions would need to be reconciled.



Considering these obstacles, it is understandable that the Trump administration has rejected a military solution to the problem of Assad and Iran in Syria. Iran cannot be weakened without military escalation however, a political transition from Assad to democracy is impossible. Unless the administration decides to change its stance on military action, Congress should insist that it revise US goals and means in Syria accordingly.

#### **A Targeted Policy**

Since the administration has rejected military escalation against Assad and Iran, its policy should include narrower goals and the appropriate means:

1. **Train and support local forces to ensure the Islamic State remains weak in US-controlled Syria.** These forces should be expanded or reorganized to ensure sufficient Arab influence and military command as opposed to the current YPG dominance. This will give local security forces legitimacy, deprive the Islamic State of ethnic fault lines to exploit, and allay Turkish concerns about perceived US sponsorship of a hostile YPG-ruled entity in Syria.
2. **Defend US-held territory against regime, Iranian, or Russian aggression.** Any indefinite US deployment adjacent to enemies will trigger eventual military escalation by deeply-committed adversaries such as Assad and Iran. The administration should plan for this and consult with Congress in advance on how to handle it. Under no circumstances should the United States commit to a mission in Syria, only to retreat in the face of foreseeable military or political costs imposed by our enemies.
3. **Strengthen governance and pursue reconstruction in US-controlled areas.** Creating effective, inclusive governance structures incorporating Kurdish-Arab power-sharing can form the basis of an alternative, pro-US, non-Assad regime in Syria. Additionally, although Secretary Tillerson ruled out 'reconstruction' in favor of less ambitious 'stabilization', refugees will not return to a place that is not being rebuilt, while extremism will thrive. Partner governments can share the costs but the United States must lead on this. Governance and reconstruction are potent counter-terrorism tools. The United States should not help rebuild Assad-held Syria, though denying it such help does not provide political leverage against the regime.
4. **De-escalate the Turkey-YPG conflict.** Continued Turkish-YPG conflict threatens the stability of a US-controlled entity and US relations with a NATO ally. The United States should push hard for a Turkish-Kurdish de-escalation by exercising diplomatic pressure on Turkey, leverage over US-trained and equipped Kurdish forces, and increased US support for Arab forces. Official US communication - civilian and military - should refrain from fulsome praise for Turkey's adversary, or accuse it of supporting terrorist groups. The US-YPG partnership is valuable but should be kept in perspective: Turkey is a regional power, a NATO ally, and simply more important.

Achieving these goals would serve the US national interest in Syria at a reasonable level of risk and cost.

**Conclusion**

The United States has found itself with few good options or partners in Syria. This does not mean it should simply abandon all its equities in northeastern Syria to Assad, Iran, and the YPG. Fighting the Islamic State is reason enough to maintain a US presence and support partners in Syria, provided this does not destroy US relations with Turkey. Refugee resettlement and reconstruction serve US security interests. Ending the Syrian war and weakening Iran's rising and robust regional empire however will take more commitment and appetite for risk than the administration has understandably demonstrated.

Only military escalation against Assad can accomplish real political change or meaningfully weaken Iran in Syria. Otherwise, Iranian interests in Syria will be secure, and the country's population zones and critical infrastructure will remain under regime control, including the capital Damascus. The administration should not expect otherwise. Nor should Congress or the American public. The United States should tie its military deployment in Syria to goals it is willing and able to realize: supporting local partners against the Islamic State; defending US-held territory; establishing effective governance; and fixing the alliance with Turkey. These goals are worthwhile and achievable.

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Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much.  
Mr. Lister?

**STATEMENT OF MR. CHARLES LISTER, SENIOR FELLOW, DIRECTOR OF COUNTER-EXTREMISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM, MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE**

Mr. LISTER. Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the committee, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you today.

Nearly 3 weeks ago Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out a vision in which U.S. interests would be secured by achieving five grand objectives in Syria. Unfortunately, his speech raised many more questions than it provided answers. Today there is simply no available path to achieve the stated objectives and no actual strategy has emerged.

Nearly 7 years of conflict has produced countless threats to American interests, including multiple wars, militarizing hundreds of thousands, fueling terrorism on an unprecedented level, normalizing chemical warfare, sparking huge refugee flows that have cripple neighbors and destabilized Europe. It has propelled Russia back to the Middle East and empowered Iranian expansionism like never before.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Syria is also not winding down. The country remains mired by multiple conflict fault lines, none of which are close to resolution. The intensity of fighting may have receded, but the mechanism used for doing so known as deescalation zones whereby Russian design intended to allow continued lower level violence. As a result, the regime has continued to indiscriminately bomb and methodically recapture strategically important territory strengthening its hand further.

The Trump administration's cessation of support to the entire vetted opposition last summer was a vitally important cog in this Russian design. By lending its support to a Russian initiative designed to strengthen the regime, the Trump administration has directly abetted Assad's survival, Iran's expansion and threat to Israel, and continued civilian displacement.

With ISIS' caliphate all but gone Syria's various root causes of conflict are now re-erupting. Fighting is intensifying, and battle fronts are reopening. Within this environment the U.S. should consider four policy avenues.

First, northeastern Syria. Here, we must significantly expand stabilization in areas liberated from ISIS. The task ahead is huge, and it is already taking too long. We must urgently raise more funds for stabilization and reconstruction to encourage refugee and IDP returns to establish a form of governance superior to the regime and to prevent further extremism.

Doubling down here does carry risks. Our SDF partners remain dominated by the YPG, which is unavoidably linked to the PKK, a designated terrorist organization and a direct threat to our NATO ally Turkey. While it might be impossible to sever the YPG's links to the PKK it ought to be possible to limit its use of PKK symbols and rhetoric and to expel non-Syrians from its ranks.

The U.S. should also engage with Ankara and the YPG to negotiate a mutually acceptable detente potentially within a broader

Turkey PKK ceasefire. The U.S. should also continue to train and Arabize the SDF at ground and command levels. This strategy also risks confrontation with pro-regime forces who will perceive our troops and the SDF as threats and against whom they will inevitably seek to conduct repeated probing attacks. The U.S. should respond to these clearly and defensively.

Second, terrorism. Although we dealt a hammered blow to ISIS, it remains active in several areas of Syria. We must sustain our mission and neutralize any signs of ISIS reemergence. We must also clearly accuse the regime of its shortcomings in confronting ISIS and where provable highlight its new role in providing it with space to operate anew.

While we fought ISIS, al-Qaeda and like-minded groups have thrived. Former al-Qaeda affiliate HTS now commands roughly 15,000 fighters and dominates the northwest. HTS is focused on localism and controlling territory makes it a dangerous spoiler whose existence presents a safe haven for global jihadists. Alongside HTS then is an even more dangerous reality, a tight-knit covert circle of two to 300 veteran al-Qaeda loyalists dedicated to the global antiwest cause. This looks worryingly similar to the al-Qaeda Taliban relationship before 9/11.

HTS' real vulnerabilities lie in its lack of popularity and credibility. So confronting it is about out competing its ability to exert ground influence. There are things we can do to better equip locals to sweep the rug from under HTS' feet and to create conditions in which kinetic opportunities may later become available.

Third, Iran. Although diminishing Iranian influence is unrealistic, the U.S. can constrain its ability to gain further and contain its threat to Israel and Jordan. To achieve the latter we should build a network of self-defense forces in southwestern Syria using our preexisting relations with vetted southern opposition groups. These forces would defend against any Iranian move closer to Israel and Jordan while also blocking further regime consolidation.

We should also continue escalatory sanctioning of Iranian-affiliated bodies and figures involved in illegal and terrorist activities in Syria. Militia groups links to the Quds force should be designated and excluded from internationally negotiated ceasefires. We should also consider joining Israel in conducting strikes on flagrant threats or strategic weapons transfers by Iran to groups like Hezbollah.

Fourth, chemical weapons. The U.S. has positioned itself as an arbiter and enforcer here since 2013 with mixed record. Continued chemical weapons use must be met with measured but escalatory consequences, particularly against Syria's Air Force and chemical weapons research facilities. More sanctions should also be deployed and further chemical use exploited as leverage within broader political dynamics.

To conclude, if anyone believes that Bashar al-Assad is the key to stabilizing Syria they have learned literally nothing from the country's recent history. Accepting today's status quo will also not stabilize Syria. Trumpeting grand goals without the means to achieve them guarantees failure, and giving up all together only ensures an eventual need to return to confront the threats that will result.

While there is indeed no panacea for Syria there are options available to protect our existing stakes, to defend against threats and to shake interim solutions and arrangements that protect our vital interests.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lister follows:]

**Written Testimony of Charles R. Lister  
Senior Fellow & Director of Countering Extremism & Terrorism, Middle East Institute  
To the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Middle East & North Africa Sub-Committee  
February 6, 2018**

**Hearing on – “Syria: Which Way Forward?”**

Mrs. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

First, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today, and to address the situation in Syria and how U.S. policy can best approach Syria’s complex but strategically important challenges.

Nearly three weeks ago, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out in some detail what he termed “the way forward for the United States in Syria.” What then followed was a five-part strategic vision, in which U.S. national security interests would be best secured by achieving five grand – and I should say, laudable – objectives: (1) the lasting defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda and any other terrorist threat to the U.S. at home or overseas; (2) the resolution of Syria’s broader conflict through a UN-led political process that secures the departure of President Bashar al-Assad; (3) the diminishment of Iranian influence in Syria; (4) the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced peoples; and (5) a Syria free of weapons of mass destruction.

Broadly speaking, this closely mirrors how the Obama administration publicly framed its own policy on Syria, and in that sense, not much has changed. However, the Obama administration’s handling of Syria was a tale of tragedy and frustration – a story of opportunities missed, deals not done, disasters not averted, and of influence and credibility lost. So, will this, apparently new U.S. strategy be any different in its implementation? Much attention was rightfully given to Secretary Tillerson’s declaration that the U.S. “will maintain a military presence in Syria” and that “it is vital for the U.S. to remain engaged in Syria... a total withdrawal of American personnel at this time would restore Assad and continue his brutal treatment against his own people.”

While the Trump administration should be praised for bringing some policy clarity to an issue of significant strategic concern, Secretary Tillerson’s speech raised many more questions than it provided answers. As things stand today, there is simply no foreseeable path available to the U.S. to achieve the five stated objectives. Moreover, the Trump administration has provided no evidence that it has developed a meaningful strategy to match its grand goals, and has revealed no plans to deploy the resources that would be necessary to pursue them. Continuing to declare

such grand goals without deploying even close to the necessary means to achieve them will only continue to erode American influence and credibility in the region.

#### **SITREP: The Syrian Crisis**

Nearly seven years of war has ravaged Syria and produced countless secondary threats to U.S. national security interests. In addition to leaving half a million dead, conflict in Syria has also forced nearly 12 million from their homes, with more than 13 million people now assessed to be in need of humanitarian assistance. Syria's collapse into chaos has produced multiple wars within a single country's boundaries and militarized hundreds of thousands on all sides. Weapons proliferation into and out of Syria will be a concern for decades to come and the array of terrorist groups borne out of and hardened by Syrian battle should be well known by now: from the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda to Hezbollah and the dozens of Shia militant groups commanded by Iran. Taken together today, those terroristic groups likely total at least 75,000-100,000 in Syria alone, but taken one-by-one, they pose differing but equally dangerous threats.

The crisis in Syria has also witnessed a shockingly regular use of chemical weapons, with monitors now accounting for between 198 and 326 suspected chemical attacks in Syria since 2012 – at least 95% of which were directly linked to regime attacks. Moreover, the UN, the OPCW, French intelligence and several other governments have now determined conclusively that the regime has used Sarin gas on multiple occasions, both before and since the Russian-mediated deal to remove Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles.

Syria's crisis has also had damaging geopolitical effects, as unprecedented refugee flows have crippled America's strategic partners in the region and sparked a wave of debilitating domestic challenges to our European allies. Our laser-like focus on combating ISIS while largely ignoring the conflict's other dynamics has now opened up the unfortunate reality of a fellow NATO ally fighting our own counter-ISIS partners, the Kurdish YPG. Russia meanwhile, has exploited the vacuum left behind by American indecision and emerged as an increasingly influential player in the Middle East and beyond. Iran on the other hand, is more powerful than ever, with its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps now operating a professional, transnational network of potentially capable militias across the region, operating in direct competition to U.S. interests and influence. Hezbollah may now be more powerful than many Eastern European militaries and together, Iran's array of proxies may now pose a more serious threat to Israel than the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon.

All of this has happened because of Syria. It is a deeply concerning reality. And yet at no time throughout the entire Syrian conflict has America devoted sufficient attention or resources to

dealing with the root causes that drive the fighting that produces these dangerous effects. The Trump administration looks set to replicate its predecessor's tendency for strong rhetoric and only minimal action – in effect, a meek policy of containment that repeatedly sees us react to events slower than they occur. Three more years of that will only produce more threats to American security and more damage to our interests, influence, and credibility abroad.

Conventional wisdom now tells us that the war, or wars, in Syria are winding down. But this is wrong. Syria today remains a country mired by countless conflict fault-lines, none of which are close to resolution. The intensity of fighting may have receded over the past year, but this was not because any root causes or conflict drivers were resolved – rather, those root causes were aggressively pushed aside while the world focused on dealing with a symptom of the conflict: ISIS. The mechanism used for doing so, known as de-escalation zones, was by Russian design intended to allow for continued, lower-level violence within a context in which external states had already agreed to cease military support to the mainstream opposition. The Trump administration's total cessation of support to over 70 vetted opposition groups with whom we had worked since early-2013 was a crucially important cog in this Russian design. The result of these de-escalation zones has become increasingly clear over time, as the Assad regime has continued to indiscriminately bomb and methodically recapture small amounts of strategically important territory, slowly strangling the opposition and strengthening its hand further.

It is important here to place this in some policy context. By lending its public and private support to a Russian-led initiative designed specifically to strengthen Assad's position yet further, the Trump administration has directly abetted Assad's survival, Iran's expansion and threat to Israel, and continued civilian displacement. We are therefore no closer to a political settlement. In fact, Western support for Russia's de-escalation design along with its bloody consequences, has been understood on the ground to represent Western support, or at minimum acceptance, of Assad's long-term legitimacy. Whatever Secretaries of State or other officials might say in front of podiums about justice, human rights and removing Assad, the facts on the ground are what determine the viability of negotiations and those facts stand starkly in opposition to our rhetoric.

With ISIS's territorial Caliphate now effectively a thing of the past, all major actors in Syria are shifting their attention to determining future dynamics. The result is the re-eruption of Syria's various root sources of conflict that had until now been swept aside by the prioritization of the anti-ISIS fight. From north to south and east to west, fighting is intensifying and battlefronts are re-opening – all of which underlines further the importance of dealing with the Syrian issue more holistically and with a prioritization where possible given to root causes, rather than symptoms.

#### **Syria: [Realistic] Policy Options**



When it comes to determining U.S. policy options, one must first acknowledge four fundamental truths:

1. Syria will remain at least partially unstable for years to come and as such, policy focus should be placed on stabilizing where possible and leveraging legitimate and acceptable actors to represent local sources of credible authority within an extended interim period.
2. U.S. policy since 2011 has been too limited in scope and scale to have acquired the necessary leverage to definitively achieve all five objectives set out by Secretary Tillerson on January 18. The U.S. must work within the realistic boundaries of what is possible.
3. U.S. influence over certain dynamics and actors in Syria could be enhanced, were U.S. policy to focus more intensively on securing discernible improvements in issues like civilian protection, humanitarian aid access, prisoner releases etc.
4. Terrorism will continue to spawn and emanate from Syria until the root causes of instability, political and social disenfranchisement and intra-communal violence are dealt with; principally the issue of political leadership in Damascus and the fate of the Assad regime.

With these fundamental truths in mind, the U.S. has four principal avenues for possible policy action:

*1. Northeastern Syria:*

- The U.S.'s greatest source of influence in Syria is in the country's northeast, where our principal partner in the war on ISIS – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – now rules supreme. Having removed ISIS from almost all of its territory by early-2018, attention has rightly turned to stabilizing populated areas of northeast Syria in order to (1) prevent conditions for a return of extremism and to (2) establish a credible alternative form of governance to compete with the regime. However, the task ahead here is huge. In Raqqa city alone, the demining effort is likely to take at least another six months and 80% of the city is damaged or destroyed. Water and electricity services remain all but nonexistent and no major international funds have emerged to sustain large-scale stabilization let alone reconstruction in areas liberated from ISIS.
  - o The U.S. needs to urgently raise more funds from within the international community – centered within the Global Coalition Against ISIS – to accelerate these stabilization initiatives. Northern Syria remains deeply unstable and the U.S. must ensure that sufficient work is done to provide the space for refugee and IDP return within a territorial region under U.S. guardianship.

- Pursuing a strategy of remaining in the northeast by-with-and-through our SDF partners brings with it a number of significant risks, which must be acknowledged and dealt with. The greatest risk pertains to the SDF and Turkey:
  - The SDF is dominated in number and command by the Kurdish militant group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that has fought a decades-long war with NATO ally Turkey. Turkey has consistently considered U.S. support to the YPG as an existential national security threat and has twice invaded northern Syria to pre-empt or block a consolidation of that threat along its border – as recently as January 2018, shortly after the U.S. announcement that the SDF would become a “Border Security Force.”
  - The Department of Defense is fighting an unwinnable battle in trying to convince Turkey that the YPG is not the PKK. After all, the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) labelled it as such until we started working with the YPG in 2014, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) resumed its labelling of the YPG as a component of the PKK in 2018. Instead, the U.S. government should acknowledge the nature of our ally in northeastern Syria and seek to ameliorate its most problematic aspects. While it may not be possible to definitively sever the YPG's links to the PKK, it ought to be possible to limit the group's use of PKK symbols and strategic rhetoric and expel non-Syrian fighters from its ranks. The greatest and most challenging objective would be for the U.S. to engage intensively with Ankara and the YPG to negotiate a mutually-acceptable détente, potentially within the broader grounds of a Turkey-PKK ceasefire. Should the U.S. demonstrate a clear and consistent ability to control the YPG's provocative behaviors and to limit its ideological indoctrination of northeastern Syria's communities, and to make it concretely clear to Turkey that it does not plan to abandon the YPG/SDF, we may at least stand a chance of avoiding an all-out Turkish-Kurdish conflict across all of northern Syria.
  - The U.S. should also continue its efforts to “Arabize” the SDF, particularly in the many Arab majority areas in which the SDF now operates. Much progress has been made in this regard in recent months, but the YPG still retains a substantial majority of the SDF's key leadership and local command functions. Until that changes, the SDF risks continuing to appear as an organization driven by YPG interests and backed by malleable minority groups and Arab tribes.
- In pursuing a strategy of doubling down in the northeast, the U.S. also risks an eventual coming to blows with pro-regime forces, who will perceive a consolidated U.S. partner force and a continued U.S. troop presence as a threat. This confrontation is most likely to come in the form of repeated, small-scale incursions by pro-regime forces, who will seek

to test U.S. defensive lines and our willingness to respond in force. The U.S. must acknowledge this likelihood up front and prepare to implement necessary responses. Within such a scenario, the U.S. should determinedly protect its assets – perceived weakness or risk aversion will in all likelihood eventually result in slow but systematic pro-regime gains. The negative fate of the U.S. military facility in al-Tanf in southeastern Syria should serve as a lesson in this respect.

*2. Terrorism: ISIS & Al-Qaeda:*

- The U.S. has dealt a hammer blow to ISIS's Caliphate, having recaptured 98% of the terrorist group's territory in Iraq and Syria. However, ISIS remains active in several pockets of Syria and American aircraft continue to strike ISIS targets in the country's east. In western Syria meanwhile, the Assad regime appears to have repeatedly allowed – or potentially even facilitated – the movement of ISIS militants through regime-held territory and onto new frontlines on which it can fight the opposition. ISIS also remains active in a small pocket of territory in southwestern Syria and there are indications that it has infiltrated opposition territory in the northwest. ISIS has also gone underground, following orders by its senior leadership several months ago to prepare the ground for a new phase of guerrilla war that would eventually catalyze another recovery alike what was seen between 2010-2014.
  - The U.S. must therefore continue to monitor ISIS activities across Syria and be prepared to attack its terrorist forces using pre-deployed ground and air assets wherever possible. The U.S. must also be clear to accuse the Assad regime of its shortcomings in confronting ISIS, and where provable, highlight its role in providing ISIS with the space to operate anew. Assad has nearly two decades of documented history engaging in such activity, so its continuation should surprise nobody.
  - The Department of Defense must also further enhance its train and equip efforts with the SDF and significantly expand – with international assistance – stabilization and interim reconstruction efforts in liberated areas of northeastern Syria (as laid out earlier). Having staked out a claim in such a valuable area of Syria, the U.S. must now meet its critically important responsibilities of establishing a sense of normalcy, stability and recovery so as to prevent any possible return of extremists and extremism.
  - The U.S. must maintain intensive intelligence collection efforts in Syria and its neighboring region, while continuing to enhance levels of intelligence sharing with coalition partners and allies, so as to ensure ISIS cannot maintain effective external attack planning. The destruction of ISIS's territorial Caliphate has been an important victory, but the establishment of a discernible Caliphate by itself

established a reality in ISIS supporters' minds that may prove irreversible. The threat of external attacks – planned or inspired – will likely remain critical for years to come.

- The U.S. must also recognize the intrinsic connection between Iraq and Syria for the counter-ISIS mission. Shortcomings in Iraq will benefit ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and vice-versa.
- While the U.S. has successfully degraded ISIS in Syria, Al-Qaeda and likeminded groups have been largely left alone and provided the space to thrive. Today, the former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commands approximately 15,000 jihadist fighters, mostly in Syria's northwest. HTS remains the militarily dominant actor in Idlib province, though its social influence is sorely lacking, having assumed that dominance by violently suppressing the mainstream opposition. Gone are the days of HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, being a widely popular and accepted movement - but that does not yet take away from HTS's brute power. HTS remains overwhelmingly focused on Syria specific dynamics – the global jihad and attacking the West is not on its agenda for now. Therefore, the threat it poses is different: it represents a dangerous spoiler that will continue to feed off of continued anti-regime sentiments within the broader opposition, and its continued jihadist nature and focus on territorial control and governance means its existence presents a viable safe-haven in which jihadists immediately concerned with external operations can operate more freely.
- Following HTS's very public falling out with Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda loyalists have coalesced into a much smaller circle numbering approximately 200-300 militants. This loyalist clique consists primarily of veteran Al-Qaeda members, senior Al-Qaeda leaders and committed, foreign jihadists from across the Middle East and further afield – likely including Western passport holders. Although these Al-Qaeda loyalists have held HTS in particularly low regard since their breakup, a delicate détente exists between them, which allows for Al-Qaeda's continued, but more covert operation in northwestern Syria. This arrangement is akin to the complex and often uncomfortable relationship between the Taliban (like HTS) and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan prior to 9/11.
  - The U.S. has minimal on-the-ground influence in northwestern Syria, particularly since the Trump administration's severing of all assistance to vetted opposition groups in the region. However, dealing effectively and sustainably with the HTS problem does not mean using kinetic, counter-terrorism means. Instead, the U.S. must recognize that confronting HTS means outcompeting its ability to exert influence on the ground. Like its predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS is heavily dependent on continued conflict with the Assad regime – a total and genuine ceasefire in northwestern Syria would represent a serious challenge to its long-term influence, especially when combined with continued external support to civil

bodies that administer services and governance activities in rivalry to HTS. Providing a semblance of stability and giving anti-HTS civilian councils the ability to provide for their communities would remove HTS's reason for being grudgingly accepted on the ground. It would also make further HTS attacks on mainstream opposition groups, civilian councils and other linked bodies a risk likely not worth considering. HTS still remains a primarily local movement, whose real vulnerabilities lie in its lack of popularity and credibility. There are things the U.S. can do to better equip locals to sweep the rug from under HTS's feet and create the conditions in which military opportunities to counter its most extremist wings could become available.

- Meanwhile, the U.S. must also maintain an active intelligence effort (both on the ground and in the air) over northwestern Syria in order to strike veteran Al-Qaeda figures and individuals known or suspected to be involved in external operations planning. The emerging presence of a small, covert Al-Qaeda loyalist clique in Idlib is a deeply dangerous development – particularly given its lack of transparency.

### 3. Iran:

- The conflict in Syria has been an invaluable boon to Iran's expansionist vision for the Middle East region, with gains made there and in Iraq having sealed a de facto land-bridge spanning between Tehran in the east and the Mediterranean in the west. In Syria alone, Iran has direct and indirect control over an estimated 150,000-man fighting force, encompassing Syrian nationals, as well as tens of thousands of Iraqis, Lebanese, Pakistanis, Afghans and Yemenis. Using the model perfected in Lebanon, Iran is now putting steps into place to ensure that it maintains control of a sizeable, battle-hardened paramilitary structure in Syria that runs parallel to the central state. Iran and its IRGC have also invested heavily in regime areas of Syria and played a role in shifting the demographic nature of some strategically important regions of the country. This is also the case in Iraq. Iran has also constructed and taken partial-charge of several ballistic missile factories in western Syria and rumor persists that Hezbollah may be receiving training in Syria in the use of chemical weapons. Iranian and Hezbollah officials have made it patently clear what this means for Israel – the next war, whenever it happens, will be fought on two fronts (from southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria) and encompass a fighting force many times larger than ever before. Whenever that next conflict occurs, Israel will face a very significant military challenge and may even temporarily lose control of territory – risking a domestic political crisis.
- The U.S. may have the means to roll back Iran's influence and power in Syria, but it clearly does not have the will – either in government or within the population. After all, accomplishing such an objective would require a very serious military effort necessitating

a military deployment tens of times larger than is currently in Syria. However, the U.S. does have opportunities to constrain Iran's ability to gain further from its role in Syria and to contain the extent to which it can exploit its newfound influence.

- The U.S. has significant strategic interests in protecting its allies Israel and Jordan from Iranian expanding influence in southwestern Syria. One potent mechanism for doing so would be to exploit our five-year-old relationships with several dozen vetted Free Syrian Army opposition groups in the southwest in order to establish a network of local self-defense forces which would protect their villages and towns from attempts by pro-regime forces to advance. These units' responsibility would be strictly defensive as the U.S. objective would be to create a defensive buffer and deterrent that better guaranteed that Iran-backed forces could not approach Israeli or Jordanian territory any further. The existing de-escalation zone agreement in the area is far from sufficient and has been repeatedly tested and violated by pro-regime militiamen. A small level of U.S. and allied SOF presence in southwestern Syria would be a necessary component of this anti-Iran strategy, though training could take place in Jordan if deemed necessary.
- The U.S. should also continue its escalatory sanctioning of Iran and Iran-linked bodies and figures involved in illegal and terroristic activities in Syria. This effort should more clearly encompass an effort to designate those Iran-backed militant groups in Syria that are clearly linked to the IRGC's Quds Force, to sanction their leaders and to ensure that any negotiated arrangements on the ground (ceasefires, de-escalation zones etc.) specifically exclude those groups just like Al-Qaeda, HTS or ISIS are excluded. Until now, even Hezbollah – a designated terrorist organization – has been included as an acknowledged, and thus legitimate actor within arrangements negotiated and blessed in part by the U.S. government. Such inconsistent application of terrorism designations only serves to strengthen the very groups our government is meant to be constraining.
- Another path of potential U.S. action would be to join Israel in conducting targeted air strikes on especially flagrant threats or strategic weapons transfers by Iran to illegal militant groups like Hezbollah. An overt U.S. role in such actions would serve to enhance the deterrent effect considerably, while offering only minimal additional justification for an Iranian response.

#### 4. Chemical Weapons:

- Despite the U.S.-Russian deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, the Assad regime has continued to use Sarin gas in attacks on opposition areas of Syria, most recently in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017. The regime has also continued to use chlorine gas for use in improvised chemical attacks on civilian areas. Such criminal acts

demonstrate not only that the Assad regime has repeatedly violated internationally-negotiated agreements and laws of war, but that his external patrons, Russia and Iran, are turning a blind eye and often covering for his use of chemical weapons. Iranian artillery rockets, for example, are being used by pro-regime forces to launch chlorine gas at besieged civilian communities in a Damascus suburb – five of those attacks have taken place in 2018, alone. Given the scale and international nature of pro-regime militia presence in Syria, the U.S. should also be concerned about the potential proliferation of chemical weapons use and experience beyond Syria's borders.

- The U.S. has a responsibility to continue to uphold and enforce international norms with regards to the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons. Having first stepped in and signed a deal with Russia in September 2013 that we now know to have been violated, and then having utilized military means to punish another use of chemical weapons in April 2017, the U.S. has established itself as an arbiter and enforcer. Continued chemical weapons use by pro-regime forces must be met with measured, but escalatory consequences – particularly the targeting of Syria's air force and military and scientific research facilities known to be linked to chemical weapons activities. Individuals linked to chemical weapons use and research should similarly be identified publicly and targeted by sanctions.
- Beyond immediate kinetic and economic responses, the U.S. should also continue its efforts to exploit the regime's continued use of chemicals and chemical weapons as leverage against Russia within the broader Syrian political dynamic.

These four areas present specific and necessary policy opportunities for the U.S. to secure important national security interests in Syria using realistic and available means at our disposal. The U.S. government must urgently accept that allowing the status quo to continue will not mean a stabilization of Syria and that by extension means the U.S. will continue to face the dangerous secondary effects of the conflict: terrorism; refugee flows and civilian displacement; chemical weapons use and proliferation; weapons proliferation; Iranian expansionism and aggression; Russian geopolitical competition etc.

The Trump administration's increasing investment in the likelihood of a political process in Geneva demonstrating significant results is based on false assumptions. There is still no indication that any aspect of the UN-led process in Geneva is shaped in such a way as to (1) succeed or (2) to lead to a representative settlement that ceases fighting, interim or otherwise. Rather than choosing to invest heavily in a process designed to secure long-term fixes to a currently unsolvable problem, the U.S. would be better positioned to focus on interim solutions and arrangements that protect our interests. In so doing, the U.S. government should acknowledge

that Syria is likely to remain at least partially unstable and divided for many years to come and the best chance of protecting U.S. interests lies in protecting those interests that we have secured thus far and confronting where possible the threats that challenge our most vital interests. The U.S. may not have the will to force the removal of the Assad regime, but it should also acknowledge our interests in ensuring that it does not wrestle back control of the rest of Syria – that scenario guarantees a continuation of the worst-case reality faced since 2011.



**STATEMENT OF MARA KARLIN, PH.D., ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR  
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FENSE FOR STRATEGY AND FORCE DEVELOPMENT)**

Ms. KARLIN. Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Syria with you today.

In 2012, 1 year into the Syria uprising, I testified before the subcommittee and I said the following: The United States knows what it does not want in Syria, but getting to what it does want the end of the Assad regime will be messy, difficult, and unsatisfying. The outcome in Syria is not evident today, but I can say with some confidence how it will not end. It will not end with Bashar al-Assad voluntarily stepping aside or choosing exile. It will not end with him making sufficient reforms to enable a transparent and free Syrian state. Let me be clear, continued oppression and violence in Syria will continue.

Looking back, it appears that grim assessment may have even been too bright. The situation in Syria today is a tragedy of epic proportions, which can make it difficult to take a sober view. Nevertheless, such a view must acknowledge three crucial dynamics going forward.

First, Assad won his war to stay in power. Granted, he rules a challenging, fragile, and fragmented Syria, one where violence will not cease in the coming years, nor will efforts to unseat him.

Second, the situation in Syria is a proxy war and a much larger geostrategic game, and any assessments of the dynamics and attendant policy recommendations must take that into account. Much like Lebanon's Civil War a nasty internecine conflict with countless casualties that lasted 15 years, the situation in Syria today is further complicated by a dizzying array of actors pursuing divergent interests in partnership with competing groups. The roles of states like Russia, Iran, and Turkey and their increasing collaboration stand out.

And third, the easy part is over. A number of disparate parties involved in the Syria conflict internal to Syria regionally and globally largely agreed that ISIS must be crushed. While in some ways the next phase of countering ISIS militarily as it goes underground and politically to ensure a capable successor does not fill its place will be tougher. This emphasis on militarily defeating ISIS enabled these powers to put tricky issues like reconciliation, rebuilding, and governance on the back burner. So the fundamental debate for Washington today is whether to focus on counterterrorism or broader geopolitical affairs in Syria.

In recent years the United States overwhelmingly and deliberately prioritized Syria as a counterterrorism problem. This narrow focus by its very nature informed how the United States conducted its role in the conflict and with whom it chose to cooperate. It facilitated a very successful counter ISIS effort, but this approach had other implications, namely that the United States effectively tolerated Assad's continued rule and largely condoned Russian and Iranian efforts.

My uppermost concern is security. As ISIS continues to lose territory the battle space in Syria is shrinking, increasing the risk of confrontation among entities there. The U.S. military's mission in Syria has been alternately described by senior U.S. officials as present and focused on bringing stability, dangerously vague terms.

Is it focused only on finishing the fight against ISIS? How much will it go after al-Qaeda remnants? To what extent is it there to push back on Iran, to fight the Assad regime? To train, equip and advise violent nonstate actors as they seek to do so? What about the Russians?

Like the U.S. Marines sent back to Beirut in 1982 with a similarly unclear mission, the residual U.S. force presence in Syria may be just enough to get us into trouble but unlikely to accomplish very much. We need clarity, not just for the American people but frankly for our adversaries, our competitors and our partners in Syria, too.

Whom is the U.S. military willing to fight? For whom is it willing to put American lives on the line? Research I conducted for my book, "Building Militaries in Fragile States," suggest findings that are translatable to U.S. collaboration with violent nonstate Syrian actors. Efforts to train and equip these groups are fundamentally political, not technical exercises. Building an effective fighting force requires more than supplying training and equipment, which has been and will continue to be insufficient to meet our declared political goals.

A narrow approach distance from key political issues waste time, effort, and resources. It is fundamentally flawed. These forces depend heavily on legitimacy, so transforming them requires the United States to become deeply involved in their sensitive military affairs.

Supporting violent nonstate actors in Syria requires U.S. policymakers to have a clear-eyed assessment of the goals and likely outcomes of U.S. military assistance. Simply put, the United States must be cautious of our tactical and operational actions driving policy and blinding us to the geostrategic picture.

As the subcommittee's members examine the way forward in Syria, I urge you to ask the following questions of the Departments of State and Defense. Does U.S. policy toward Syria prioritize counterterrorism or larger geopolitical challenges? What is the U.S. military doing in Syria? Why and on what basis? What is its mission, rules of engagement, red lines, and how are these being communicated to Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime, Hezbollah and other violent nonstate actors, including U.S. partners. And what is the nature of the U.S. military's relationship with and commitment to violent nonstate actors in Syria.

In conclusion, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look toward to answering any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Karlin follows:]

Testimony of Mara Karlin, Ph.D.  
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 House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
 Hearing on Syria: Which Way Forward?  
 February 6, 2018

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to discuss Syria with you today.<sup>1</sup>

### Looking Back

In 2012, one year into the Syria uprising, I testified before this Subcommittee and said the following: “The United States knows what it does *not* want in Syria. But getting to what it does want—the end of the Asad regime—will be messy, difficult, and unsatisfying. The outcome in Syria is not evident today, but I can say with some confidence how it will not end. It will not end with Bashar al-Asad voluntarily stepping aside, or choosing exile. It will not end with him making sufficient reforms to enable a transparent and free Syrian state. Let me be clear: continued oppression and violence in Syria will continue.” Looking back, it appears that grim assessment may have even been too bright.

In the years since, we have seen Asad’s continued reign over much of Syria, and he has very much lived up to his reputation as a venal, vicious, and murderous thug. We have seen civil war erupt across much of the country, the cynical manipulation and destabilization of Syria by outsiders, and the horrific rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). With the support of Tehran, Hizballah, and in particular, Moscow, the rotten regime in Damascus has stayed entrenched. The ghastly humanitarian costs of the war keep rising, to include the largest refugee crisis in the world emanating from a region already suffering in a multitude of ways.

### Looking Forward

The situation in Syria is a tragedy of epic proportions, which can make it difficult to take a sober view. Nevertheless, such a view must acknowledge three crucial dynamics looking forward:

- 1) First, Asad won his war to stay in power. Granted, he rules a challenging, fragile, and fragmented Syria; one where violence will not cease in the coming years nor will efforts to unseat him. Despite the emphasis on Syrian unity and territorial integrity enshrined in the Geneva Communiqué, in United National Security Council Resolutions, and in statements by numerous regional actors, zones of control are gradually solidifying across Syria, making de facto partition more likely. Partition is not a stable end state; it will be characterized by continued violence. Surely the regime in Damascus will seek to regain

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this testimony are excerpted from the following: Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Mara Karlin, “Why Military Assistance Programs Disappoint: Minor Tools Can’t Solve Major Problems,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017. Mara Karlin and Melissa Dalton, “How Should the Pentagon Reshape Its Mideast Posture? Four Indicators to Watch,” *Defense One*, January 20, 2018.

control over all of Syria, but doing so will be a difficult and costly effort. There exists a surfeit of worrisome implications of Asad staying in power. Among them include the shattering of any lingering expectations for a different, more open, and democratic Syria. Asad's continued use of chemical weapons demonstrates that he hasn't been deterred whatsoever from committing atrocities. And, opponents of Iran and Hizballah have warily realized that countering them cannot be a halfhearted affair. They are not pushovers and, as the continued bloodshed in Syria underscores, are willing to sacrifice mightily to protect their interests.

- 2) Second, the situation in Syria is a proxy war in a much larger geostrategic game, and any assessments of the dynamics and attendant policy recommendations must take that into account. Much like Lebanon's civil war, a nasty internecine conflict with countless casualties that lasted 15 years, the situation in Syria today is further complicated by a dizzying array of actors pursuing divergent interests in partnership with competing groups. The roles of Russia, Iran, and Turkey—and their increasing collaboration—stand out. Both Moscow and Tehran's use of force in Syria is heinous. After spending much of the last decade modernizing its military, Russia has used Syrian territory as its tactical and operational testing ground while propping up the Asad regime. Its efforts bought more than bases in the Middle East; they also bought Moscow a permanent seat at the table in any negotiations to end the war, and increased influence more broadly in the region. Just a few years ago, one did not overwhelmingly focus on “whither Moscow” when analyzing regional developments; today, it would be foolhardy not to do so. Nevertheless, as Asad grows confident, Russia's role in Syria may become knottier.

Iran, despite profound and persistent domestic political and economic vulnerabilities, has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to its mission in Syria, increasingly purchasing another strategic border with Israel. Working by, with, and through Hizballah, Iranian power projection across the Middle East has skyrocketed. Both Iran and Hizballah are entrenched in Syria, which will make any U.S. efforts to counter their regional influence that much harder.

Turkey, who has been turning away from the west for years, and with whom U.S. views are increasingly diverging, further complicates the picture in Syria. For a period of time, Turkey and the United States saw Syria through a somewhat common frame: counter-ISIS. That frame is blurring as the fight against ISIS winds down and with it comes serious questions about the justification for future U.S. support to the Syrian Kurds. The conflict between Turkey and the YPG in northern Syria threatens not only to distract from efforts to conclusively defeat ISIS; it also risks a confrontation with U.S. forces that would be extremely dangerous for NATO. While debating the circumstances under which two NATO allies may both invoke Article V is academic for some, the increasing salience of that debate is troubling. Indeed, Turkey's drift toward Russia, particularly evidenced by its recent arms purchases, highlights just how far this NATO ally has fallen.

- 3) Third, the “easy” part is over. A number of disparate parties involved in the Syria conflict—internal to Syria, regionally, and globally—largely agreed that ISIS must be crushed. It's difficult to list another national security challenge that has brought together

such radically dissimilar entities like the United States, Russia, Iran, the Asad regime, and Hizballah, among many others. To be sure, parochial interests for fighting ISIS varied among these actors. And, in some ways, the next phase of countering ISIS—militarily as it goes underground and politically to ensure a capable successor does not fill its place—will be tougher. Nevertheless, this emphasis on militarily defeating ISIS enabled these powers to put tricky issues like reconciliation, rebuilding, and governance on the backburner. With ISIS largely routed militarily, this can no longer be the case. A race to claim the last territory under ISIS control is now giving way to jostling for influence over a potential settlement in the broader war. And that's very dangerous.

### **Implications for the United States**

The fundamental debate for Washington going forward must focus on whether counter-terrorism or broader geopolitical affairs should be the priority in Syria. In recent years, the United States overwhelmingly and deliberately approached Syria as a counter-terrorism problem. This narrow focus, by its very nature, informed how the United States conducted its role in the conflict and with whom it chose to cooperate. It facilitated a very successful counter-ISIS effort, but this approach had other implications—namely, that the United States effectively tolerated Asad's continued rule and largely condoned Russian and Iranian efforts. Despite its partnership with the YPG and its foothold in northeastern Syria, the United States is a relatively marginal actor in Syria, and there are limited steps it can or is willing to take to fundamentally shape the situation there.

While Secretary of State Tillerson's recently announcement encapsulated clear goals for Syria, there was little discussion of the strategy to achieve them or the attendant resources that would enable their fulfillment. This is especially true with respect to a political transition in which the Asad family would play no part. Nevertheless, pledges to continue crucial humanitarian assistance, and to support stabilization and reconstruction in areas outside of regime control, make sense and should be redoubled.

My uppermost concern, however, is the security picture. As ISIS continues to lose territory, the battlespace in Syria is shrinking, increasing the risk of confrontation among entities on the ground. The U.S. military's mission in Syria has been alternately described by senior U.S. officials as "presence" and focused on bringing "stability"—dangerously vague terms. Is it wholly focused only on finishing the fight against ISIS? How much will it go after al Qaeda, which has quietly built a substantial following in Idlib province? To what extent is it there to push back on Iran? To fight the Asad regime? To train, equip, and advise violent non-state actors as they seek to do so? What about the Russians? Like the U.S. Marines sent back to Beirut in 1982 with a similarly unclear mission, the residual U.S. force presence in Syria may be just enough to get into trouble, but unlikely to accomplish very much.

We need clarity—not just for the American people—but frankly, for our adversaries, competitors, and partners in Syria, too. Whom is the U.S. military willing to fight? Whom is it willing to kill? And for whom is it willing to put American lives on the line? Simply put, if the U.S. military's mission and rules of engagement in Syria are unclear to those of us who spend our professional lives cogitating on these issues, we all should be profoundly concerned.

The central government in Syria rejects the U.S. military presence there as a violation of its sovereignty. While the Asad regime is indeed malign, it's imperative to recognize its aims and the potential range of actors within Syria with whom it could find common cause to try to

undermine the United States. This is particularly important if the administration's intent is to expand its presence to include diplomats and development personnel.

Research I conducted for my book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, suggests findings that are translatable to U.S. collaboration with violent non-state Syrian actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces. The U.S. military plans to spend up to half a billion dollars to train and equip them. To date, they have been trained for a counter-terrorism mission. If that is no longer the case, then building them contributes to a civil war, an entirely different mission that requires serious consideration—and should be tied closely to a political objective. Efforts to train and equip such groups are fundamentally political—not technical—exercises. Building an effective fighting force requires more than supplying training and equipment, which has been and will continue to be insufficient to meet our declared political goals. A narrow approach—distanced from key political issues—wastes time, effort, and resources. It is fundamentally flawed. These forces depend heavily on legitimacy, so transforming them requires the United States to become deeply involved in their sensitive military affairs, weighing in on higher-order questions of mission, organizational structure, and personnel.

Above all, supporting violent non-state actors in Syria requires U.S. policymakers to have a clear-eyed assessment of the goals and likely outcomes of U.S. military assistance. Syria is part of a much bigger picture and increasingly will be, as I underscored previously. Simply put, the United States must be cautious of our tactical and operational actions driving policy and blinding us to the geostrategic picture.

Therefore, the following principles should guide U.S. involvement in Syria going forward:

- Prioritize a geopolitical perspective;
- Continue actively countering ISIS;
- Ensure stabilization and reconstruction support in areas outside of Asad regime control is tied to a coherent political strategy; and,
- Deliver substantial humanitarian assistance to refugees outside Syria.

### Questions to Consider

As the Subcommittee's Members examine the way forward in Syria, I urge you to consider the following questions:

To the Departments of State and Defense:

- Does U.S. policy toward Syria prioritize counter-terrorism or larger geopolitical challenges? What are those challenges and how should the United States prioritize them?
- What is the U.S. military doing in Syria, why, and on what basis? What is its mission, rules of engagement, and red lines? And, how are these being communicated to Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime, Hizballah, and other violent non-state actors (including U.S. partners)?
- What is the nature of the U.S. military's relationship with and commitment to violent non-state actors in Syria like the Syrian Democratic Forces?

To the Intelligence Community:

- To what extent is Iran making Syria a vassal state? How will Russia maintain its influence Syria while avoiding a prolonged military investment? As Asad grows increasingly secure, in what ways does he push back on these efforts by Tehran and Moscow—or deepen his dependence?
- How is Iran responding to an anticipated harder-line U.S. policy? Does this response suggest evidence for how Iran can be deterred in the nuclear, conventional, and unconventional domains?
- How has Israel's ability to defend itself changed?
- To what extent have the US and Turkey's interests sufficiently diverged that a more serious break becomes inevitable? Is Russia likely to benefit from that break, and what steps could decrease the likelihood of going down that path?
- Who is joining the emerging next generation of Salafi fighters and why?
- In what ways is Hizballah's role in Syria shifting? How is that influencing its position in Lebanon?

In conclusion, I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Dr. Karlin, and thank you to all of our excellent panelists. And we will begin the question and answer period of our hearing. And our side will begin by with Mr. Mast of Florida.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, chairwoman.

You know, some great comments from all of you. Great analysis on the unlikelihood of a peaceful transfer of power from Bashar al-Assad, and that is where I want to begin is from that point. Assuming we can get to that point at some time in the future, what would it take to have a post Assad Syrian Government that would back U.S. regional policy goals in the Middle East, that would back support for Israel, that would oppose Iran, and that would oppose Hezbollah?

This is open to any of you. What do you think—what groundwork do you think we need to be laying in place for that?

Don't all jump at once.

I will ask Dr. Karlin because I thought you had a great analysis. I would love to hear from you.

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you. You are asking a really difficult question. I think that is why you met some looks on our side.

Look, 6, 7 years ago when this conflict broke out this was a real point of debate. A lot of people said maybe you could just push Assad to the side. People around him might have a different vision for Syria. I, as I noted, was rather skeptical, as were potentially some of my fellow panelists. Bottom line, you are talking about not just taking Assad out of the picture, and that is not going to happen willingly, but everyone around him.

I think the vision that you are outlining is what one should aspire to, but it is decades and decades off, and were I to think about policy prescriptions to try to get us there, they would probably start with kind of very local state building enterprises.

Mr. MAST. So I am going to move just a little bit in that direction of getting to that goal and ask if you could look at the forces that are operating throughout that region, whether it be Iran, whether it be Hezbollah, whether it be the Assad forces, whether it be Russia, how would you rank them in terms of threat against the United States of America, and which one of those dominos would you look to be knocking on first?

Mr. ITANI. Thank you for the question. To start with, the kind of Syria you are talking about, one that would be friendly to Israel, hostile to Iran and Hezbollah, the quick answer to that is any Syria that arises out of a political deal with the opposition is not going to be friendly to Hezbollah and Iran, definitely not. That is the easy part.

For it to be friendly to the Israelis, I don't think there are any Arab countries as such that are really friendly to the Israelis, maybe Jordan to a certain extent. Syria is not going to be that way, but that doesn't mean it is going to be part of the Iranian regional chess board in strategy and a front line against the Israelis like it is right now. I think the Syrians are preoccupied and will be preoccupied with other things to be honest with you. So that is my quick answer to your question.

Mr. FORD. Congressman, let me just directly address your question. It is easy for me to imagine that Iranian revolutionary guard



backed militias in Syria, as well as Syrian intelligence services would attempt unconventional attacks against U.S. personnel on the ground in Syria. In fact, I expect it, frankly. They may choose the time based on other issues whether in Iraq or elsewhere. I doubt very much that the Russians themselves will launch a direct attack on American forces in Syria. But all three countries, Iran, Syria, and Russia want American forces out of Syria.

Mr. MAST. Mr. Lister, you spoke a good deal on the Kurds. My question is open to all of you in terms of a more national Kurdistan in its entirety. Do you believe that that would be a draw for Kurds across the region coming from Turkey into a Kurdistan coming from Iraq, coming from Syria, and do you think it would draw all Kurds from the region and provide a stabilizing force in terms of centralizing Kurds throughout the region?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And we will allow just a short answer so we can get to the other panel members.

Mr. LISTER. With time on our side I am sure other people on the panel probably want to say something on this, too. My personal position is much as the project that has been established in Kurdish majority areas of northeastern Syria has been an attractive proposition to Kurdish populations elsewhere in the region in Turkey and Iraq and elsewhere.

There are certain nationally unique dynamics that are in place, as well, so no, I don't think if the United States or any other country was to establish some kind of Kurdistan in Syria that it would become something that Kurds from all across the region would suddenly start flowing to. I don't think so.

Having said that, it has demonstrated that when there is a threat to certain regions in Syrian Kurdish areas, such as in Afrin right now, we have seen Kurds from Iraq and Kurds from Turkey travel to Syria to defend Afrin. But when I say "Kurds," we have got to be really careful here about not generalizing. It is specifically Kurds who are supportive of the YPG and the broader PKK vision for breaking down national boundaries, having no state borders, and launching this new kind of ideological vision for governance.

You are not seeing supporters of Kurdish national parties in Iraq, in Turkey, or in Syria joining along with us. In fact, they all stand in opposition to it. So it is not a unifying Kurdish vision.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, chairwoman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much.

Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and thanks to the witnesses for the great testimony. I think I heard unanimous recognition and concern from the panel of Iran's increased role in Syria, and despite the administration's strong rhetoric on Iran the Trump administration's strategy so far appears to have been to clear territory from ISIS and then troublingly to let Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah fill the void.

Ambassador Ford, you pointed out that American forces are 350 miles from the Iranians. Dr. Karlin, you mentioned in your testimony that with the help of Hezbollah Iranian power projection across the Middle East has skyrocketed. You also said Iran has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to its mission in Syria,

increasingly purchasing another strategic border with Israel. All of this is really concerning.

One of the objectives for Syria according to Secretary Tillerson is to diminish Iranian influence. Mr. Itani, you talked about the mismatch of means and ends. I don't know if that is one place where that is true.

And, Mr. Lister, you talked about striking weapons transfers perhaps to send a message. The question is, really what should the administration be doing to push back against Iranians' projection of power, and could Syria be co-opted by Iran and its proxies as we have seen in Lebanon where Hezbollah has increased its political and military stranglehold on that country?

Mr. LISTER. I would start by answering the latter part of your question, and I would say we are pretty much already in that direction. I would say one reason why the Russians seem to be rushing their own political efforts is because they realize that on the ground they are fighting a losing battle in terms of the Iranian influence.

Without getting too granular I would point you to a number of incidents that have happened in the last week or 2 where the Turkish military with Russian permission has entered areas of northern Syria in order to establish a deescalation outpost. Each time they have done that with Russian permission, they have been attacked by Iranian-backed militias. There are very clear divergency here between Russia and Iran on the ground. They are seeking the same objectives, but the tactical decisions are different.

So I think we are already shaping in that direction. Iran is using the Hezbollah model in Iraq already, and they are doing exactly the same thing in Syria. And I do think that is a danger.

Is that something the United States can roll back? No, it isn't. As I said in my oral testimony, I think it is something we can seek to contain. And if protecting Israel is as serious an interest as the Trump administration says it is, then there are certain things that we can do to be able to deter and contain that threat.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right. So, what should be we doing? Ambassador Ford, there is obviously much discussion among policymakers about Iran's desire to build a land bridge from Tehran to Beirut. Right? Everyone wants to talk about the land bridge, how far have they established the land bridge. You said in your testimony the Iranians don't need a land bridge from Iran to Lebanon for many years, they just use the Damascus Airport.

So the question is what can we do if we are 350 miles from the Iranians, and you suggested that ultimately they pose a threat not just to Israel but ultimately our troops are likely to be on the receiving end of some sort of attacks by Hezbollah or IRGC, what do we do? What does the administration do to match its rhetoric?

Mr. FORD. Well, two things, Congressman. First, we need to recognize that short of going all out war into Syria, and by the way with a risk of dramatic escalation with the Russians in that process, we are not going to be able to get the Iranians to leave Syria. When I was Ambassador there in 2011 there was an Iranian presence. Not much bigger now, but the Iranians have long been there, and they don't need as I have said in my written testimony they don't need a land bridge, they don't need a road. They fly things

into Damascus Airport. I don't think it is the policy of this administration to shut down Damascus Airport. Were we to do so, it might change the calculations in Tehran. I do think there are two things we need to—

Mr. DEUTCH. Ambassador Ford, I am sorry, but I want to follow up on that. Are there—I understand that it is not the policy to shut down the airport. Are there any deliveries that Iran would be making that should, as Mr. Lister suggested, that should prompt our military to take action?

Mr. FORD. Well, first more than just us sleeping in, the Israelis often strike themselves, and a retired Israeli Air Force general commented within the last 6 months after his retirement that the Israelis had struck hundreds of times. So the Israelis are already operating this way.

It makes sense to me to have intense behind closed doors discussions with the Israelis about what they need because this, after all, is first and foremost their problem. I can imagine a series of things that we could do. That might be if the purpose is to deter Iran from attacking Israel then perhaps we should have troops in Israel instead of eastern Syria. Perhaps we need to rethink what kind of peacekeeping forces up on the Golan, separating Israeli defense forces from these militia fighters that we are talking about and the Syrian Army.

Change the mandate of the United Nations force. Replace the United Nations force with something else we negotiate with the Russians and with other members of the international community. Maybe we need to do what Charles suggested and set up a proxy force. What I am saying is that the presence of U.S. forces far away is not going to address this problem.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ambassador Ford.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much.

Mr. ITANI. If I may, may I add something?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, we would love to hear from you, Faysal. But, you know, we are in recess, but they already buzzed that we are going to be in session in just a few minutes and we have got Mr. Kinzinger, Mr. Cicilline, Mr. Donovan, Mr. Connolly, Mr. Chabot, and Mr. Lieu, so perhaps if we can keep our question and answer period less than 5 minutes that would be great.

Mr. KINZINGER. I will do my best.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. Go to it.

Mr. KINZINGER. First off, again, thank you all for being here.

In my opening statement I said that this was predictable. I kind of lied. I think it has gotten way worse than what we even predicted. We knew it was going to be bad. But I remember back in 2013 colleagues from both sides of the aisle, both sides share blame, in this came and said we can't do anything in Syria or it is just going to—you know, look at Libya. And, frankly, as bad as Libya is it is better than Syria right now sadly.

But we are in the sixth year of this now, and, Mr. Ambassador, I am sure you are obviously very familiar with the number of refugees, and one of my biggest concerns I think when we look at—it is entirely possible in 30 years if you go forward people will look back at this time period as actually World War III. It will be a low

grade version of that, it is not like I or II in terms of the intensity, but it is a worldwide conflict.

And one of my biggest concerns is not just alleviating the issue in Syria. That is a problem. But beyond that it is the 7- and the 8-year-olds in refugee camps right now that are seeing a world that has left them behind that aren't getting educated, that aren't learning, that aren't shown that they have hope and opportunity, and that is the best recruiting ground for the next generation of ISIS or the next generation of al-Qaeda.

They will be easy recruits, frankly. And so if we look at this as a generational struggle, which I do, I think for the rest of my life we will be fighting radicalism. We have to I think take this issue very seriously.

So, Mr. Ambassador, given your experience what type of impact can we have going forward in Syria and the surrounding countries to ensure that we give these kids a chance at a better life, what kind of programs and stuff. And if you want to keep it fairly brief I know that is a long question, but I do have one other issue I want to get to.

Mr. FORD. Very briefly, Congressman Kinzinger, the United Nations and the partner agencies that work with it, whether it be Save the Children or the International Rescue Committee, others, Doctors Without Borders it is a long list, they can do a lot. They can do a lot if they have the resources, but the resources have been on a downward slope lately.

There is an element of donor fatigue, and that is why I said I think we need to increase that assistance to refugees. It costs money, I understand that, but precisely for the reason you mentioned about not having these refugee communities as future recruitment grounds, it has to be done. If the Americans lead on this, lead on this, we will get other countries to follow.

Mr. KINZINGER. And I wish we could budget differently because I think investing in a kid's education is way cheaper than a 500-pound GBU in the future.

And let me ask on the chemical weapons. So on the broader issue just worldwide holding the counter proliferation we obviously know the Assad regime destroyed some of their weapons, but I believe they are reproducing sarin gas, or are using chlorine gas, we know this.

I think the President bravely took out a Syrian airfield, but it is not enough. Obviously it didn't send a strong enough message to Assad and to the Russians that we are serious about this, and, you know, we are finding out that they are doing this again to another extent.

So I think we need to bring the full force of the United States and the world community to bear on this issue, and it doesn't mean necessarily overthrowing the Assad regime, though I would love to do that. Even if we ground Assad's Air Force permanently, crater his runways, take out his helicopters and make it clear that the delivery of chemical weapons the cost to you will be far greater than any benefit you can gain psychologically or otherwise would be good.

So both for the Ambassador and Mr. Lister in your opinion what would be the appropriate response to his continued use of chemical weapons in defiance of the President?

Mr. FORD. Just very briefly, Congressman.

It is imperative, if we want to stop the Syrian Government from using chemical weapons, that we make them feel pain militarily. And targeting the Syrian Air Force is certainly one place they would feel pain especially because with their troop shortage, they need air power more than some other governments in their civil wars.

Mr. KINZINGER. And I think, Mr. Lister, I will let you answer. But let me just say, I think it is clear. We are not saying if we respond for his use of chemical weapons we are going to go and solve the Syrian conflict. We are not saying that. What we are saying, though, is we are going to destroy his ability to violate world norms since World War 1.

Mr. Lister.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Adam. But I just worry about—

Mr. KINZINGER. Go ahead.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much.

Mr. KINZINGER. You owe me 40 seconds.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. You are a gentleman and a scholar.

Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

As I indicated in my opening statement, I am very concerned about Turkey's recent attacks in Afrin. I want to acknowledge Dr. Othman, one of my constituents, who has been working very hard to raise this issue who continues to have family in Afrin. And this has resulted in civilian deaths. I have introduced in the record some photographs of children that were struck and killed. It has resulted in the displacement of 16,000 people, and the administration has said very little about this ongoing offensive. And what they have said has been very restrained.

And so, Dr. Karlin, I would like to start with you. Can you speak a little bit about the dynamics here? What is Turkey trying to achieve? Why is the administration allowing an offense against some troops that we have trained and that have been so helpful in our fight against ISIS? What is the impact of this on our allies' ability to make progress against ISIS? And shouldn't we be doing more to protect Kurdish civilians and particularly since they have been such great partners with us in this fight against terrorism?

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you for this question, sir.

For Turkey, Kurdish issues are existential. And the challenge here, of course, is there are two different apertures through which you can view what is going on. You can view it in terms of countering ISIS, right? A very Middle East perspective by which you would say, we should work with any violent nonstate actor that can effectively weaken ISIS. And, indeed, we have seen that the Kurdish groups in Syria are pretty good at this. You can view it through another aperture, which is NATO, counter Russia, Article V. A much bigger geopolitical view. From that perspective, indeed, as you are going forward, then your cooperation with these groups might actually need to decline. It all depends on which priority.

I think one of the challenges right now, and I would urge as you are speaking to the State and Defense Departments, that you engage them on this issue, is how do we actually see the Syria conflict going forward? Is it still a counter terrorism problem, or is it a broader problem where we are dealing with Russia where we are actually looking at issues with Europe whole, free, and at peace, with looking at NATO as an entity?

Or it is quite possible, you know—and there is an academic debate, what happens if two NATO allies both declare Article V on one another? That is entertaining in an academic sense. It is actually quite dangerous in a practical sense. So it is, as you can imagine, understandably very difficult for these groups to have a real effect these days when they are under attack by the Turks.

But it is also important from a Washington perspective that we figure out going forward what is our real priority. And I might add from a defense perspective, this is an area in particular we are thinking about, because the Defense Department divides these regions up. And I will just note that, in recent weeks, I have continually heard statements from the commander of Central Command as opposed to the commander of European Command about how to think about what is going on there. That invariably is conveying a certain perspective.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. And I just want to go to Mr. Itani. You mentioned in your written testimony that deescalating this Turkish-Kurdish situation is a critical priority. How do we do that?

Mr. ITANI. So trace how we got to this point, and then rewind it a bit. We started by aligning with a group that they see as their mortal enemy. Fine, rightly or wrongly, I could see the military rationale. Now the ISIS threat has become less urgent. So this is a chance, an opening, for us to shift things around a bit and recalibrate the relationship. It doesn't mean letting them do what they are getting away with in Afrin, I think that is wrong too.

But the truth of the matter is we are letting them get away with it because they let us get away with all the other stuff. So we don't really have any more leverage as long as we haven't changed or indicated that we want to change the balance of power in the North. Once we indicate that, then I think we are in a position to broker and put mutual pressure on the Kurds and the Turks to reengage in peace talks.

Not too long ago, this was a serious prospect, and then it crumbled very quickly. But I think ultimately, if we want to make our presence in Northeast Syria tenable, we need to get the Turks at least as passive accepters of the situation.

Mr. CICILLINE. I will yield back that additional 40 seconds. But I hope that we do that, you know, consistent with the obligation that we have to the Kurds who have been so helpful in this fight.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Donovan of New York.

Mr. DONOVAN. Thank you, Chairman.

One of the disadvantages, or what some people take advantage of, being so low on the totem pole here, is most of the questions have already been asked.

But let me just follow up on two things. Adam asked about the stockpile of chemical and biological weapons. Mr. Ambassador, you were talking about taking out their military. With the proliferation of these chemicals and biological warfare elements in places like North Korea, they could easily be purchased as well.

Besides taking out the military, do economic sanctions to strangle Syria's ability to purchase these horrific weapons, are they also successful.

Mr. FORD. I want to be clear what I said Congressman. I do not believe we can take out the stockpile. We can't. The only thing we can do is establish deterrence against the use of that stockpile.

Frankly, Syria has so many sanctions on it imposed by both Congress and by administrations dating back to the 1970s, when I was the American Ambassador and I looked at this, it was a real spaghetti. So Syria's ability to buy things legally through the regular market is already severely hindered. That is why they do so much of their trade with Russia and Iran.

I think the real question with respect to the chemical weapons issue is how do we sustain deterrence against their use by the Syrian Government.

Mr. DONOVAN. And because I think they might be calling the votes now, let me just ask you a follow-up also on the Syrian children that Adam brought up.

You spoke about donor fatigue. And we find that throughout the world. I think America is a passionate and a compassionate Nation who likes—who wants to come to the aid of people who are in need but wants to see where that need is going to end at some point. I know this is difficult.

Is there an end to this.

Mr. FORD. There is certainly no end in the immediate prospect. I want to underline that. I think all of us have said that. There is no end in the immediate prospect. I think over time the problem will grow less severe for two reasons. Number one, as some parts of the country grow more peaceful—I didn't say democratic, I said peaceful—some refugees will go back home. Farmers will go back to their lands because it will be safe for them to farm again, hopefully. As cities are gradually painfully slowly rebuilt, some people will go home. Not everybody. But there will be less of a demand.

The second factor will be especially in countries like Turkey and Jordan, what steps will they take to integrate the remaining refugees into their broader society. That will be exceptionally difficult, especially for Jordan and also for Lebanon. In fact, right now both countries are trying to kick Syrian refugees out, which is against international humanitarian law, in any case.

The Turks have gone some distance, and I saw a report that Jordan is beginning to give work permits to some Syrian refugees. And it is going to be that kind of thing.

But, Congressman, frankly, this is going to take years and years and years.

Mr. DONOVAN. Thank you.

Madam Chair, I yield the remainder of my time.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Donovan.

Mr. Schneider of Illinois.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Madam Chairman. And I will be quick. I wish we had much more time, because this is one of the most impressive, most intelligent panels I can recall.

You have all touched on the fact that—or touched on the United States' goals, strategy, and reflected on our capacity for commitment to persist until we achieve our goals. But I was wondering in the context, and I may ask you just to submit this answer in writing, because it is a big question.

But Russia, Turkey, Iran are in this space with their own goals, strategy, and different commitments to stay to succeed. And they are not going to act—not let us take our steps without reacting accordingly. So how will they respond to us? And I will leave that question, because I know we are in urgent—and say if you have a chance to respond, I would be grateful.

And I yield back.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. I think that it is still all right.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Okay. Then I will ask you for your answers.

Dr. Karlin.

Ms. KARLIN. Yes, sir. Thank you for that very big question, which I will not do service to in 30 seconds. That said, so I think the Iranians right now are looking with a very curious eye. You have a more declared antagonistic posture from the administration. And I think in Tehran they are trying to figure out how will this actually get manifested right now. So they will be watching very closely what are the steps the United States takes?

So in regard to Congressman Deutch's question earlier about the sorts of things one might do, well, there are—to the extent the United States wants to be more serious. We could do things like naming and shaming the Iranians for the sorts of steps they are taking. We could start pushing on flight searches like we did just after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. We could even take steps like we did in Iraq where we started to arrest their affiliates. We saw this in 2007 in Iraq with Hamid the Mute.

So I think the Iranians right now are waiting to watch. I think the Turks and, you know, we understand the situation obviously with Turkey which really has been turning away from the NATO model. We have seen it with their arms' purchases with the Russians, et cetera. I think the Turkish view is very much, Hey, America, what is your priority? Is it NATO or not.

And as we are seeing I think from a lot of our European allies, they want it to be NATO. Understandably, that is valid. For Russia this is a bigger game. And if you read the national defense strategy that Secretary of Defense Mattis published about 2 weeks or so ago, the big emphasis in there is that the U.S. military's focus in the future is countering Russia and countering China. And so Moscow wants to know does that mean in Europe? Does that mean in the Middle East?

Thank you, sir.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Mr. Lister.

Mr. LISTER. I would just say very briefly, I think—I would kind of be quite cynical about framing a solution or an interim solution to Syria that is nationwide. One of the reasons why I framed some of my opening comments in terms of looking at specific pockets of the country is because I think that is the only way we can ap-



proach it. And in that sense, answering your question would require me to look at, well, the Northeast and where does Turkey and Iran and Russia stand. In the Southwest where do all those country stand? But that is how I think that the United States should be looking at this.

I don't think we have the means, and I also don't think we have the will to try to figure out a nationwide strategy for Syria. And I don't think one really necessarily exists. In fact, I don't think one necessarily exists for Russia and Iran either.

So I think that is the starting point. I can submit something in writing to you in more detail—

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. That would be very much appreciated.

Mr. LISTER [continuing]. To treat the different dynamics individually and thus individually with different countries.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Okay.

Mr. Itani, Ambassador Ford.

Mr. FORD. Very briefly, Congressman.

I think Russia, Iran, and Turkey all—all—do not want a sustained U.S. military presence in eastern Syria that builds up a Syrian Kurdish militia, and they will all work in their different ways to impede that, which is why I think it is especially important for the Congress to demand of the administration what are the benchmarks for progress so that these local forces we are setting up are self-sufficient. What are the timelines? And if the administration can't provide that, then it is incumbent upon the Congress to decide if you are comfortable with an indefinite and vague U.S. military mission in Syria.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. And I will yield back the balance of my 20 seconds.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank yo so much.

And now Ambassador Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you, witnesses.

Dr. Karlin, I appreciated your review of Secretary Mattis' 2018 national defense strategy. You summarized that prioritizing preparation for potential conflicts with China and Russia will come at the expense of fighting today's wars against violent nonstate actors.

How do you think the Secretary ranks the Syrian conflict in his list of priorities? And to what extent do you think the Pentagon has the tools it needs to implement a serious policy in Syria beyond defeat of ISIS?

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you, ma'am.

I think, based on at least what I have seen publicly from the Defense Department, the conflict in Syria is no longer ranked terribly high. I think the view is that the future is about high-end conventional conflicts, potentially with China, potentially with Russia. It is regaining the United States' qualitative military edge which has been waning in recent years. And so I think the view is very much focused on countering ISIS and then, as that wrap ups, shifting the U.S. focus.

To the extent there is an issue on the table for the administration—for the Pentagon beyond Russia and China, I would say it is

probably Afghanistan as we have seen with the troop surge. But that would really limit it.

In terms of the tools, I think one of the challenges that we see going forward is much of the challenge in Syria is going to be much more a whole-of-government sort of approach, so it is less kind of Defense Department hard kinetic tools. It is more the ability to work in terms of developing areas and potentially even diplomacy depending on how one can build statelets of sorts through which to start to exert some sort of influence.

Thank you.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you very much.

Ambassador Ford, thank you for your service in Syria. How can the U.S. regain leverage for peace talks and address the, should I say, rivalry between the Russian, Iran, Turkey Astana talks and the U.N.-backed Geneva process?

Mr. FORD. In short, I don't think the Americans now can gain much leverage in the Geneva process or the Astana process because it is a war, and we are not in the war—or our war is against a different enemy, Islamic extremists in the eastern part of the country. So we are not a player.

In a war, military actions, military operations count for something. Stalin once asked how many divisions does the Pope have? I think the Russians asked a similar question about the Americans. Now, in western Syria, which is the subject of the peace talks, so it is my short answer.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you. Thank you.

Mr. Lister, you wrote that the President has big plans for Syria but no real strategy. What would a serious strategy look like to enforce deescalation areas and restabilize Eastern Syria.

Mr. LISTER. That is a good question. How long do you have?

Mrs. WAGNER. Not long, sir.

Mr. LISTER. You know what? I think what the previous Secretary of State John Kerry did with the Russians had a number of serious faults, largely because of the fact that we didn't have very much leverage. But I think the design was probably grudgingly largely right in the sense that because we don't have leverage, it has to be a multilateral effort.

The problem with the current deescalation regime, which was a Russian-led initiative, is that it was designed in such a way to deescalate, not to cease fire. Now, that simultaneously with a complete American cessation of support to the opposition meant only one thing, that the regime was the only partner that would benefit from deescalation.

So the only solution to that, frankly speaking, is if that is what we want, to have a fair ceasefire nationwide in Syria, and, frankly, I don't think we are really going to get there, but if that is what we want, we have to have more skin in the game. And that might mean being more active in the northeast and more assertive. And that means creating the self-defense forces in the southwest that I talked about. That would be defensive and would have a specific purpose. They are not to attack the regime but to defend. But we have to have more skin in the game if we want to have any role in creating any of this.

The same stands for the political process. We are, frankly speaking, laughed at, because we don't have the skin in the game and yet we make these big grand demands.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Lister, for your candid testimony here.

Mr. Itani, in my brief time here, how can the U.S. ensure that the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies do not get access to any Western stabilization and reconstruction assistance? Do you think the international community should help rebuild Syria, for instance? In 2 seconds.

Mr. ITANI. No, I don't think they should do that. And by that I mean regime-held Syria, partly because I don't think it would work because it would be pouring money into one of the most corrupt and dysfunctional political economies in the world, a political economy that was actually the initial cause of the war, or the uprising.

Before we even started talking about military uprising and regimes and militias and wars, it was about the political economy. So I think it would be a very bad investment, firstly.

Second, we don't owe it to the regime to do it. It is not that I believe we should be starving the place, but I don't think it is the United States' duty to go rebuild the place for him.

And luckily, that is one of the things we as the United States have a lot of leverage over, which is international financial flows and the organizations that he is—that the people who want to rebuild the place are hoping will jump in. In fact, I am actually more on the other extreme. I think we should be really worrying about the things that are already going on where our money is going on the——

Mrs. WAGNER. Because we do not want the Syrian regime or the Iranian allies to have access to our assistance in that regard?

Mr. ITANI. I don't believe we do, no.

Mrs. WAGNER. Yes. All right. Thank you very much.

Madam Chairman, my time has expired, and I yield back.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you Madam Ambassador.

Mr. Connolly of Virginia.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

And, Mr. Lister, I want to focus in on your written testimony, because it strikes me. I have had to listen at this table to my friends on the other side criticize the Obama administration for lacking a serious strategy. And yet, if I read your statement correctly, you have got two very pointed critiques of the Trump administration. One is you say the Trump administration has provided no evidence that it has developed a meaningful strategy to match its grand goals and it has revealed no plans to deploy the resources that would be necessary to pursue them. Continuing to declare such goals without deploying even close to the necessary means to achieve them will only continue to erode American influence and credibility in the region.

And then, secondly, what struck me in your testimony, you went further. You said it is important to place this in a policy context. By lending its support, its public and private support, to a Russian-led initiative, meaning a ceasefire, designed specifically by the Russians to strengthen Assad's position yet further, the Trump admin-

istration has directly abetted Assad's survival, Iran's expansion and threat to Israel, and continued civil displacement.

We have gone way beyond a critique of Obama's policy being reckless and not effective to actually abetting the very people and forces we want to see removed as our precondition for peace in Syria. That is your critique, if I understand it. I want to give you the opportunity to expand, because that is one of the most powerful cogent critiques of the Trump approach to Syria I have yet heard.

Mr. LISTER. Well, thank you very much for summarizing some of the points I made. And I do——

Mr. CONNOLLY. I actually didn't summarize. I read them.

Mr. LISTER. Thank you. Well, thank you for reading them.

And I stand entirely by them. I think the fact remains that it has taken a year for the Trump administration to make the speech that was given 2 or 3 weeks ago. And as I said in my opening comments, the speech was a vision. It was a dream. As Ms. Hani said, we have nowhere near the means or the will to achieve the grand objectives that we set.

And, yes, frankly speaking, we don't know what went on behind closed doors when Trump met Vladimir Putin and then shortly thereafter there was the announcement of total cessation of support to the opposition in Syria. It is very hard to see those two things as not having been more than a coincidence. And the impact on the ground is huge. Let's rewind a little bit of time and look at what Russia did when it first intervened in Syria. Ninety-eight, I think, percent of its immediate air strikes in the first few months of its operations targeted the groups we were supporting.

They weren't targeting al-Qaeda, they weren't targeting ISIS, they weren't targeting other Islamists. They were supporting the vetted groups that we had been supporting since the end of 2012. What does that tell us? Those were the groups that Russia saw as the biggest explicit threat to the regime because they were more moderate, they were more representative of a portion of the population.

So for the Trump administration to cease support to every single group across the entire country that was opposing Assad and that we had invested in since the end of 2012 sent only one message to Russia: You have a free hand.

Now, we might be thinking something different from the Trump administration today, because if you read Secretary Tillerson's speech, it sounds completely different. But that is also the problem, frankly speaking, that we have seen from the Trump administration is a complete lack of consistency. One day we are willing to work with the Russians. The next day we want to roll back the Russians. One day we want to attack Iran. The next day we accept Iran as where it is.

Until we find a clear, clarified position, this is going to be the endless situation that U.S. policy is on Syria. In fact, we will lose it. We will be losing leverage, losing credibility, as I say, and losing the kind of leverage we would need on the ground to meet any of the objectives we have set.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, I want to thank you in the time I have left for that analysis. And I think it is really important for the record. There are practical and very grave consequences from the Presi-

dent of the United States aiding and abetting Vladimir Putin's expansion of his foreign policy at our expense and our allies'. And you have just pointed out one quite clearly. We have aided and abetted the Assad regime as a consequence. So that bromance between Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin is not a trivial one and it is not without consequence.

I yield back.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you.

Mr. Lieu.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you. Let me ask you a follow-up on what Mr. Lister said. The President of the United States has stated that he thinks it is good to be unpredictable. My view is, in foreign policy, that is just phenomenally stupid. And what you want is you want world leaders and other countries to actually know what U.S. foreign policy is and that we don't flip back and forth and backtrack. And I just want to have you amplify a little more. Is it your view that being unpredictable is a good thing in foreign policy or is it a bad thing?

Mr. LISTER. There is an argument for and against. But my opinion is it is very much a bad thing. I think the way that our rivals in the Syrian context, Russia and Iran and the regime look at it is it is not being unpredictable, it is not what I think the White House frequently calls it, which is strategic ambiguity. I think frankly it is just an excuse for indecision. And as I say, it did take us a year to make a speech about what we think we want Syria to be sometime down the line.

We didn't give a strategy. We didn't give a timeline. We didn't, you know, show any means to get there. So I think the way our adversaries see it, which, I think, the most important answer to your question is, it makes us look confused.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you. I think it is actually even worse than that. It is not just unpredictable. It is that the same Trump administration will simultaneously put out exactly opposite viewpoints and take opposite actions.

So I will give you a sanction example. In the Middle East, as you all are familiar with their Saudi-led blockade on Qatar. And if you remember, you had Secretary of State Rex Tillerson publically saying no, no, no, this is a bad idea. Do not do economic blockade. It is basically an act of war. And then you have the President of the United States basically contradict him essentially the same day in the rose garden later saying—taking credit, sort of, for, you know, doing this blockade. And then later you had the State Department selling billions of dollars of weapons to Qatar.

So if someone is looking at that, they get the impression, I think, that the Trump administration has no idea what they are doing.

So now let's talk a little bit about Syria. So in terms of Turkey, last July, the Center for Security Policy put out that Turkey reveals the location of American bases in Syria and that the Pentagon was quite concerned about that. They didn't want that to happen. Turkey went ahead and did it anyways. We then see more recently in a Reuters' report on January 31 that Turkey essentially is telling the U.S. that we should end our support for Kurdish YPG fighters or risk being targeted by Turkey. In fact, they had some

pretty specific remarks that I view as threats to U.S. troops and our policy there.

Given sort of Turkey's increasing—what is a good way to put it—ability to sort of take on the U.S. in ways we don't like and to sort of oppose our foreign policy interests, do you think it is time that we get some truth out there? So we all understand that the Armenian genocide happened, it is a historical fact. And the only reason that that resolution has not been passed is because we want to keep relations with Turkey.

Is it now time to pass that resolution and tell Turkey that, look, if you are going to take these actions against us, we are going to now tell the truth and do some things that you just might not like?

Anyone on the panel can answer that.

Mr. ITANI. I will jump in only because I want to continue the same conversation we were having about Turkey.

The thing is, if you want to judge anything that happened over the past 4 years or 3 years with Turkey, the context is really, really bizarre. We were fighting a proxy war against the terrorist group on their border using the proxy group that they view as a terrorist group and that is their existential enemy.

So imagine—flip it around. Imagine we were to go to Southern Syria to fight al-Qaeda, and we were to use Hezbollah to do it. How do you think the Israelis would react? So as the Israelis say it, I am not passing judgement on the militia in question. As the Israelis would see it, that is how they would see it. So everything they do I am judging in that lens.

Now, separately something else is going on in Turkey that is kind of obfuscating everything, which is politically the place is taking a very worrying turn, and its leader is also taking a very worrying tone. And I am trying my best, when I think about this from a policy stance and I think everybody ought to try to disaggregate these two things. Turkey is not going to attack U.S. troops. That is Erdogan speaking. However, Turkey is going to do things like reveal our bases, because that is to the extent that which they could provoke and anger us. Now that ISIS is sort of behind us in the rearview mirror, I am hoping we can continue with our lives and go back to some degree of normalcy and have a normal State-to-State relationship. But under those circumstances, I don't think it is realistic to expect it to be anything but this hostile and bizarre.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Ted.

And I will recognize myself.

Thank you.

One of the more alarming situations unfolding in Syria is not only Iran's use of Shia militias to replicate Hezbollah's model, but Iran's attempt to solidify not only a theological bridge between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, but an actual land bridge whether they can use the airport or not.

In Sunni majority areas in Syria and Iraq, we have already seen Iran hard at work on this model directing its proxy groups to fuel sectarian tensions, displacing Sunnis, and manipulating the demographics of the region for its own benefit. We have heard reports that Iran is directing Hezbollah to take root in areas where Sunnis have fled in Syria in order to make them Shia majority.

It seems like Iran and its proxies are playing chess thinking long-term, thinking strategically, while the U.S. and our partners are playing checkers and are failing to see the bigger picture.

How can we in the U.S. and our partners work to counter Iran's efforts to alter Syria's demographics and establish its control and influence from Tehran to Beirut?

Thank you, Faysal.

Mr. ITANI. I am happy to take this.

So with respect to the chess-and-checkers analogy, I completely agree, Madam Chairwoman. I have nothing to say other than that.

But on the issue of the demographics, something a bit stranger is going on in Syria. What seems to be happening is the regime is removing people it sees as hostile. Of course, most of them are Sunnis. But within the regime's eyes, you can also be a good Sunni. Actually, it is very useful to have good Sunnis in the sense that these are the Sunnis that like the regime. That is one of the reasons he is still around.

So they keep them generally more prosperous areas or middle class, and everybody else gets the sharp end of the stick. Hezbollah is taking areas in Syria that are important to its position in the mountainous areas between Lebanon and Syria. So it has expanded its military domain. Demographics are only kind of a small section of that problem. And it is regime driven on the demographic end, strategically and militarily driven on the Hezbollah Iran end. I will put it that way, because especially remember there are not a lot of Shia in Syria. There are mostly Alawites, the people on the side of the regime.

Ms. KARLIN. Ma'am, could I add one point to that?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Yes, please.

Ms. KARLIN. You had mentioned Iraq. And what is interesting here is that the situation with Iraq and Iran is actually a lot more complicated now than I think we could say it was a few years ago.

So I was in Iraq not long ago, including in Mosul. And what you see is much of the successful fight against ISIS militarily was conducted by militias, many of whom are supported by Iran. It was not conducted by most of the Iraqi military.

So now you have Iranian support of militias that are running, say, checkpoints in and out of Mosul, as I saw. But to make it even tougher, they have a bit of a victory that they can wave about.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Ambassador Ford.

Mr. FORD. One last point on this, Madam Chairwoman, briefly. It is difficult for me to imagine how we can successfully pressure Iran in Syria without being on the same wavelength as Turkey.

Turkey and Iran are historic rivals. Goes back hundreds of years. Turkey is the major Sunni power, if you will, in that part of the world. Even more important in some ways—some ways—than Saudi Arabia.

I think to govern is also to set priorities. If it is the priority of the United States to use the Syrian Kurdish forces as a hammer against the Islamic State, then it is going to be much harder to work with Turkey on the Iran problem.

On the other hand, if we decide that now the priority should be Iran, then we need to figure out how to come to some sort of an agreement with Turkey in a manner that meets their concerns

about what they perceive as an existential threat emanating from the Kurdish areas of Syria.

Mr. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you again to all of our panelists for thoughtful analysis. And our subcommittee will be back next week with a hearing on the PA unless we are in a shutdown, in which case, I don't know, rum and cokes at Ted's office, maybe.

Thank you so much.

And with that, the subcommittee is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:37 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]



## A P P E N D I X

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

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

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
Heena Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman**

January 30, 2018

**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 and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>).

**DATE:** Tuesday, February 6, 2018

**TIME:** 2:00 p.m.

**SUBJECT:** Syria: Which Way Forward?

**WITNESSES:** The Honorable Robert Ford  
Senior Fellow  
Middle East Institute  
*(Former United States Ambassador to Syria)*

Mr. Faysal Itani  
Senior Fellow  
Atlantic Council

Mr. Charles Lister  
Senior Fellow  
Director of Counter-Extremism and Counter-Terrorism  
Middle East Institute

Mara Karlin, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of the Practice of Strategic Studies  
School of Advanced International Studies  
Johns Hopkins University  
*(Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development)*

**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 202/225-5921 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 and North Africa HEARING

Day Tuesday Date 02/06/18 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:06 p.m. Ending Time 3:39 p.m.

Recesses ☐ (      to      ) (      to      ) (      to      ) (      to      ) (      to      ) (      to      )

**Presiding Member(s)**

*Chairman Ros-Lehtinen*

*Check all of the following that apply:*

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

**TITLE OF HEARING:**

*Syria: Which Way Forward?*

**SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

*GOP- Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Reps. DeSantis, Kinzinger, Donovan, Wagner, Mast  
Dem- Ranking Member Deutch, Reps. Cicilline, Schneider*

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

**HEARING WITNESSES:** Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

*(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*

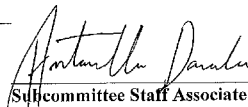
**STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD:** *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

*Kassem Eid Statement for the Record Submitted by Ranking Member Deutch  
Dr. Idris Othman Report for the Record Submitted by Rep Cicilline*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:39 p.m.

  
Subcommittee Staff Associate

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE THEODORE E. DEUTCH,  
A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF FLORIDA

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

“Syria: Which Way Forward?”

February 6, 2018

KASSEM EID

Syrian Chemical Weapons Survivor

Dear Distinguished Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch,

I would like to thank you and the Middle East Subcommittee for its continuous support of the Syrian people since the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011. Under your leadership, the Subcommittee has stood up for the Syrian people’s right to freedom and protection from the brutal Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers.

As a survivor of Assad’s 2013 sarin gas attack in the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta, I would like to call attention to the fact that Assad retains his chemical weapons program, in defiance of the Russian-American OPCW deal. In fact, according to report by the Syrian American Medical Society, the Assad regime has used chemical weapons well over 100 times since the 2013 attack.<sup>1</sup>

Just last week, UN chemical weapons inspectors finally confirmed that the sarin gas used to attack my home in 2013 matches the chemical stockpile relinquished by the Assad regime as part of the OPCW agreement.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Bashar al-Assad regime and his allies continue to test the resolve of the international community. In the last few days in Syria, there has been a major uptick in chlorine gas attacks on Douma and Idlib, which are located in supposed de-escalation zones. There have been at least six chemical attacks in Syria since the start of 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> Syrian American Medical Society. “A New Normal: Ongoing Chemical Attacks in Syria.” February 2016. [https://www.sams-usa.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/A-New-Normal\\_Ongoing-Chemical-Weapons-Attacks-in-Syria.compressed.pdf](https://www.sams-usa.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/A-New-Normal_Ongoing-Chemical-Weapons-Attacks-in-Syria.compressed.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Reuters. “Exclusive: Tests Link Syrian Government Stockpile to Largest Sarin Attack: Sources.” January 30, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons-exclusiv/exclusive-tests-link-syrian-government-stockpile-to-largest-sarin-attack-sources-idUSKBN1FJ0MG>.

The Trump Administration has also recently reported that the Assad regime may be developing new weapons and delivery mechanisms, in violation of the OPCW agreement.<sup>3</sup> UN reports have shown that other international pariahs like North Korea have facilitated Assad's ability to continue attacks against my countrymen and women.<sup>4</sup>

Secretary Tillerson stated last month in Paris that Russia is ultimately responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria because it has shielded the Assad regime from international accountability. Yet it is a fantasy to believe that Russia—which itself deliberately continues to bomb hospitals and schools in Syria on a daily basis—will ever use its leverage to force the Assad regime to uphold international norms. Russia's routine votes in the UN Security Council to shut down investigations into such attacks further demonstrate its role in promoting the slaughter of Syrian civilians.

The United States must act in concert with like-minded nations to uphold international law. In April 2017, President Trump rightfully upheld the U.S. redline on chemical weapons and struck the airfield from which the sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikoun originated. If chemical weapons continue to be used, the U.S. and its allies must show that there will be serious consequences. Unless Assad's entire Air Force is grounded, I fear that the Syrian regime will grow even more ruthless and bold in using chemical weapons against civilians. Assad has shown time and again that he will stop at nothing to punish his own people.

Finally, I wanted to thank the Chairwoman and Ranking Member for supporting the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which has now twice passed the House of Representatives. It is shameful that the bill has languished in the Senate for months without movement while Assad and his backers have continued their attacks against civilians. It is imperative to pass this bill to hold accountable those supporting the Assad regime's war crimes.

Thank you for conducting this hearing and for searching for solutions to end Assad's war on the Syrian people.

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<sup>3</sup> Reuters. "U.S. says Syria May be Developing new Types of Chemical Weapons." February 1, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/u-s-says-syria-may-be-developing-new-types-of-chemical-weapons-idUSKBN1FL65L>.

<sup>4</sup> Reuters. "Exclusive: North Korea Earned over \$200 Million from Banned Exports, Sends Arms to Syria, Myanmar - U.N. Report." February 2, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-un-exclusive/exclusive-north-korea-earned-200-million-from-banned-exports-sends-arms-to-syria-myanmar-u-n-report-idUSKBN1FM2NB?il=0>.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE DAVID CICILLINE, A  
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND



5.2.2018

Afrin-North Syria ( a detailed file on the committed massacres done by the Turkish airstrikes with its allied forces on Afrin)

**1.the first massacre in the first day of the Turkish airstrikes 20\1\2018:**

The Turkish military airstrikes targeted several times Afrin city at around four o'clock afternoon in Turneda village. The attacks caused damages in people's houses and souls, which led to a terrible massacre (IDP) family displaced to Afrin from Edileb.

But unfortunately all the family members were died.

Hemada family from Edileb were surprised by the sounds of the Turkish airplanes, the kids went out to see what was going on, but when the mother rushed to get her children in, she saw them on the ground with their organs out of their bodies.

The nine-year old Yehya Hemeda got martyr; even though the doctors tried hard to rescue him. His brother Khaled Hemeda who was eleven years old suffered from very bad injuries in abdomen and his situation is now very critical, hoping he will come over soon. Not to mention the injured member in the family.



**2.the second massacre in the second day of the Turkish airstrikes 21\1\2018:**

In the second day of the Turkish airstrikes on Afrin, Al-Hussien family in Jilboul town in Sherwa district, was the target of Turkish shells. This miserable family who consists of three families together came from Edileb as well – Maaret Nouman town as IDPs running away



from the conflict in their area to Afrin region looking for a better way of living and shelter for their children.

The family managed to get a house in Jilboul village and ran a ranch for chickens, but the family faced a very awful massacre leaving 24 person injured among them 11 martyrs and 8 wounded and 5 missing members, most of them were children and women.

The martyrs are:

- 1.Wael Al-Hussein one- year old.
- 2.Salma Al-Hussein six years old.
- 3.Mousab Al- Hussein six years old.
- 4.Ghaliya Al-Hussein eight years old.
- 5.Hedel Al-Hussein ten years old.
- 6.Ahmed Al-Hussein seventeen years old.
- 7.Rehef Al-Hussein thirty three years old.
- 8.Bedar Al-Hussein twenty four years old.
- 9.unknown person
- 10.Emad Shamo twenty nine years old.
- 11.Ahmed Rehmano thirty seven years old

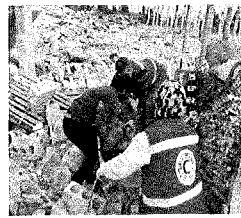
The wounded are:

- 1.Guma Mohemmed Al-Hussein seventeen years old.
- 2.Hemeda Ibrahim three years old.
- 3.Hesen Ibrahim Al-Hussein two years old.
- 4.Fadi Mohemmed Eed ten years old.
- 5.Ismail Mohemmed Ibrahim twelve years old.



6. Ibrahim Mohemmed Ibrahim thirty five years old.

7. Khaled Mohemmed Ali thirty six years old.



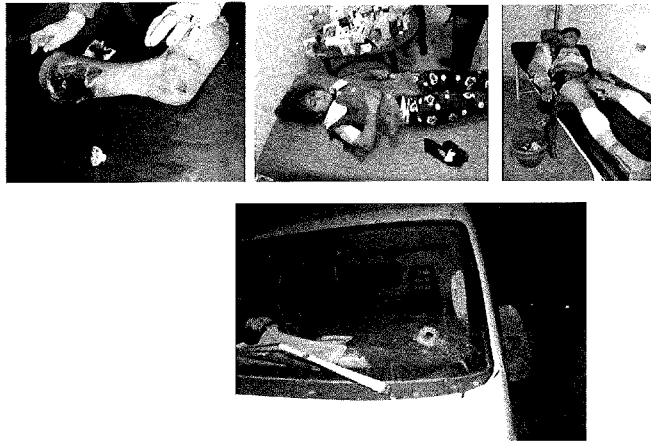
### 3. the third massacre by the Turkish airstrikes 23\1\2018:

Turkey forces along with what so called the free army and other gangs bombed randomly the civilians in Jendayrs district where both Arabs and Kurds live together with heavy weapons. The Turkish airstrikes focused on Al-Hemam village ( still under attacks) . Turkish and gangs' shells left a lot of damages among poor civilians causing a terrible massacre between kids, women and elderly people. The numbers of victims reached to 45 people from them five martyrs and 41 wounded. The medical center was also attacked and the Kurdish Red Crescent's ambulance got shot by many shots.

The martyrs are:

1. unknown child four years old.
2. Elmaza Shieko Horo fifty years old.
3. unknown women fifty five years old.
4. unknown person nineteen years old.
5. Gigar Khon fifteen years old.





#### 4.the fourth massacre by the Turkish airstrikes 26\1\2018:

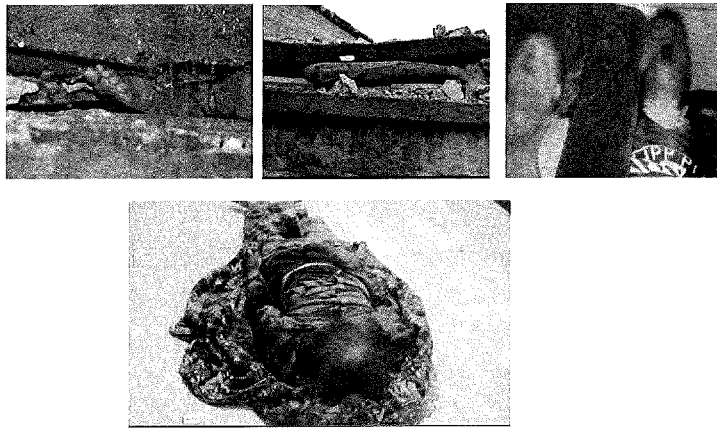
The bombs , shells and rockets target almost all towns, villages and regions in Afrin . This time the Turkish forces with its terrorist groups targeted Moubeta district leading to a very terrible massacre in a civilian family who were refugees from Tel-Kirah town in North Aleppo. The victims were seven members from the same family. Al-Khater family came to Afrin looking for a living and a safe shelter for their children. But unfortunately they became an easy target for Turkish shells which destroyed their homes on their heads while they were sleeping.

The six martyrs are:

- 1.Yousra Taha Al-Khater nine years old.
- 2.Soulieman Taha Al-Khater fourteen years old.
- 3.Zaky Taha Al-Khater fifteen years old.
- 4.Moustefa Taha Al-Khater seventeen years old.
- 5.Amena Taha Al-Khater fourty years old.
- 6.Taha Moustefa Al-Khater fourty five years old.



As for the seventh member Safaa Taha Al-Khater nineteen years old, she had some minor injuries, the doctors assure that her psychological situation is very bad after she knew that all her family were dead.



##### **5.the fifth massacre by the Turkish airstrikes 28\1\2018:**

Afrin people woke up on a very awful massacre on Gubela village in Sherwa district. Keno family who consists of three families together came to Afrin region looking for a better life. The family worked in grazing herds of sheeps. According to the father ( the only survivor) , the Turkish airstrikes bombed their houses with four rockets continuously making the house fall to the ground. When the rescue team of the Kurdish red crescent arrived to the place, they found a yard full of parts of bodies to the extent the team couldn't recognize the shredders of human 's and herds'.

The victims of this massacre were mostly kids and women.

The eight martyrs are:

- 1.the child Kemal keno seven months.
- 2.the child Safaa Keno seven years old.
- 3.Hesen Keno thirteen years old.



4. Hanedy Keno fifteen years old.

5. Amera Keno seventeen years old.

6. Jourya Keno forty five years old.

7. Fatema Abd Rebo forty years old.

8. Rewan Al-Aswad twenty years old.

While the rest they were badly wounded.

The names of wounded:

1. Abedallah Keno fifty years old.

2. Mohemmed Abedallah Keno twenty seven years old.

3. Abedallah Mohemmed Keno two years old.

4. Hesnaa Abedallah Keno two years old.

5. Mehmoud Abedallah Keno six years old.

6. Rehef Abedallah Keno five years old.

7. Bedriya Abedallah Keno eighteen years old.



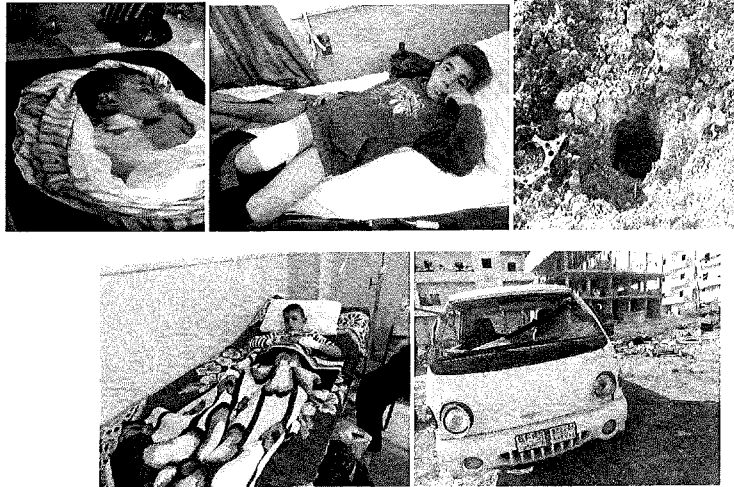


**6. the sixth massacre by the Turkish airstrikes 31\1\2018:**

The Turkish airstrikes once again targeted Afrin city-Turneda village randomly. The savage attacks caused a very painful massacre to a very miserable family who already ran away from the Turkish fires in Jalema town. Aleko family were taking place in one of the basements in Turenda village as a temporary place. The reckless shell went directly to the basement leading to many injuries with their little child as a martyr.

The wounded are:

1. Mohemmed Aleko seventy five years old.
2. Ali Ekrem Aleko fourty years old.
3. Mohemmed Ahmed Aleko ten years old.
4. Abedo Mousa Mousa eleven years old.
5. Gulah Mohemmed Khalil fourty years old.





At the end of this report we assure that the numbers of martyrs increase daily as most of the wounded 's situations are very critical. This report include massacres from 20\1\2018 to 31\1\2018.

**Rep. Dan Donovan's Statement for the Record**

The recent reports of resurgence of chemical and biological weapons in Syria is alarming, and that's putting it mildly. Even more alarming is the proliferation of chemical weapons throughout the world, from Syria to North Korea. That's why the Foreign Affairs Committee recently held a hearing on chemical and biological weapons in North Korea, and I chaired a hearing at the Homeland Security Committee about "Examining the Department of Homeland Security's Efforts to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction." Everyone – innocent civilians included – is at risk. The facts are jaw-dropping. Assad has used Sarin and chlorine gas on his own people; it appears the most recent use of such occurred this past Sunday. North Korea has a vast network of chemical and biological tools that Kim Jong Un would likely not hesitate to unleash. Kim Jong Un possesses an estimated 2,500 to 5,000 metric tons of sarin, VX, chlorine, and other chemical agents. If all the right conditions were met, open sources estimate that up to 2.5 million people could be killed from these stockpiles alone. North Korea can use these chemical agents for their own purposes, or export them to other nations and bad actors.

If we didn't have enough to worry about with the use of state-sponsored use of chemical and biological weapons, then we can turn our attention to terrorists who would love to get their hands on these bloodcurdling tools. In 2014, an ISIS hideout in Syria contained plans for weaponizing bubonic plague. There are even document reports that ISIS used mustard gas in Syria. Just six months ago in August 2017, Australian police discovered a "sophisticated" ISIS plot to release hydrogen sulfide to the public. This demonstrates that the threat of chemical weapons is real. Terrorists and madmen alike will not hesitate to use them. My question to the panelists today will ask how can we eliminate the stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons in Syria, ensure that they are never used again in the country, and safeguard not just American citizens, but people around the world, that ISIS and other terrorists will not use these abominable weapons.

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**Statement for the Record**  
*Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia*

More than seven years into the Syrian civil war, while 98 percent of ISIS-held territory has been reclaimed, numerous strategic threats to U.S. interests remain. The Trump Administration has outlined vague objectives for the United States in Syria, but failed to articulate a strategy or invest in the necessary resources to achieve those goals. As a result, other parties on the ground – namely Turkey, Russia, and Iran – have largely been able to shape the conflict and ongoing negotiations to reflect their own interests to the detriment of U.S. objectives in Syria.

In January, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered a speech that was billed as the “Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria.” While he named five “key end states” for Syria, he offered no strategies and committed no new resources to reach the Administration’s goals, which include: an enduring defeat for ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria; a post-Assad Syria from a UN-led political process; diminished Iranian influence; safe and voluntary return of displaced Syrians; and a Syria free of weapons of mass destruction. The reality is that achieving those goals would require a significant military presence and a robust diplomatic effort. However, the Trump Administration has only committed to a muddled and open-ended military engagement and has outsourced the diplomatic heavy lifting to Russia and Iran. In that sense, Syria has become a microcosm of the Trump Administration’s unilateral retreat from global leadership.

Last week, Russia hosted a “Syrian Congress of National Dialogue” that undermines the U.N.-led peace talks in Geneva. The leadership of the Syrian opposition boycotted the conference because it ignored several of their key demands, including reform of the security forces and a commitment to allow Syrian refugees to participate in future elections. The Syrian Government has taken advantage of the so-called “de-escalation zones,” negotiated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, for strategic military purposes. Since mid-December, the Syrian military has escalated fighting and airstrikes in Idlib, causing more than 272,000 people to flee an area supposedly protected by the de-escalation agreement.

On January 20, Turkish forces pushed into Afrin, which is held by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). If Turkey follows through on its threats to continue the assault into Manbij where American forces are operating alongside the SDF, the U.S. could find itself face-to-face with a NATO ally in northern Syria. Tillerson correctly outlined the dangers of U.S. disengagement in Syria: “As a destabilized nation and one bordering Israel, Syria presents an opportunity that Iran is all too eager to exploit.” The problem is, the Trump Administration’s disengagement has already exacerbated the Iranian threat to Israel. President Trump acquiesced to a ceasefire deal with Russia that permits Iran or its allied Hezbollah forces to operate dangerously close to Israel’s border.

In addition to these geopolitical concerns, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe. There are 13.1 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, 6.1 million Syrians internally displaced, and 5.4 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. This crush of humanity has strained resources within countries hosting massive refugee populations, drastically changed regional demographics, and destabilized neighboring countries. The Assad regime has perpetrated atrocities on the Syrian civilian population -- including sectarian violence, mass killings, torture, and the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs -- and it shows no signs of subsiding.

Last April, the United States conducted airstrikes on a Syrian airfield in response to Assad's horrendous sarin gas attack that killed roughly 100 people, including scores of children. At the time, I warned that a kneejerk kinetic response without an overarching military strategy would endanger American lives and diminish U.S. global leadership. Unsurprisingly, Syrian forces have continued undeterred and reportedly carried out two chlorine gas attacks in rebel-held areas in the last couple weeks.

Amidst this backdrop, the United States has a variety of interests at stake in Syria, including counterterrorism efforts and the fight against ISIL, alleviating humanitarian concerns, reducing Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, enforcing global norms against chemical weapons, and broader regional stability. Congress and the Administration must embark on an effort to define for our allies, our constituents, and the Syrian people the terms of our Syrian engagement and how we will protect these interests.

This crisis cannot end while a civil war rages on. Ultimately, it is political negotiations that will bring lasting relief to the millions of affected Syrians who have known only violence and displacement for more than seven years. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has been unwilling to make the diplomatic investments that would be necessary to ensure that a negotiated settlement reflects U.S. national security interests. If the Administration continues down this path, then the United States will be forced to accept a Syrian future shaped by our adversaries.

