

# **10 YEARS OF WAR: EXAMINING THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN SYRIA**

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**HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND GLOBAL  
COUNTERTERRORISM  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
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## **10 YEARS OF WAR: EXAMINING THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN SYRIA**

**Thursday, April 15, 2021**

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

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:09 a.m., via Webex, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chair of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right, the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism will come to order. Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the subcommittee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the length limitation in the rules.

As a reminder to the members, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with House Resolution 8 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition, to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum. I will now recognize myself for opening remarks.

And pursuant to notice, we are holding a hearing on the ongoing conflict in Syria. A month ago, we marked 10 years since the Syrian people rose up to demand dignity, freedom, and a voice in shaping their government. In response, Bashar al-Assad raged a brutal crackdown with the help of outside support, ushering in a decade of conflict—and counting—and spawning a proliferation of global terrorism.

The struggle for the future of Syria has led to the deaths of more than 600,000 people and the displacement of more than 12 million, both inside Syria and around the Middle East. The crisis has destabilized neighboring Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, and threatened Israeli security. It has no doubt changed the region for decades to come.

The civil war created a radicalizing governance vacuum that helped launch ISIS. Although ISIS has been effectively dismantled by the United States and more than 75 allies and partners, it and its global franchises remain a lethal threat. The United States must prevent a resurgence of ISIS which would directly threaten regional stability, our European allies, and the American people.

Recent headlines related to Syria—reports on Assad’s use of chemical weapons, widespread economic misery and obstacles to delivery of humanitarian assistance—are agonizing reminders that the conflict is far from over and that the Syrian people continue to suffer. In the past few years, ongoing fighting in Idlib plunged nearly a quarter of Syria’s population into further humanitarian crisis. Increased strikes from Assad’s forces continually set up potential clashes between Syria and Russia and Turkey.

The deescalation zone agreed to during the previous administration, which saw the U.S. pull back from our Kurdish partners, was never fully implemented. And while the fighting has stalled, the conditions in Idlib remain dire. In February, the United Nations estimated that 13.4 million people in Syria required humanitarian and protection assistance, almost a 20 percent increase in 1 year. Additionally, approximately 5.6 million Syrian refugees throughout the Middle East require aid.

On March 30th, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, announced more than \$596 million in new humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis. I applaud this announcement. The United States must continue to aid the Syrian people and also advocate for unfettered humanitarian access including by defending cross-border assistance.

In addition to humanitarian concerns, the Syrian conflict affects other U.S. national interests. The conflict allowed Iran to expand its influence throughout the Middle East. Russia has used a foothold in Syria to expand its political, military, and economic influence, attempt to reclaim its status as a great power, and promote itself as a authoritarian alternative to the United States.

Assad, Russia, and Iran continue to brutalize the Syrian people, violate cease-fires, and flagrantly disregard international law by attacking hospitals, schools, shelters, health clinics, and residential areas. On Monday, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons claimed that Assad retained sufficient chemicals to use sarin gas, to produce and deploy chlorine munitions, and to develop new chemical weapons.

In the last decade, Assad has unjustly detained and tortured tens of thousands of Syrians including Omar Alshogre who joins us today. Assad also continues to imprison several Americans including Austin Tice who has been detained since August 2012, and Majd Kamalmaz who was arrested in February 2017. I look forward to working with the Biden Administration to free Austin and Majd as well as all Americans unjustly detained in the Middle East and around the world.

Congress has sought to play a role in supporting the Syrian people and resolving the conflict through both humanitarian aid and the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. The legislation mandates additional sanctions on enablers of Assad including anyone who does business with or provides financing to his regime, his intelligence and security services, or the Central Bank of Syria.

The leverage created by the Caesar Act seeks to help end the Syrian conflict through a negotiated diplomatic solution which is vital to stabilizing the Middle East, protecting U.S. interests in the region, and providing a better future for the Syrian people. This is the challenging environment in which the Biden Administration

must develop its Syria policy. Achieving a political resolution in Syria has bedeviled the previous two administrations and President Biden's team faces difficult decisions and tradeoffs in the coming months. Congress stands ready to support a strategy that will advance U.S. national interests, deliver dignity and peace that the Syrian people have bravely pursued for more than a decade. After 10 years, we must let the Syrian people know that this Congress has not forgotten them.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how we can realize these goals and I will now yield to the ranking member for his opening remarks.

Mr. WILSON. Yes. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank Aviva Abusch for her coordination. Mr. Chairman, she has done a great job getting this together.

And I want to thank you, Chairman Ted Deutch, for calling this very important hearing at an extraordinary time in history. It has been over 10 years since the Syrian revolution began. Let us not forget that we saw play out in international media when thousands of brave Syrians shouting "peaceful, peaceful" were met with bullets, barrel bombs, and other unthinkable horrors. As I have said before, the Assad regime is illegitimate and should be replaced to benefit the people of Syria.

And I know how talented the people are of Syria, with American citizens of Syrian Lebanese heritage being business and political leaders in my home State of South Carolina with dynamic assimilation. There is no solution to this crisis so long as President Assad remains in power. Ten years later, it is clear that failure to act in Syria and failure to enforce red lines was a critical mistake that has led to devastating consequences and led to destabilization in the entire Middle East.

In unleashing his reign of terror, Assad has been assisted by the Russians in the air and Iranian-backed terrorist groups on the ground. Attempts to work with both countries to resolve the conflict have only led to failure. After 10 years of atrocities, it is unfathomable that Assad, Russia, or Iran would be a part of any solution as they are the root of the problem.

To respond to the tragedies of Syria, Congress has acted in a bipartisan way in passing this Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. Last Congress, as chairman of the Republican Study Committee's Foreign Affairs Task Force, I was grateful to release a detailed report which included multiple recommendations to strengthen the Caesar Act and achieve a future for Syria free of the brutal Assad regime.

Based on this report, I am also grateful to introduce Stop the Killing in Syria Act in the 116th Congress. Additionally, I introduced the bipartisan Stop U.N. Aid for Assad, which would end the illogical policy of providing U.S. taxpayer support to U.N. entities in Syria which were directly funding the Assad regime. This policy idea is not radical. It should be a common sense. It was actually first recommended by Ambassador Robert Ford, President Barack Obama's Ambassador to Syria.

As we speak, the Assad regime is ramping up its efforts to wipe out Idlib province, something they have promised to do before. Despite our important differences with Turkey, I am grateful that the

Donald Trump administration worked with Turkey to stop the Assad regime's assault on Idlib last year. Yet, more must continue to be done to deter the Assad regime from an assault which creates the biggest refugee crisis yet in the history of the conflict, which threatens to again overrun Europe.

This time, as always, is the time to act. How many more Syrians will lose their lives in communities before we act? Thank you to the witnesses for their time and expertise. It is particularly helpful to have the honor of Omar Alshogre, a champion for the people of Syria, a courageous survivor of Assad's notorious Branch 215 prison, with us today, and I thank him for his work and bravery for the people of Syria.

With that, I yield back to Chairman Ted Deutch.

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

I will now introduce our distinguished witnesses. Dr. Lina Khatib is the director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House. She was formerly director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and co-founding Head of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. Her research focuses on the international relations in the Middle East, Islamist groups and security, political transitions and foreign policy, with special attention on the Syrian conflict.

Mr. Omar Alshogre is a Syrian public speaker, detention survivor, and a current Georgetown University student. Mr. Alshogre was smuggled from prison and fled Syria at the age of 20 after being arrested and imprisoned for participating in demonstrations against the regime. He currently engages in awareness raising for the situation in Syria and leads the Syrian Emergency Task Force's efforts to advocate for the liberation of detainees as the Director of Detainee Affairs.

And Ms. Jennifer Cafarella is the inaugural National Security Fellow at the Institute for the Study of War, a position created to sponsor rising national security leaders. She previously led ISW's Syria Team before becoming director of Intelligence Planning and then its research director. She is a graduate of ISW's Hertog War Studies Program and she has written extensively on Syria, Iraq, al-Qaida and ISIS, and regularly briefs military units preparing to deploy on a range of subjects including Syria, ISIS, and Russia. We are glad to welcome her back to testify again before the subcommittee.

I thank all of the witnesses for being here today. I now will recognize the witnesses for 5 minutes each and, without objection, your prepared written statements will be made a part of the record.

Dr. Khatib, you are recognized.

#### **STATEMENT OF LINA KHATIB, DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA PROGRAMME, CHATHAM HOUSE**

Dr. KHATIB. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. Let's remember that we are having this hearing partly because of U.S. disengagement on Syria over the past decade. Disengagement pro-

longed the conflict and created a vacuum exploited by Russia and Iran.

Today, I am going to present ten available options for U.S. Syria policy which must be pursued together. One, the performance of previous U.S. administrations showed that saying the right things about the Syrian crisis is not enough. Their decoupling of rhetoric from action hurt U.S. credibility in the eyes of enemies and allies. The Biden administration can rectify the mistakes of the past by linking words and deeds.

Two, the Syrian conflict can only end through the United States initiating bilateral talks with Russia. Russia's intervention in Syria is driven by a desire for international and American recognition. Russia can accept sacrificing Assad's presidency in return for maintaining some influence for itself in Syria both political and military. Russia is likely to accept the formation of a transitional government in Syria, not as an outcome of the U.N. peace process, but as the outcome of bilateral negotiations with the United States.

Three, the U.S. should ensure that the U.N.-led peace process continues, but this process must be reformulated to become the mechanism for implementation of a Russian-U.S brokered peace deal based on supporting the formation of legitimate political, military, and economic alternatives to the Assad regime.

Four, the U.S. must pursue a comprehensive strategy to limit Iran's intervention in the Middle East. Negotiations over the nuclear deal must not be separated from negotiations over Iran's regional role. Both need to run simultaneously.

Five, the U.S. must maintain a military presence in northeast Syria. Withdrawing troops hands over the northeast to Iran-backed groups who would acquire resources like oil and make the border with Iraq porous, threatening U.S. assets and allies in Iraq.

Six, ISIS continues to pose a threat to U.S. national security and the world, but the global coalition to defeat ISIS must widen its campaign into a comprehensive strategy, going beyond military action to also cover social, economic, and political components, addressing the grievances that drive people to join groups like ISIS, like tensions between Arabs and Kurds. The U.S. must also ensure that any governance model implemented in northern Syria is transparent, effective, and inclusive of all ethnic groups. This would help lessen tension with Turkey regarding Kurdish controlled governance.

Seven, the U.S. must engage Turkey to jointly support the Syrian opposition in Idlib. Eight, the U.S. must support Syrian civil society to push for accountability for war crimes. This prevents those convicted of war crimes from ascending to power once a resolution to the conflict happens. Nine, the U.S. must hold the United Nations accountable regarding the distribution of aid inside Syria to prevent the Syrian regime from diverting aid to suit its interests. The U.S. must also open direct channels with civil society inside regime-controlled areas to counter Iran's strategy of grassroots level control.

Finally, the U.S. must maintain sanctions against the Assad regime and anyone associated with it, Syrian or not, but mitigate sanctions' indirect impact on people. Sanctions are necessary, but

not sufficient to push the conflict to a close. Peace in Syria requires a comprehensive strategy that only the U.S. can lead. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Khatib follows:]

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

*Hearing: 10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria*

Witness statement by  
Dr. Lina Khatib  
Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

15 April 2021

**The conflict in Syria is not a civil war and only the United States can push it towards a resolution.** Syria's is an international conflict threatening US national security interests and is a source of global terrorism. Syria has also become a platform for Iran and Russia to assert themselves vis-à-vis the West generally and the United States specifically. The Syrian conflict presents the United States with a security risk, but the United States' general disengagement on Syria over the past ten years has also caused the US reputational damage. Today there is an opportunity for the administration of President Joseph Biden to reverse this damage and for the US to play a leading role in steering this conflict to a close. This would affirm US commitment to international norms and address the root causes of the Syrian refugee crisis. Drawing the conflict to a close would also consolidate the defeat of ISIS in Syria and overseas. **An end to the Syrian conflict can only happen if it includes supporting the formation of legitimate alternatives to President Bashar al-Assad's regime as part of a Syrian-led political process under the auspices of the United Nations, using the UN-led Geneva process as a mechanism of implementation of a peace deal brokered diplomatically between the United States and Russia.** A viable resolution to the conflict would also reduce Iranian influence in Syria, thereby helping contain Iran's regional intervention in the Middle East, and would ensure that Syria is free of weapons of mass destruction.

All the aims mentioned in the above scenario have been explicitly communicated by the United States as key objectives for Syria but they are yet to be realized. Dynamics on the ground in Syria as well as the diplomatic situation present challenges to those objectives, but they are not impossible to achieve. Far from having to passively accept the current status quo in Syria as fait accompli, the United States is the only international actor with the ability to open the door to a peace deal for Syria.

**Diplomatic situation**

**US disengagement on Syria over the past decade has paved the way for Russia and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad to take advantage of the vacuum to assert themselves diplomatically.** The Syrian regime and Russia as well as Iran are primarily directly responsible for why the objectives of the peace process led by the United Nations have not yet been achieved. There has not been a cessation of hostilities, and the Syrian regime and its allies continue to use violence against the civilian population. The regime is not releasing adequate information about detainees and alongside Russia continues to engage in war crimes. There is no freedom of movement for journalists and no freedom of association in regime-held areas. The regime and its

Russian ally continue to block humanitarian aid intended for Syrians under the pretext of protecting Syria's sovereignty.

Although the UN-led peace process established a Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) composed of representatives of the Syrian regime, the opposition, and civil society, the Assad regime—under de facto Russian direction—has been largely uncooperative during the five rounds of meetings of the SCC, with the meetings resulting in no agreement on a draft of a new constitution. There has also been no progress on the formation of a transitional governing body as stipulated by UN Resolution 2254. The parliamentary elections held in regime-held Syria in July 2020 were neither free nor fair, and it is expected that the looming presidential election scheduled for summer 2021 will be similarly fraudulent.

**It has become clear that the UN-led peace process is not likely to be the first step towards achieving a resolution for the conflict in Syria. The Syrian regime and Russia are deliberately stalling the peace process to consolidate their military gains on the ground and using those military gains to bolster their political position.** Russia and the Assad regime are hoping that the international community will eventually tire of the peace process going nowhere and subsequently accept Bashar al-Assad as the de facto ruler of Syria. Such a scenario would pave the way for normalization with the Assad regime, bestowing Assad with legitimacy and opening the door for reconstruction funds to flow into Syria from the West and elsewhere. All this would allow Assad to continue to act with impunity, prolonging Syrians' suffering and maintaining the risk of regional instability. The United States must not let that happen. **Only the United States has enough leverage over Russia to bring it to the negotiating table to broker a peace deal for Syria and to make the UN-led peace process fruitful.**

#### **Humanitarian environment**

**The United States has a moral responsibility to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria in line with the United States' own declared values.** The humanitarian situation in Syria continues to worsen. Largely due to both damage from the war and the corrupt and criminal behavior of the Syrian regime, the economic crisis in Syria is currently worse than during any previous time since the Syrian conflict began. Add to that the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods in Syria. In March 2021, UNHCR reported that "In the past year alone, the Syrian pound has lost three quarters of its value while the cost of food and other essential items has rocketed by more than 200 per cent... over 13 million Syrians require humanitarian and protection assistance and almost 90 per cent of the population lives in poverty". There is also concern that the current UN authorization for cross-border aid from Turkey into northwest Syria, which expires in July, might not be renewed if Russia vetoes it. Consequences of such a veto would be catastrophic, with the UN calculating that more 75% of civilians in northwest Syria rely on UN aid. The situation is worsened by Russia's deliberate military attacks on hospitals and schools and the Syrian regime's influence over where the UN distributes aid inside Syria.

The European Union and the United Nations held the fifth Brussels Conference in March 2021, during which humanitarian pledges for Syria were made. However, the level of aid pledged in this conference was less than in previous years. More broadly, all humanitarian assistance currently flowing into Syria is not enough to restore Syrian people's livelihoods or even cover needed basic provisions adequately. As long as the conflict continues to rage, no amount of aid will be able to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. **Addressing Syria's humanitarian and**

**economic needs adequately requires resolving the conflict as a first step. Rebuilding a viable post-conflict state in Syria requires international commitment akin to a Marshall Plan.**

Millions of Syrians remain displaced inside Syria, millions continue to be refugees outside, and thousands are detained or disappeared. There is a growing movement among the Syrian diaspora, mainly in Europe, to push for accountability for anyone involved in war crimes in Syria. The Syrian regime persists in making conditions inside Syria difficult for those who may wish to return. For instance, Law Number 10 strips people of property rights and a newly introduced law on evading military service imposes a fine of \$8000 on those who failed to perform their service; the law also dictates that property belonging to the evaders or their families could be seized in lieu of payment. Many people who returned to Syria and "settled" their status with the Syrian state have been subjected to arrest or harassment by the regime.

Even inside regime-held areas, there is widespread poverty as the regime has not been providing enough supplies of basic goods like bread. There is an increasing gap between few rich cronies and the majority of people in regime-controlled areas. This has led to a state of frustration and anger manifested in several protests by residents of regime-held areas about living conditions, especially regime supporters in coastal areas who feel their children who were killed in the course of army service sacrificed their lives for the sake of regime survival. The economic crisis in Lebanon is also having an impact on the financial situation in Syria, with assets of Syrian regime-allied figures stuck in Lebanese banks, thereby reducing the flow of hard currency into regime-held Syrian areas.

The above dynamics are mainly the result of the regime's own behavior and to war dynamics. The regime uses its revenue streams to support its crackdowns and infringements, not to benefit the Syrian people. **Syria's economic crisis must not be simplistically attributed to the impact of US-imposed sanctions, which have increased pressure on the Syrian regime and its cronies.** It must be noted, however, that the regime and its allies have been able to partially redirect the negative impact of the sanctions to hit ordinary Syrians instead, as regime cronies control smuggling routes and engage in illicit trade activities to circumvent sanctions. **The United States needs to maintain sanctions on the regime but mitigate the regime's ability to cope with them and to redirect their impact towards ordinary Syrians.**

Sanctions as well as war dynamics have also left the regime less able to restore the capacity of state institutions like the Syrian army. The regime's imposed new laws and fines on citizens as mentioned above aim to acquire resources from them to compensate for the regime's own losses. This vividly shows that the regime's priority is maintaining its own wealth as opposed to addressing the needs of Syrian citizens. **The Assad regime's behavior during ten years of conflict has illustrated that it is neither capable of nor willing to reform.**

### **Russia**

**US disengagement on Syria has meant that Russia has been the largest beneficiary of the Syrian conflict.** Russia intervened militarily in Syria mainly to use the conflict as a platform from which to assert itself vis-à-vis the West in general and the United States in specific. Russia's military intervention has been essential for the survival of the Assad regime, and the regime has become a client of Russia's.

Bashar al-Assad responded to the economic and military pressures faced by his regime partly through tightening the circle of loyalists around him, including a public falling out with his

cousin Rami Makhlouf—once one of Syria's leading cronies—whose assets Assad seized. Economic and other pressures coupled with Assad's handling of loyalists like Makhlouf have weakened his regime despite his survival in power. **A weakened Assad is more useful for Russia than a strong Assad, as his weakness gives Russia greater clout over Syrian state institutions and politics. Russia has huge influence over security and military entities, which control all Syrian state institutions.**

Russia has proven adept at taking advantage of such opportunities in Syria to bolster its own position and to present itself as the power broker in the Syrian conflict. In March 2021, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Saudi Arabia and UAE and brokered a joint statement with Qatar and Turkey in which the two countries, alongside Russia, announced their commitment to a political solution in Syria that preserves Syria's territorial integrity. In this way, **Russia is presenting itself as the actor who can prevail over competing regional powers in the Middle East.**

Russia's courting of competing actors is also seen in northeast Syria. Russia's military involvement in Syria relies mainly on the use of its air force with minimal presence of Russian officers on the ground. Russian armed forces do, however, patrol some border areas in the northeast jointly with Turkish forces, while Russia also cooperates with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in other areas in the northeast. **This illustrates the pragmatic military approach that Russia is taking in the Syrian context.**

Russia is also benefitting economically from the Syrian crisis. Its intervention in Syria has come at a relatively low cost and it has made it clear that it does not intend to invest in reconstruction in Syria. Quite the opposite, Russia sees in Syria an economic opportunity. It has pressured the Syrian state to sign several contracts with Russian companies in lucrative fields like gas and oil and phosphates mining and is trying to position itself as the broker for reconstruction funds whenever they begin to flow into Syria. This ambition partly explains why **Russia has been pushing for other countries to normalize relations with the Syrian regime—normalization would mean the lifting of sanctions, with funds directed into Syria and therefore into Russia's hands.** Russia has also strengthened its military presence in the Mediterranean through having a naval base in Syria and has been leading an effort to reshape the Syrian military including through the appointment of figures loyal to Russia in key roles in the Syrian Arab Army. Syria has therefore come under a de facto Russian mandate.

### **Iran**

**Iran has made great gains in Syria but the situation today presents the United States with an opportunity to roll back Iran's intervention in Syria and in the Middle East as a whole.**

Russia's air operations in Syria are complemented by on-the-ground presence of Iran-backed groups, from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) to Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Pakistani, Afghan and other mercenaries and Syrian militias. Iran's influence in Syria predates the current conflict, but before 2011, Iran's presence in Syria was mainly through soft power and the use of Syrian territory by Hezbollah to train members and transport weapons. **The Syrian crisis provided Iran with an opportunity to extend its soft and hard influence in Syria.** Iran has signed several economic contracts with the Syrian state; it has purchased land inside Syria, attempting to do so in areas that are strategic geographically; it has expanded some Shia religious sites; and it has increased the presence and military and economic activities of its proxy groups inside Syria. Iran is also investing in long-

term efforts to convert Syrians to Shiism through building religious schools, cultural centers and health facilities, which would give it greater support at the grassroots level.

Iran-backed groups exert significant control over the Syrian borders with Lebanon and Iraq, which facilitates smuggling operations by those groups, such as of fuel, arms, and drugs. Hezbollah uses the profits from such operations to partly fund its military activities in Syria. Such illicit trade is frequently conducted by Hezbollah in coordination with Syrian military groups such as the Fourth Division led by Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher. However, there have been a number of clashes between the Fourth Division and some Iran-backed militias in Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus. Clashes among regime-backed Syrian militias have also taken place in regime-controlled coastal areas.

**Clashes among militias demonstrate the weakened grip of the Syrian government over its loyalists. Syrian government weakness is also illustrated through the rise of warlords and profiteers in Syria and the increased de facto autonomy of parts of the security services, all of which put the pursuit of their own interests ahead of the interests of the regime. These dynamics are suitable for Iran because it benefits from the presence of a weak state in Syria possessing little capacity and oversight,** which is somewhat similar to Hezbollah's taking advantage of the weak state in Lebanon to increase its own de facto control over the country.

Iran is unlikely to give up on Syria because first, Syria is essential as a supply route for Hezbollah, and second, it borders Iraq, which Iran regards as the priority country for its regional influence. But **Iran's intervention in Syria presents it with challenges.** Although Iran has been part of the Russian-led Astana process alongside Turkey, Iran's partnership with Russia is a pragmatic one where Russia has the upper hand rather than being an equitable alliance: Russia has on more than one occasion not stepped in to shield Iranian sites and officers from being targeted by Israeli air strikes inside Syria. Iran and Russia sometimes compete over military strategy and plans. Israeli and American air strikes have limited Iran's consolidation of military presence in Syria though they have not significantly damaged it. Unlike Russia, Iran has committed significant funds to its intervention in Syria, while international sanctions imposed on Iran have increased the extent of this financial burden. Although Iran has signed some economic contracts with the Syrian state, Russia has on a number of occasions pressured the Syrian regime to shift those contracts to Russian companies instead of Iranian ones. All this presents an opportunity for the United States to roll back Iran's influence in Syria and in the Middle East.

### **Turkey**

Turkey has always approached the Syrian file through the prism of the Kurdish issue. It found in the uprising in Syria an opportunity to intervene to try to prevent a Kurdish autonomous region from being formed at its doorstep. The Kurdish issue remains Turkey's main concern in Syria, and it has felt uncomfortable with the United States' support for the Kurdish-led SDF as a key ally in the fight against ISIS. Turkey has therefore been trying to consolidate direct control in northern Syria by occupying Syrian territory and implementing administrative oversight in three main areas (Euphrates Shield; Olive Branch; and Peace Spring). Turkey has also been supporting varied anti-regime factions, from Syrian opposition factions to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in Idlib. In addition to the Kurdish issue, Turkey sees its presence in Syria as preventing a further influx of refugees onto its soil and as providing it with military leverage that it can use vis-à-vis Russia and the Syrian regime. As Turkey is concerned about a joint attack on Idlib by Russia and the Assad regime, and as such an attack would also not be in the interests of Europe, the United

States or Syria's neighboring countries, **there is an opportunity for US-Turkish collaboration on Idlib that might make Turkey more open to a deal on the Kurdish issue in northeast Syria that would ensure equitable participation of Arabs and Kurds in governing north-eastern Syria and see the US empower the Syrian opposition in Idlib.**

#### **Terrorism**

**The Syrian conflict sustains terrorism not just in Syria but also regionally and globally.**

Although ISIS has been largely militarily defeated, it continues to exist in pockets in central and eastern Syria, where it has been conducting operations against the United States' allies, the SDF. ISIS also continues to be influential inside camps in northeast Syria in which its members or families of its fighters are detained, while no long-term solution for the camps is being presented by the international community. Tension within local communities in the area also sometimes leads to ISIS taking advantage of grievances to recruit people under the pretext of conducting operations to settle scores, including Arab-Kurdish tensions caused by lack of inclusivity and participation in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration.

**ISIS is also surviving as an underground, mafia-like organization engaging in a wide range of economic activities to keep its income flowing.** Despite their overt antagonism, there have been economic transactions conducted between ISIS and the Syrian regime and between ISIS and Iran-backed militias on the Iraqi-Syrian border. This underlines that Russia and the Assad regime's claims to be a counter presence to ISIS are false—**Russia and the Assad regime benefit from the existence of ISIS to make a claim to legitimacy for themselves.** The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has focused its campaign on military objectives, but the larger social, economic and political drivers behind the rise of ISIS have not been sufficiently addressed by the international community. This risks a resurgence of international Islamist extremism in the future emanating from Syria, increasing the threat of instability to Syria's neighbors and the world at large.

In the northwest, HTS as well as jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda operate. HTS has been trying to rebrand itself as a political group driven by a governance objective, in a bid to play a role in a post-Assad Syria or at least in a local administration in northwest Syria. However, although HTS does not have global terrorist aims like ISIS, Syrian residents in areas of Idlib where HTS has established what it calls its "Salvation Government" largely prefer to be governed by an administration that is not affiliated with an extremist group, and several protests against HTS have been staged in the area. Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the northwest are small in size but they pose a threat to stability and to those international organizations working in the area to support civil society and provide humanitarian aid. **Both HTS and groups linked with al-Qaeda have contributed to weakening the Syrian opposition in Idlib militarily and administratively, while Western support for the Syrian opposition there has reduced.**

Iran-backed militias continue to attack targets belonging to Syrian opposition factions on the borders of north-western areas as well as to the SDF in the east. **Iran is also trying to recruit local Syrians in the east into its militias, increasing their presence in areas held by the Global Coalition and the SDF, thereby risking undermining the international effort to fight ISIS.** The presence of Iran-backed militias in Syria, including on the Syrian-Iraqi border, presents a stability risk to Iraq and Israel as well.

**Options for US policy**

Though the landscape of the conflict in Syria is complicated and challenging, it is only the United States that has the ability to draw this conflict to a close so that the US achieves its own stated objectives regarding the Syrian conflict and maintains US national security interests. There are several policy paths that the United States must pursue simultaneously.

1. **The United States must not repeat the mistakes of previous administrations of decoupling rhetoric from action.** Saying all the right things without having a clear, comprehensive strategy to achieve them and without actually implementing such a strategy only serves to hurt US credibility not only in the eyes of its enemies but also in the eyes of its allies. This includes European allies who have been bearing a huge part of the burden of the Syrian refugee crisis.
2. **The only way for the Syrian conflict to end is through the United States having bilateral talks with Russia as a first step.** Russia's intervention in Syria has been driven by a desire for international and American recognition and Russia is likely to accept sacrificing Bashar al-Assad's presidency in return for maintaining a degree of influence for itself in Syria, both political and military. As such, Russia is likely to accept the formation of a transitional government in Syria composed of elements of the current regime from outside the Assad family and elements of various opposition groups and civil society. This acceptance is not likely to occur as an outcome of the UN-led peace process but as the outcome of bilateral negotiations with the United States.
3. **While the US should ensure that the UN-led peace process continues to exist, this process must be reformulated to become the mechanism for implementation of a US-Russian brokered peace deal on Syria.** Any such deal must be based on supporting the formation of legitimate political, military, and economic alternatives to the Assad regime.
4. **The United States must pursue a comprehensive strategy regarding limiting Iran's intervention in the Middle East.** Negotiations over the nuclear deal with Iran must not be separated from negotiations over Iran's regional role—both need to run simultaneously. Syria must be a key component of negotiations about Iran's regional role.
5. **The United States must maintain a military presence in the northeast.** Withdrawing troops from the northeast not only endangers the SDF but also leaves the area wide open for takeover by Iran-backed groups, who would then acquire resources like oil fields and make the border with Iraq porous, which would in turn threaten US assets and allies in Iraq. Parallel to this, **the US must use its influence over the Autonomous Administration to make the latter more inclusive, transparent, and effective in terms of governing areas under its control.** This would also present a good example of how Syria could be governed in the future.
6. As ISIS poses a national security threat to the United States and a global terrorism risk, **the United States must continue to lead the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, but the anti-ISIS campaign must be widened to be based on a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond military action.** It must also encompass social, economic, and political components addressing the grievances that drive people to join groups like ISIS and community tensions such as between Arabs and Kurds.

7. **The US must engage Turkey to jointly support the Syrian opposition in Idlib.** The US must also ensure that any governance model implemented in northern Syria has significant participation by all ethnic groups in the resident communities. This would help lessen current tension with Turkey regarding Kurdish-controlled governance.
8. **The United States must support growing efforts by Syrian civil society in the diaspora to push for accountability for war crimes conducted in Syria.** Such accountability not only brings justice to victims and their families but also creates a barrier for those convicted of crimes against humanity to ascending to power once a resolution to the conflict happens.
9. **The United States must hold the United Nations accountable regarding the distribution of aid inside Syria to prevent the Syrian regime from diverting this aid to suit its interests. The US must also work on opening direct channels with civil society inside regime-controlled areas.** This would not only capitalize on frustration with the regime in those areas but also counter the regime's anti-West propaganda and Iran's strategy of grassroots-level control.
10. **The United States must maintain sanctions against the Assad regime and anyone associated with it, whether Syrian or non-Syrian,** including the Caesar Act and the No Assistance for Assad Act. This must apply to US allies such as any Arab or European countries contemplating normalizing relations with Assad. **The US must also find ways to tighten sanctions on the regime and its cronies while mitigating sanctions' indirect impact on people** (for example by supporting micro-level businesses that are of no interest to the regime). It must be noted that sanctions are necessary but not sufficient to push the Syrian conflict to a close as achieving peace in Syria requires a comprehensive strategy encompassing all the recommendations presented in this statement.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Dr. Khatib.  
 Mr. Alshogre, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MR. OMAR ALSHOGRE, SYRIAN PUBLIC SPEAKER AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST, DIRECTOR OF DETAINEE AFFAIRS, SYRIAN EMERGENCY TASK FORCE**

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you for inviting me to give my testimony. I want to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Chairman Meeks, and Ranking Member McCaul for their dedication to stopping the killing in Syria. Today, I am sitting in the most democratic institution of the United States of America—the people's House. And I hope 1 day, Syria will have one too.

Ten years ago, when I was 15, the people of Syria began asking for democracy and representation inspired by the United States and its ideals. We all took to the streets singing for freedom and democracy. We went to the streets singing for freedom and democracy and we were holding flowers in our hands. For my peaceful participation in these demonstrations, the regime detained and tortured me. They even pulled out my fingernails.

I spent 3 years in prison alongside my young cousins, one of whom, Bashir, died in my arms after enduring the years of torture. Months after my arrest, I learned that my father and two of my brothers were dead. My village al-Bayda was in ruins. Assad regime massacred my entire community. All of my childhood friends were dead. Assad regime feared al-Bayda's hope would spread to the surrounding cities, so they killed everyone they could find. The regime forces even filmed their brutalities. Videos of them slaughtering the people of my hometown are everywhere. I even found a video of them killing my own father.

By a miracle, I escaped prison and reached Idlib, the remaining opposition sanctuary in Syria, which once was home to one and a half million people; today, it houses four million civilians, about a million of them children. These people have done nothing wrong but ask for freedom and basic rights. Only in Idlib was I offered some care and protection and when I was able to leave the country to seek medical treatment, Sweden, thankfully, gave me asylum.

Today, I am proud to come before you as a student at Georgetown University and Director of Detainee Affairs at the Syrian Emergency Task Force. I know that many of you have been committed to support democratic aspirations of the Syrian people and I have had the honor of meeting with many of you personally, so I want to thank you.

I thank you for the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. I want to urge you to continue to ensure full implementation of the act, with a special focus on stopping the war machine that the Assad regime, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah aimed against Idlib. If the existing cease-fire collapses and the Assad regime continues its offensive with conventional and chemical weapons, those four million civilians currently in Idlib will face detention, displacement, or death, and any prospect of negotiating a settlement will be off the table.

If we do not protect the people of Idlib, there will be mass humanitarian atrocities eventually surpassing the numbers of Srebrenica, significant levels of displacement which could poten-

tially double the number of refugees in Europe and an increase in extremism. Extremist actors will manipulate the lack of actions in their own propaganda and recruitment efforts, presenting themselves as the only civilian defense line.

If Idlib falls, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime will then focus their efforts on northeast Syria, increasing the challenge for U.S. force protection efforts and endangering U.S. partner forces. As former U.S. envoy to Syria, Ambassador Frederic Hof said, an Assad victory would “entrench Syria as the North Korea of the Middle East.” By protecting Idlib, the United States would effectively prevent Assad military victory and, in doing so, would be conducive to political solution and a negotiated settlement as per U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

In January 2020, the Assad regime and its allies began to revamp their relentless offensive on Idlib which resulted in massacres against civilians and displacement of almost 500,000 in the matter of a week. Fearing a massive flow of refugees, Turkey intervened, standing up to Russia and fighting against Iranian-backed militias including Hezbollah and Assad forces. NATO troop presence in Idlib resulted in a fragile cease-fire that is on the verge of collapse today.

The United States must support its NATO ally, Turkey, to ensure that the existing cease-fire in northwest Syria is maintained and made permanent. This can be done without sending additional U.S. troops to Syria, because there are four main areas the U.S. can [inaudible] ties and should. The U.S. must pursue and strengthen efforts toward an immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib civilians by engaging military-to-military conversations with Turkey and then providing them with logistical and diplomatic support.

The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts with Geneva to renew Bab al-Hawa humanitarian border crossing and reopen Bab al-Salam and Al Yaroubiyah crossing to deliver humanitarian aid. The United States must step up support for existing independent civilian infrastructure in Idlib to counter this threat of extremist ideology and propaganda efforts. The United States must intensify and broaden Caesar Act accountability efforts.

This war, ladies and gentlemen, began with civilians like me calling for freedom. It was inspired by you, the United States. We wanted Syria to be a country of the people, by the people, for the people. I am honored to be sitting here today, but I do so with an enormous responsibility to convey to you the voices of the Syrian people, the thousands of civilians tortured to death in the Caesar photos, many of whose lifeless bodies the regime forced me to number. It is incumbent upon us that we save those who remain and we seek justice for those we have lost.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Alshogre follows:]

**Omar Alshogre**

**“10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria”**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**Thursday, April 15th, 2021**

Thank you for inviting me to give my testimony. I want to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking member Wilson, Chairman Meeks, and Ranking member McCaul for their dedication to stopping the killing in Syria.

Today, I’m sitting in the most democratic institution of the United States of America - the United States Congress. And, I hope one day Syria will have one too.

Ten years ago, when I was only 15, the people of Syria began asking for democracy and representation, inspired by the United States and its ideals. We all took to the streets singing for freedom, holding flowers in our hands. For my peaceful participation, I was detained and tortured. My fingernails were pulled out.

I spent three years in prison alongside my young cousins, one of whom, Bashir, died in my arms after enduring years of torture. Months after my arrest, another cousin from my village was brought to our cell. He told me that my father and two of my brothers were dead. My village, al-Bayda, as well as the larger city nearby, Baniyas, were in ruins. The Assad regime had massacred my entire community; all of my childhood friends were dead. When Baniyas first began to protest for freedom, the Syrian regime feared they would lose control. They feared hope would spread to the surrounding cities and in order to prevent others from rising up against them, the Syrian regime killed everyone they could find in Baniyas. The regime forces filmed their brutal crimes - there are videos of them slaughtering the people of my hometown. There is even a video of my father and brothers being murdered by Assad’s forces.

Following these three years of detention - three years of torture, starvation, and loss of everyone I loved - I was finally smuggled out. The security guard who snuck me out dropped me off at a public state-run hospital because I had contracted severe tuberculosis in prison. Tuberculosis does not have the same repercussions in Syria as it does in the United States. There are no options for treatment. If someone in Syria gets sick, it is a death sentence.

At first, the doctor at the hospital was kind. He put his stethoscope under my shirt and felt the scars of my torture. He asked me: “Who did that to you?” and I replied: “I was in Saydnaya.” Saydnaya is a prison where political detainees are sent after having been “tried” unfairly in military court. At Saydnaya, one of the most notorious facilities for torture, prisoners are not informed of their sentences. Saydnaya once had white walls but, over the years, the blood of prisoners has tainted them red. Upon hearing the name, the doctor’s kindness suddenly disappeared and he kicked me in the face. He screamed for the nurses who rushed to his side.

Once they heard that I had been in Saydnaya prison, one of them started to stick needles into my face and my knees, calling me a terrorist. Assad's regime let stories spread about Saydnaya's prisoners, claiming them to be enemies of the regime and of the state - in reality, its prisoners are like me, peaceful protesters who fed security officers false confessions under torture.

To seek real medical care, I had to travel to Idlib governorate, in northwest Syria. Getting to Idlib was challenging - the border region was rife with military officers seeking to kill any young person trying to flee to Idlib. They were afraid that if young people made it to Idlib they would be able to gather enough men to rival Assad's forces. Once I successfully made it into Idlib, however, I felt safe and welcomed, yet, I could still hear constant bombing.

"Despite the perpetual aerial and ground strikes conducted by the government with Russian and Iranian support, it was the safest place for me to go. There, I knew I would be cared for and far from regime detention centers. During my time in Idlib, I was welcomed and supported by Syrians from all around the country who had also fled the regime. On the street, the play of children was frequently interrupted as they scrambled for cover anytime they heard a plane. The sky was and continues to be a constant source of danger. We do not watch blue skies for clouds - we watch them for planes. For bombs. At the time, I was still suffering from tuberculosis, but the regime had stripped Idlib of all resources, including medical infrastructure. It wanted the people of Idlib—me, the children, the kind individuals who helped me—to suffer. To give up.<sup>19</sup>"

Idlib governorate was once home to one and a half million people. Today, it houses four million civilians, about a million of them children. These people have done nothing wrong but ask for freedom and basic rights.

Since then, I have been granted asylum in Sweden and today I study at Georgetown University and work as the Director of Detainee Affairs at the Syrian Emergency Task Force.

I know how tough it is to be in your position, so I want to thank you. Thank you for the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. I would also like to encourage you to continue ensuring the act's full implementation, with a special focus on stopping the Assad regime, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah's war machine against Idlib.

Those four million people currently in Idlib are destined for detention, death, or displacement. Right now, they have no other choice. If we do not protect the people of Idlib, there will be mass humanitarian atrocities, surpassing the numbers of Srebrenica, and there will be significant levels of displacement, which could potentially double the number of refugees in Europe. If Idlib falls, Russia, Iran and the Assad regime will then focus their efforts on northeast Syria, increasing the challenge for US force protection and endangering US partner forces. If

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<sup>19</sup> Omar Alshogre, "10 Years on, Syrians Have not given up," Foreign Policy, April 7, 2021.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/07/ten-years-syrian-war-idlib/>

attacks against civilians continue without protection or response from the United States and the international community as a whole, extremist actors will manipulate this lack of action for their own propaganda and recruitment efforts, presenting themselves as the only civilian defense line.

In January 2020, the Assad regime and its allies began to revamp their relentless offensive on Idlib which resulted in massacres against civilians and the displacement of almost 500 000 thousand people in a matter of a week. The Wisdom House school for orphans and Tomorrow's Dawn women's center - two institutions supported by American communities and run by my organization, the Syrian Emergency Task Force - were permanently displaced. Fearing a massive flow of refugees, Turkey intervened, standing up to Russia and fighting against Iranian-backed militias, including Hezbollah, and Assad forces. NATO troop presence in Idlib resulted in a fragile ceasefire that is on the verge of collapse today. The United States must support its NATO ally, Turkey, to ensure that the existing ceasefire in northwest Syria is maintained and made permanent.

By protecting Idlib, the United States would effectively prevent Assad's military victory and, in doing so, would be conducive to a political solution and a negotiated settlement as per UNSC 2254. As former US envoy to Syria, Ambassador Frederic Hof, said, an Assad victory would "entrench Syria as the North Korea of the Middle East." However, if the United States continues to allow Assad and its Russian and Iranian-backed allies to employ conventional and chemical weapons and slaughter, displace, or detain the remaining 4 million Syrian civilians in Idlib, any prospect of a negotiated settlement will be off the table. This would ensure that no refugee ever returns home to Syria, that crimes against humanity continue to aggravate, and that destabilization in the region increases. The following excerpt from the Syrian Emergency Task Force's 2021 report "Idlib: Syria's Last Hope,"<sup>2</sup> outlines clear policy recommendations the United States must undertake to project its interests in Syria and prevent further mass atrocities:

- 1) The United States must pursue and strengthen efforts for the immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib's civilian population.<sup>3</sup>** The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies continue to escalate military operations in Idlib, including by deliberately targeting civilians—a war crime and crime against humanity. Aside from Turkish efforts, aerial attacks by Russian and Syrian forces have gone unchallenged. The United States must act to stop the further slaughter and forced displacement of civilians in Idlib. The current precarious ceasefire in Idlib was made possible by Turkey's military action against regime and Iranian-backed forces including Hezbollah in northwest Syria. That action stalled further atrocities and mass displacement. The United States must work to support its NATO ally on the ground through logistical, intelligence, and diplomatic

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<sup>2</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Idlib: Syria's Last Hope," March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice President at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

coordination. Through these efforts, coupled with continued economic sanctions under the Caesar Act, the United States can help protect Idlib without direct U.S. military intervention. Protecting Idlib is conducive to a negotiated settlement and bolsters U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

**2) The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts in Geneva.**<sup>4</sup> The United States must push for the advancement of UNSCR 2254, which calls for “an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.”<sup>5</sup> The United States, as a significant donor to humanitarian aid in Syria, must use its diplomatic efforts to hold the United Nations accountable for ensuring the safe and adequate delivery of humanitarian aid to the region. Specifically, Washington must sway Russia and China to extend the UN authorization for cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing currently authorized for humanitarian aid. This authorization is set to expire in July 2021.<sup>6</sup> Washington should also push Russia and China to reopen the three border crossings that previously carried cross-border aid but were closed at Russia’s behest: Al-Rathma and Al-Yaroubiyah, which have been closed since January 2020,<sup>7</sup> and Bab al-Salam, which has been closed since July 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the United States must develop a diplomatic strategy to achieve the full implementation of UNSCR 2254.<sup>9</sup> The United States must reaffirm and emphasize its commitment to a red line regarding the use of chemical weapons. Washington should use its influence to push the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to suspend the Syrian regime’s rights and privileges to hold the regime accountable for using chemical weapons against its own people.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the United States must send a strong message against the normalization of relations with Assad.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015.

([https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/pdf/cf%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/pdf/cf%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf))

<sup>6</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security, Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Meeting Coverage SC/14127, “Greater Cross-Border, Cross-Line Access Needed for Assistance to Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council,” February 27, 2020. (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14127.doc.htm>)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Press Release SC/14268, “Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council,” 29 July 2020, (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14268.doc.htm>); Jacob Kurtzer and Will Todman, “The Possible End of Cross-border Aid in Syria,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 6, 2020. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria>)

<sup>9</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security, Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

**3) The United States must step up support for existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib province.**<sup>12</sup> Existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib is not operating at full capacity, due to limited international support. The United States must engage with and support existing and additional civilian programming, including schools, medical facilities, and local governing councils to stabilize the region and develop a strong democratic civil society. Strengthening civilian infrastructure and civil society will help counter the influence of VEOs in Idlib by providing people with alternatives to, and the means to resist, VEOs such as HTS.

**4) The United States must intensify and broaden 2019 Caesar Act accountability efforts.**<sup>13</sup> Strict enforcement of Caesar and other U.S. sanctions are crucial for “limiting the resources available to the Assad regime for military offensives.” According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the Caesar Act went into effect in June 2020, the departments of State and Treasury have imposed sanctions on 113 individuals and entities for supporting the Assad regime or preventing a resolution of the war in Syria.<sup>14</sup> The Biden administration must continue this effort and ensure that the United States will make no exception for allies or partners who evade sanctions.<sup>15</sup>

Today everyone in Syria is suffering.

In **Rukban camp**, there are ten thousand civilians, half of them children, besieged by Russia and the Assad regime, while Jordan and Iraq keep their border crossings closed to humanitarian aid. Although this internally displaced persons camp is less than ten miles away from the US-led coalition’s al-Tanf garrison, they remain in dire need of sustained aid. Rukban has no schools or hospitals, although the Syrian Emergency Task Force runs a no-cost Hope Pharmacy. Through Voice of Rukban<sup>16</sup> - a series of videos made by the camps’ residents - many explain the fear of leaving the camp which would result in forced detention and death at the hands of the Assad regime. The US coalition’s partner forces that lead the fight against ISIS, keep Iran at bay and protect the fifty-five mile zone surrounding al-Tanf, are recruited from the camp, and their families continue to reside there. The US State Department and USAID, as well as the United Nations have failed in providing aid to Rukban.

Resolve humanitarian crisis in Rukban.

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<sup>12</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020; virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> According to a document provided by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan think tank focused on national security issues that has tracked the announcement of Caesar-related sanctions, there have been 119 Treasury and 34 State Department designations since June 17, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/voiceofrukban?lang=en> <https://www.facebook.com/voiceofrukban/>

- a. Provide direct humanitarian aid from al-Tanf Garrison to those most vulnerable amongst the camp's 10,000 civilians. The UN, ICRC, USAID and State Department have all failed to provide direct aid to the people of Rukban due to the Assad regime and Russian siege of Rukban IDP camp. Jordan and Iraq have closed their borders to direct humanitarian aid to the camp.
- b. Provide direct sustained humanitarian aid via the Al Walid road connecting Syria and Iraq by negotiating with the Iraqi government on potentially opening that border point for humanitarian aid .
- c. Transfer the willing civilian population of Rukban to a non-regime controlled location.
- d. Work through a US-led coalition based at al-Tanf Garrison to help facilitate the establishment of a hospital and educational facility that can cater to the camp's civilians. There are multiple NGOs able and willing to provide the manpower and funding, but they need logistical support and access.<sup>17</sup>

In **Northeastern Syria**, specifically in Deir Ezzor, civilians are vulnerable to ISIS attacks, as well as other security risks due to Assad regime and Iranian activities in eastern Syria. Today, the United States-led international coalition's presence in Deir Ezzor is key to ensuring that ISIS does not resurge and keeps hundreds of thousands of civilians safe from Iran and the Assad regime. Our counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in northeast Syria also provide the United States with leverage over the Assad regime, Iran, Russia in any negotiation.

Ensure security and stability in N.E Syria (particularly Deir Ezzor).

- a. Ensure that all democratic processes/structures of governance are free of corruption and are representative of the communities they serve.
- b. Ensure inclusivity of all Arab and Kurdish actors into the structure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).
- c. Rid the AANES of PKK elements that have ties to Iran, Russia and the Assad regime.
- d. Work towards an eventual bridging between NE & NW Syria politically and economically to leverage against the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran, opening up the possibility of a place where refugees can return and offering a stable and free alternative to regime-controlled areas of Syria.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", updated April 13, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", updated April 13, 2021.

**In regime-controlled areas**, security forces continue to arbitrarily detain and torture civilians to death. In Assad's torture chambers, there are over one hundred and fifty thousand men, women, children and elderly. I was one of the thousands of children in these detention centers where I witnessed the most nightmarish scenes anyone could imagine. It is the responsibility of the United States and the international community to put an end to the machinery of death existing in Assad regime prisons. It should be non-negotiable for children and innocent civilians to be released immediately. One must only look at the Caesar photos to understand the urgency of addressing detainees in Syria and let us not forget that six American citizens remain in these hellish dungeons, including Austin Tice and Majd Kamalmaz.

Addressing the release of the over 200,000 men, women and children detained by the Assad regime, including American citizens.

- a. Establish a clear and strong stance emphasizing that the immediate release of detainees is non-negotiable, and will not be accepted as part of a negotiated settlement.
- b. Politically and financially support the creation of a mechanism to account for all the missing and disappeared around Syria. There is currently no unified database or cross system data comparison.
- c. Use targeted and Caesar Act sanctions on anyone associated with the detention apparatus in Syria, as a deterrent for those working within the Assad intelligence and detention apparatus.<sup>19</sup>

The Assad regime has obliterated the Syrian economy. Bashar al-Assad has chosen to buy and manufacture weapons of mass destruction to be used on his own people, as opposed to procuring medicine and food. Assad and his corrupt regime have continued to instill terror in the hearts of civilians, including allowing the COVID-19 pandemic to spread unabated. Assad has paid and borrowed enormous sums to Russia and Iran in exchange for their military backing. He has prioritized keeping his position of power over feeding even those loyal to him.

Full implementation of the Caesar Act and other targeted sanctions aimed at protecting civilians.

- e. Expand the Caesar Act implementation to go beyond previously sanctioned individuals, as a majority of those sanctions have come on entities and individuals that are already sanctioned.
- f. Prioritize sanctioning individuals based on who is most actively responsible for the current violence against civilians [particularly in Idlib], including detention and military mid-level personnel, over symbolic sanctions. These sanctions should act as a deterrence measure, targeting

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<sup>19</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", April 13, 2021.

chemical weapons, detention facilities, business facilitators outside Syria currently providing fuel and energy.<sup>20</sup>

I am honored today to be sitting in the hallowed halls of the United States Congress, but I sit here today with an enormous responsibility on my shoulders: the responsibility to convey to you the voices of those who are not able to be before you today. The thousands of civilians tortured to death in the Caesar photos, many of whose lifeless bodies I was forced to number are gone. We must achieve justice for them and their families, but we have failed in saving their lives. It is incumbent upon us that we save the rest, including the hundreds of thousands of detainees, the four million civilians in Idlib, the ten thousand in Rukban and the millions of others suffering under Assad's tyranny in my home Syria.

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<sup>20</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", April 13, 2021.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Alshogre. We appreciate it.

Ms. Cafarella, you are now recognized.

**STATEMENT OF MS. JENNIFER CAFARELLA, NATIONAL SECURITY FELLOW, INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR**

Ms. CAFARELLA. Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me today. I am honored by the opportunity to testify again about the devastating impact of Syria's now decade-long war and how the U.S. might better safeguard American interests while making an end to the violence possible.

For 10 years, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has chosen to torture, execute, bomb, and starve his own people rather than grant even modest concessions. The OPCW just this week implicated his forces in yet another chemical weapons attack against civilians, this one in 2018. Assad's violence has upended the Middle East, caused instability to ripple across Europe, and inflamed the global jihadist movement. But today, I would like to shift focus to put Assad in his proper place within the Syrian war.

Assad is resilient and capable, but he cannot alone determine Syria's future. The war being fought in 2021 is much different from the one that began a decade ago when Assad chose violence against peaceful protesters. The Syrian battlefield is now a tapestry of transnational military forces who are locked in a complex and multisided power struggle. Foreign forces including the Russian and Turkish militaries, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force and its foreign proxies, and various foreign jihadists as well as U.S. forces now control or influence much of the Syrian battlefield.

An agreement between international actors is now a prerequisite for ending the conflict, but it is unlikely in the near term. Moreover, no actor currently fighting in Syria can seize and hold all of the country and most are pursuing goals that are incompatible with a durable partition. The war will continue with increasingly global repercussions and leaving behind the Syrians who rose up to reclaim their country and who still represent Syria's future.

Policy goals that were reasonable in 2011, are no longer appropriate a decade later. The U.S. will not achieve a nationwide ceasefire in Syria which has become a fully discredited notion. A diplomatic settlement of the war is also out of immediate reach. Assad refuses to negotiate even now as his economy collapses and new unrest among loyalist communities emerges. His behavior indicates he believes time is on his side.

America's habit of choosing unattainable goals in Syria has cost us opportunities to make an impact and has made us vulnerable to a number of strategic traps that would worsen the conflict. They include accepting Assad and lifting sanctions on his regime; supporting Syrian Kurdish independence, or the opposite extremism, abandoning our Syrian Kurdish partners to Turkey; normalizing al-Qaida's offshoots; or, most importantly, expecting Russia either to play a constructive role or to fail in Syria, including outsourcing counterterrorism or countering Iran to Russia, expecting Russia to

deliver an diplomatic settlement that ends the war or expecting Syria to become a quagmire that weakens Russia.

The Russia traps are the most dangerous. Viewing Russia as a potentially constructive actor overlooks Syria's importance to Russia's global ambitions. Russia is using its military bases in Syria as a springboard to expand military infrastructure across the Middle East and North Africa. Russian's efforts to coopt the U.N.-led diplomatic processes are weakening international systems that would otherwise restrict Russia's malign activity.

Empowering Russia and Syria is the same as strengthening Vladimir Putin's bid to make Russia a global power. These are not America's only options. Once we set aside unrealistic goals more constructive options emerge. I recommend the following:

First, reinforce our successes. The U.S. should reevaluate the stabilization and military assistance needed to bolster our partner in eastern Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF, and commit to providing cross-border humanitarian aid even if Russia vetoes approvals for it at the U.N. Security Council.

Second, constrain U.S. adversaries by upholding sanctions on Assad and his backers and continuing counterterrorism pressure against both ISIS and al-Qaida. I recommend going even further to hold Russia accountable by commissioning a congressional study of Russian war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and other theaters as appropriate. The U.S. should also provide diplomatic and economic assistance to Turkey to prevent another attack on Idlib province.

And third, the U.S. should build for the future. The U.S. should launch a robust diplomatic effort to foster dialog across as much of Syrian society as possible while sidelining Assad and his backers. Support to the SDF in eastern Syria is also a vital component of building to the future and should include pressure on the SDF to reform its governance model to provide better political inclusion and accountability. The U.S. has experienced the consequences of a decade of avoidance in Syria and they are unacceptable. It is time to commit to engagement. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Cafarella follows:]



Prepared testimony of:

Ms. Jennifer Cafarella  
National Security Fellow  
Institute for the Study of War

For the hearing:

"10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria"  
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Before the:

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

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian war in 2021 hardly resembles the revolution that began a decade ago. A settlement between the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his opponents is no longer viable in the near term. The war is now so deeply intertwined with wider regional and global geopolitics that it cannot end without an international agreement. This transformation of Syria's war since 2011 has created new threats to US national security and worsened those that emerged in the war's first years.

The Syrian war will continue for the foreseeable future. No actor currently fighting in Syria can seize and hold all of the country and most are pursuing goals that are incompatible with a durable partition. Numerous actors are projecting insurgencies outward from their areas of control. Major ground operations have slowed, but future offensives remain likely including in Idlib. Assad's superficial control within regime-held areas will continue to generate instability.

The United States is overlooking Syria's centrality to Russia's global ambitions. US policy framing that isolates Russia's operations in Syria from Russia's broader challenge to the United States and international order creates a dangerous blind spot that Russia is actively exploiting. Russia's military expansion and adaptation in Syria allows Russia to apply new pressure on NATO operations in the Middle East and North Africa while developing capabilities to offset US and NATO advantages. Russia's efforts to co-opt the UN-led diplomatic process in Syria are worsening the erosion of international mechanisms that have mitigated global conflict since the end of WWII.

Transnational terrorist organizations continue to proliferate in Syria and are evolving under US counterterrorism pressure to pose new and challenging threats. ISIS is reconstituting an insurgency fueled by the group's global momentum and the significant opportunity created by the large population of vulnerable displaced persons across Syria and Iraq. Defeating the ISIS caliphate damaged but did not defeat the group. Al Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al Sham is attempting to gain international recognition that could increase its access to revenue and legitimize its indoctrination and recruitment of Syrians.

Iran is exploiting the vacuum in Syria to entrench its own transnational networks in ways that will fuel continued regional instability and risk provoking a major war with Israel. Israel is degrading Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, but Iran's long-term effort to gain social roots through religious, cultural, and financial outreach remains unanswered. Iran is positioned to neutralize the impact of a future deal for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria, which would leave Iran's local influence intact.

The limited US commitment to Syria has achieved disproportionate impact, including constraining Assad's war effort and preventing ISIS from fully reconstituting, but is untenable at current force levels. The United States could face a forced withdrawal if pro-Assad actors significantly increase their military pressure through insurgent attacks, a contingency for which they are preparing.

Multiple **strategic traps** await the United States as the Biden Administration reformulates its Syria policy.

- Accepting Assad and lifting sanctions on his regime
- Supporting Syrian Kurdish independence
- Abandoning the Syrian Kurds to Turkey
- Normalizing al Qaeda's offshoots
- Expecting Russia either to play a constructive role or fail in Syria.

The Russia traps are particularly dangerous due to Russia's success in advancing disinformation that promotes them. The versions of this trap include outsourcing terrorism to Russia, expecting Russia to constrain Iran or deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war, or expecting Syria to become a "quagmire" that weakens Russia.

All of these traps, which surface frequently in policy discussions over Syria, do not provide viable pathways to accomplish US interests in Syria. Instead, they will lead to greater conflict and erosion of US military leverage and diplomatic influence while emboldening US adversaries including Russia, Iran, and Salafi jihadist groups.

Overestimating what is achievable in Syria is as likely to lead to strategic failure as a complete withdrawal. The United States must pursue modest goals that make longer-term interests, including a diplomatic settlement, more achievable over time. In the next five years, the United States should:

1. Constrain Russia, Iran, and Assad in eastern Syria
2. Deny Assad normalization and economic windfalls
3. Help the SDF build responsive governance and capable security structures in eastern Syria
4. Realign with Turkey in Syria by supporting it in Idlib and pressing the SDF for reform
5. Ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and SDF-held areas, including the al Hawl camp
6. Prevent an ISIS reconstitution and inhibit attacks by ISIS and/or al Qaeda against the West

To start, the United States should take the following steps to shore up its strategic position, posture the United States to mitigate worst-case scenarios, foster local resilience, and enable follow-on measures.

#### *Reinforcing successes*

- Evaluate the force requirements to stabilize eastern Syria, defeat ISIS's insurgency in SDF-held areas, and assist the SDF in deterring attacks from Russia, Assad, Iran, Turkey, and their proxies.
- Commit to continued cross-border aid access even if Russia vetoes access in the UN. Pursue a deal with the EU and Turkey for a joint humanitarian aid effort.

#### *Constraining US adversaries*

- Uphold sanctions and maintain a firm position against political normalization or new financial support to the Assad regime, including from the IMF. Apply additional sanctions as appropriate including secondary sanctions against those still investing in Syria.

- Commission a congressional study of Russian war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and other theaters as appropriate in order to combat Russian disinformation and reinforce international laws and norms against such tactics.
- Commit to supporting Turkey diplomatically and economically in Idlib in the event of a future Russian-backed offensive in order to foster cooperation while preventing a dangerous escalation in northwest Syria. Begin talks with Turkey to identify military support that may be necessary.
- Continue high-value strikes against al Qaeda leaders and attack cells. Publicize as much evidence as possible regarding HTS's current and historic role in transnational terrorism including key elements beyond attack planning: foreign fighter recruitment, cross-theater logistics, and international financing.

*Building for the future*

- Launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin an intra-Syrian dialogue through conferences and track II initiatives with inclusion from as broad of a cross-section of Syrian society as possible.
- Evaluate the funding requirements to accelerate stabilization in eastern Syria and identify priority target areas, which should include the al Hawl internally displaced persons (IDP) camp.<sup>1</sup> When security conditions allow, return civilian programmers and diplomats to the area and launch new stabilization programs based on the review.
- Push the SDF to reform its governance model to provide more political inclusion for Arab populations and better accountability mechanisms that improve civilians' trust.

## INTRODUCTION

The war in Syria today hardly resembles the revolution that began a decade ago. Foreign forces—including the Russian and Turkish militaries; Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force and its Afghan, Pakistani, Lebanese, and Iraqi proxies; foreign jihadists; and US forces—now control or influence much of the Syrian battlefield. A meaningful settlement between Syrian president Bashar al Assad and his opponents is no longer achievable in the near term. Assad has spoiled all diplomatic efforts while fracturing and radicalizing his opposition and forcing much of its support base to flee.<sup>2</sup> While a compromise among Syrians remains necessary to end the war, an agreement between international actors is now a prerequisite that is unlikely to be met in the near future. The war in Syria is now intertwined with regional and global geopolitics that preclude a settlement. The war is on track to continue, with Syrians its first victims.

The repercussions of the first ten years of Syria's war have been severe.<sup>3</sup> The flow of refugees fleeing the violence of Assad and his backers has destabilized Syria's neighbors, polarized Europe, and caused conflict between the United States and Turkey. The stress of this refugee crisis will continue to damage the region and Europe as the Assad regime is committed to ensuring this population has no viable option for return.<sup>4</sup> The war has destroyed the country, which the UN estimated in 2017 would take \$250 billion to rebuild.<sup>5</sup> The cost has only grown since then. Syria's collapse has provided enduring safe havens for Salafi jihadist groups, given Russia the opportunity to gain a strategic foothold in the Middle East, enabled Iran's regional expansion and escalating conflict with Israel, and undermined international norms including those regarding weapons of mass destruction. Syria's impact is global.

Conditions on the ground in early 2021 point to a new phase of the war that will produce even worse consequences in the coming years. The international community has done little to mitigate the damage of Syria's war or foster the conditions that will make its resolution possible. The most decisive actors have been those willing to destroy the country and its people for their aims: Assad, Russia, and Iran.

### **NO END IN SIGHT FOR SYRIA'S WAR**

Waiting out the Syrian war is not an option. The war is on track to continue—with increasingly global repercussions—for the foreseeable future. No actor is capable of seizing and holding all of Syria, which is divided into three major zones. Assad seized large portions of western Syria from 2016-2018 with Russian and Iranian help but has been unable to consolidate control or advance into new areas. Turkey controls a swath of northern Syria along the Turkish border, which it secures and governs using Turkish military forces and infrastructure augmented by Syrian proxies. Finally, US forces enable the SDF to control the remaining approximately 1/3 of Syrian territory.

The Syrian conflict will not crystallize into a partition. Most major actors in Syria either seek to define the future of the entire state or view it as a component of a larger regional project. Assad has deliberately retained a foothold in all “four corners” of Syria in order to mitigate the possibility of partition.<sup>6</sup> Russia views Syria through the lens of resisting what Russia falsely claims are Western efforts to overthrow the Syrian regime or otherwise destroy its sovereignty and thus will not accept its division.<sup>7</sup> Iran views Syria as a lynchpin in its efforts to shape governance and security structures across the region along the model of its Islamic theocracy.<sup>8</sup> ISIS and al Qaeda and its offshoots seek to replace the regime with an Islamic state in all of Syria.<sup>9</sup> The PKK views Syria as a test case for its vision of an independent Kurdistan across the Middle East and a front line in its war against Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Turkey is pursuing its own regional hegemony that includes territorial expansion to defeat the PKK in Syria.<sup>11</sup> The ambitious goals of the major actors in Syria engender maximalist approaches that are incompatible with a durable partition.

Syria's current front lines are unstable and could not be readily transformed into borders. Numerous actors are waging insurgencies from their zones of control into those of their primary opponents. PKK elements within the SDF are likely responsible for numerous insurgent attacks that are destabilizing areas Turkey seized from the SDF from 2016-2019.<sup>12</sup> Assad, Iran, and possibly Russia are enabling insurgent attacks against the SDF east of the Euphrates River.<sup>13</sup> The ISIS insurgency has reached all major zones in Syria except the coast. Major ground operations have slowed, but future offensives remain likely. Assad intends to attack Idlib again. Turkish forces and their proxies continue low-level attacks against the SDF and could launch a renewed offensive.<sup>14</sup>

Assad's control within regime-held areas is superficial and will continue to generate instability. Renewed insurgencies and protests threaten to destabilize regime-held areas again, especially in Dera'a where the revolution began in 2011.<sup>15</sup> Russian and Iranian forces and their proxies operate outside state control and are mobilizing Syrian forces that they will not fully submit to regime control. Assad faces growing unrest from loyalist populations including among the Druze population in Suwayda province and indications of growing dissatisfaction in the Syrian coast.

Assad cannot seize and hold all of Syria, and could even begin to lose hold of some recently seized areas. The west has little reason to cede him Syria, which he is responsible for destroying and will fail to secure.

#### **NEW AND WORSENING THREATS IN SYRIA**

The transformation of Syria's war since 2011 has created new threats to US national security and worsened those that emerged in the war's first years. The United States is overlooking Syria's centrality to Russia's global ambitions. US policy framing that isolates Russia's operations in Syria from Russia's broader challenge to the US and international order creates a dangerous blind spot that Russia is actively exploiting. Meanwhile, despite six years of US-led counterterrorism operations in Syria, transnational terrorist organizations continue to proliferate in Syria and are evolving to pose new threats that will be even more difficult to address. Iran is also exploiting the vacuum in Syria to entrench its own transnational networks in ways that will fuel continued regional instability and risks provoking a major war with Israel in the future.

**Russia's position in Syria is a grand strategic challenge to the United States and NATO.** Russia is using its air and naval bases in Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartous, respectively, as a springboard to build out military infrastructure across the Middle East and North Africa that could give Russia strategic depth it has not possessed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian private military companies (PMCs) deploying from Syria took control of an airbase in Libya and are fortifying it to enable what could become a permanent presence.<sup>16</sup> Russia is also establishing a naval base in Sudan that will enable it to repurpose its base in Syria from primarily a resupply facility to a multipurpose naval base.<sup>17</sup> Long-term, Russia seeks to expand the area of responsibility of its Black Sea Fleet to cover the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Persian Gulf while extending to Madagascar and India's west coast.<sup>18</sup> Russia's expanding military footprint provides it greater leverage over NATO in the Middle East and North Africa, positioning Russia to apply pressure such as threats to freedom of navigation through key naval chokepoints. If its expansion continues, Russia could develop even greater disruptive leverage.

Russia is also using its experience fighting in Syria to transform its military capabilities to bypass and offset US and NATO advantages, potentially leveling the playing field.<sup>19</sup> Russia's evolving doctrine prioritizes information operations and subordinates military operations to support their effects, a reversal of the US framework and for which the United States does not yet have a strategic response. Russia is also using its Syria experience to close several capability and technology gaps with the United States and NATO including command and control, expeditionary warfare, coalition warfare, precision strike capabilities, long-range drones, and counter-drone capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Russia continues to use the Syrian battlefield as a live-fire proving ground for new weapons systems and doctrine and will feed new lessons learned into its ongoing efforts to transform and professionalize its force.<sup>21</sup>

The experience fighting in Syria has already improved the capabilities of Russian command headquarters, airpower, PMCs, and Special Forces (Spetsnaz). Spetsnaz teams have supported pro-regime forces in frontline combat using heavy weapons and anti-tank guided munitions (ATGMs), including during the 2019 push by pro-regime forces into Idlib Province.<sup>22</sup> Their experience in

combat differs from the experience gained by US special operations forces in Syria, who have performed a train and assist mission with local partners and have not engaged in frontline fighting.

**US forces in Syria are already confronting a transformed Russian threat.** Russia has made eastern Syria a test case for a type of contested operational environment that US forces must prepare to face in the future. Russia is testing and fielding new electronic warfare systems to interfere with US operations, including disabling US aircraft and small surveillance drones and disrupting US communications. Then-US Special Operations Command commander General Thomas described Syria as “the most aggressive EW [electronic warfare] environment on the planet” in April 2018.<sup>23</sup> Russia’s EW toolkit includes a GPS spoofing capability that some military analysts in Russia claim caused multiple US cruise missiles to miss their target during the US strike on the Shayrat airbase in Syria in 2017.<sup>24</sup> Other Russian EW systems directed at Syrian opposition groups could be used to interfere with the United States and its partner force in the future, including phone jamming and text message/call spoofing.<sup>25</sup>

Russia is employing its new doctrine to shape social and political conditions in eastern Syria to be inhospitable to US forces. Russia seeks to shape the decision-making of local actors toward outcomes favorable to Russia through information operations reinforced by kinetic operations. Russia’s effort in Eastern Syria threatens to fragment the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and generate either or both local resistance to continued US presence or a decision by the SDF’s senior leadership to abandon the US partnership. Russia’s primary information operations frame the United States as an unreliable partner and stoke Arab tribal unrest against SDF governance, exploiting a seam between the SDF’s primarily Kurdish leadership and local Arab populations.<sup>26</sup>

Russia is also applying its successful model of fighting with indigenous forces in Syria to achieve other geopolitical interests.<sup>27</sup> Russia scaled up the recruitment and mobilization of thousands of Syrian proxy fighters in mid-2020. Russia has already deployed these forces alongside its PMCs in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Venezuela and likely will use this expeditionary capability in other theaters. If successful, this effort will provide a cheap expeditionary force that increases the scope and scale of the military operations Russia can sustain abroad at low risk to Russian personnel or domestic backlash.

The strategic and operational threats Russia’s operations in Syria pose to the United States and NATO have gone unanswered. US sanctions have imposed some costs on Russian officials and companies involved in violence against civilians in Western Syria but do not mitigate the broader risks posed by Russia’s continued military expansion and adaptation. In Eastern Syria, US forces lack the support needed to respond to Russian pressure, including authorities to counter Russian information operations more effectively. The United States is also widening the strategic power vacuum in the Middle East by redeploying assets out of the Persian Gulf and signaling potential additional troop reductions to follow.<sup>28</sup> This re-posturing cedes an opportunity for Russia to extend its infrastructure and influence in the Middle East right as Russia is gearing up to do so. The United States will miss critical opportunities to disrupt Russia’s acquisition of new global leverage if US efforts to posture effectively for great power competition overlook the Middle East theater.

Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to dismantle the rules-based international order that makes the world safe for democracy and constrains disruptive actors like Russia. Putin envisions diminished American power and the creation of a multipolar world order in which Russia is a global power capable of imposing its will on others.<sup>29</sup> The UN is a key battleground for Putin's campaign.<sup>30</sup> Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council (UNSC) is a key source of Russian power. Putin is working to bolster the significance of the UN while simultaneously eroding the constraints it imposes, effectively repurposing the organization to enable Russia's rise at the expense of the US and international norms. Consistent with Russia's new military doctrine (discussed above), Russia is focusing its efforts at the UN on reshaping the global information space, using the UN to legitimize Russian operations across theaters.<sup>31</sup>

**Syria is central to Russia's effort to reshape international mechanisms to favor Russia.** Weak international resolve to take action in Syria creates opportunities for Russia to tear down UN resolutions and mechanisms that constrain Assad and his backers, creating precedents Russia can apply to other theaters. Russia's most concerning success has been to terminate the joint inquiry by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate and identify those responsible for chemical weapons use in Syria.<sup>32</sup> France led an important effort to mitigate the damage by forming a separate investigative mechanism at the OPCW that has continued to investigate and publish in-depth findings regarding the Assad regime's role in chemical attacks.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, Russia's success forcing the investigation out of the UN reduces its impact and bolsters Russia's efforts to normalize chemical weapons use.

Russia has also done significant damage to the UN's ability to provide humanitarian aid to civilians in war zones. Russia has devastated the humanitarian aid effort in Syria in part by using UN coordinates to conduct illegal precision strikes against hospitals.<sup>34</sup> Russia is also working to eliminate UN-provided authority to bypass the Assad regime to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria. Russia has already used its veto power to scale the authorization down from four border crossing points to one and will likely vote against the final crossing in July, forcing the UN deeper into complicity with Assad.<sup>35</sup> Assad's behavior to date indicates he will use the leverage to attempt to starve out remaining opposition-held areas while directing aid to loyalist communities.<sup>36</sup> Russia's success will lead to greater cooptation of humanitarian aid by authoritarians including the Assad regime in the future.

**The US approach to diplomacy in Syria fails to account for Russia's success in shaping the UN and the information environment surrounding Syria.** Russia has neutralized UNSCR 2254 as a potential mechanism to force major changes in the behavior of the Assad regime. The resolution outlines requirements for an end to the war including a ceasefire and the drafting of a new Syrian Constitution followed by UN-monitored elections. Russia seeks to repurpose 2254 to break Assad's isolation and preserve his regime. Russia has made multiple attempts to this end, including proposing reconstruction funds in return for refugee resettlement.<sup>37</sup> While these efforts have failed, they have bought time for Russia and Assad to strengthen their position on the ground while further delegitimizing the diplomatic process. In 2021, Russia is again advancing an effort to implement UNSCR 2254 outside the UN framework, this time with support from Turkey and Qatar as well as potentially other Arab Gulf states.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's success undermining the viability of the UN as a mechanism for upholding international law and constraining human rights abuses makes conditions much worse for diplomacy than they were in 2015 when UNSCR 2254 passed. The Syrian diplomatic process remains in a limbo that favors Assad and his backers while lending credence to a claim that Salafi jihadist groups use to recruit: Syrians have no option for justice except the full destruction of the Assad regime.

**Syria remains a durable haven for Salafi jihadist groups, which are evolving to pose new threats.** The sizes of these forces are difficult to verify, so available numbers should be treated with some skepticism. The available evidence indicates a substantial jihadist presence in Syria that constitutes a major counterterrorism challenge. Estimates from the UN in 2021 indicate there are roughly 30,000 jihadist fighters on the Syrian battlefield, including ISIS's insurgent force and various al-Qaeda-linked groups.<sup>39</sup> Another 10,000 ISIS fighters are currently detained in SDF-held prisons, including 2,000 foreign fighters whose countries of origin have refused to repatriate them.<sup>40</sup> In aggregate, Syria is second only to Afghanistan in terms of the relative size and diversity of its jihadist movement.

**Absent sustained counterterrorism pressure, ISIS could re-establish a physical caliphate.** ISIS remains an organized and capable global organization. It is focused on resurging outside Iraq and Syria to regain momentum and reinvigorate its brand. It has expanded its operations across the African continent, including creating multiple new provinces that have generated momentum and resources that can fuel ISIS's recovery in Syria and Iraq.<sup>41</sup> In Syria, ISIS is reconstituting fastest in areas held by the Assad regime and its backers including in the central Homs desert, where ISIS maintains a durable base from which it can prevent pro-regime forces from transiting the area and seize energy infrastructure. ISIS's secure base in central Syria also positions ISIS to scale up operations in other provinces in the coming months.<sup>42</sup>

An unaddressed IDP crisis across Syria and Iraq provides ISIS its greatest opportunity. After defeating ISIS's physical caliphate in 2019, the anti-ISIS coalition has failed to enable the reconstruction and stabilization necessary to enable tens of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi IDPs to return home safely. This population's continued vulnerability provides ISIS a major recruitment opportunity. In Syria, ISIS is recruiting additional members within the al Hawl IDP camp, which hosts 50,000 children under the age of 18 who are particularly vulnerable.<sup>43</sup> ISIS also conducted a major assassination campaign in the camp in late 2020.<sup>44</sup> ISIS is similarly recruiting among the 30,000 IDPs at the Rukban IDP camp near the border with Jordan.<sup>45</sup> Forced returns of these populations began in late 2019 and are worsening the problem, sending civilians to destroyed homes and often to hostile communities where they are even more vulnerable to ISIS.<sup>46</sup> New grievances provide ISIS additional inroads with the population.

**The United States faces an even more dangerous threat from the al Qaeda network in Syria,** which is insulating itself from counterterrorism pressure. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the successor to al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, is attempting to become a legitimate governance provider in northwest Syria. HTS's force of approximately 10,000 fighters in Idlib Province now leads a governing body titled the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) that has consolidated control and positioned itself as a Turkish partner.<sup>47</sup> HTS seeks to gain more international support for the SSG in the form of humanitarian aid and has begun to indicate a desire for political recognition. HTS's

bid to govern reflects a new phase of its careful approach in Syria. HTS has prioritized gaining local support and legitimacy in order to deny the United States opportunities to leverage popular resistance to defeat the group, as we did to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from 2007-2011 and ISIS from 2014-2019.<sup>48</sup>

HTS's control in Idlib increases the terrorism threat the United States faces by providing other al Qaeda-linked groups and ISIS haven, positioning HTS and other groups to indoctrinate and recruit among Idlib's vulnerable IDP population, legitimizing HTS's extreme ideology, and enabling HTS to raise significant financial resources. HTS claims to have severed its ties to the al Qaeda global organization but has not moderated its ideology nor forcibly expelled al Qaeda elements who are planning attacks against the West. The financial resources HTS can mobilize are particularly dangerous. An HTS official claimed in late 2019 the organization makes \$130 million per month via taxes, oil, extortion, and land seizures and sales.<sup>49</sup> HTS is also fundraising abroad, including through cryptocurrency trading.<sup>50</sup> It is unclear from publicly available information how much money HTS provides the broader al Qaeda network.

**New al-Qaeda-linked groups are emerging in Syria.** The most prominent group, Tanzim Hurras al Din, has approximately 2,000-2,500 fighters and publicly asserts its intent to conduct attacks against the West.<sup>51</sup> The Turkistan Islamic Party, another prominent al Qaeda-linked group that the UN estimates has 3,500-4,000 fighters in Syria, openly declares its intent to attack China and Russia and may be linked to at least one attack abroad from Syria.<sup>52</sup> Other apparently al Qaeda – linked groups have begun to emerge, including one that has claimed multiple attacks against Turkish forces deployed to Idlib as well as Russian forces north of Raqqa City.<sup>53</sup> The continued proliferation of jihadist groups in Syria demonstrates that the United States will continue to face a terror threat from Syria for the foreseeable future.

**Iran is attempting to build a long-term presence in Syria through a combination of permanent military infrastructure and social outreach, which could entrench Iranian presence and influence.**<sup>54</sup> Iran's expanding military infrastructure has triggered an escalating Israeli air campaign, which has imposed costs that block the full scope of Iran's intended build-out.<sup>55</sup> Iran's social outreach is unaddressed, however. Iran is building religious, cultural, and economic influence along the Euphrates River in eastern Syria that complement similar efforts along the Syrian coast and Syria's southern Dera'a Province and leverage established Iranian-supported entities including Lebanese Hezbollah's development organization Jihad al Bina to gain inroads into Sunni populations.<sup>56</sup> Iran is recruiting tribal fighters into its proxy militias, meanwhile.<sup>57</sup>

Iran's social outreach in Eastern Syria increases the threat Iran poses to the region, Israel, and US forces deployed in eastern Syria. It supports Iran's establishment of a land corridor that passes through Iraq and eastern Syria before reaching Damascus and then Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> It also positions Iran's proxies to benefit from future cross-border trade between Syria and Iraq and to threaten US forces on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River (more on this below). Iran's new local roots in Syria could neutralize a future deal that requires a withdrawal of foreign forces, which would leave Iran with strong inroads in local communities. Iran's investment in Sunni-majority areas including

Eastern Syria will also drive instability and sectarianism, creating an opportunity for Salafi jihadist organizations like ISIS to justify insurgent attacks.

Iran's ability to gain traction among these communities is a product of the strategic vacuum in Syria more than the appeal of Iran's ideology or material support. The greatest competition Iran faces is from Russian and regime units who are also recruiting and performing outreach to this population.<sup>59</sup> The poverty caused by the war is their primary enabler. The false starts of US withdrawals from Syria in 2018 and 2019 also undermined the SDF and created fear that drove some communities to embrace alternatives—including Iran, Russia, and Assad. It remains to be seen how durable their influence is if contested, however. The United States could disrupt their consolidation and potentially erode their influence by establishing and communicating an enduring presence in eastern Syria that strengthens the SDF and offers new opportunities for locals to gain employment and enjoy security.

### CURRENT US IMPACT

The current US commitment to Syria has achieved a disproportionate impact in support of US interests. US economic pressure is constraining Assad's war effort and miring him in efforts to mitigate and offset the destabilizing effects of a growing collapse of the regime economy. The economic and diplomatic isolation US sanctions create have also disrupted Russia's effort to gain reconstruction funds from Europe that would have been used to reward regime power brokers and Russia and Iran rather than rebuild the parts of Syria they have destroyed. Meanwhile, the deployment of roughly 900 US special operations forces to eastern Syria is enabling a minimum level of stability that prevents a major ISIS breakout and denies Assad, Russia, and Iran valuable energy assets and terrain.<sup>60</sup> US strikes after the last two confirmed chemical weapons attacks in Syria have thus far deterred future use. These outcomes are important and have prevented even worse scenarios from emerging.

The United States must not overestimate what more this commitment can achieve, however. Defeating the ISIS caliphate damaged but did not defeat the group nor eliminate the threat it poses to the West. Current US efforts will not end the war or cause a diplomatic settlement to occur, moreover. Statements by US officials that link US sanctions and stabilization efforts to the UN-backed diplomatic process reflect a positive orientation on a long-term settlement of the war but are counterproductive in the near term. Conditions are nowhere near set for implementation of UN resolution 2254, but the US focus on it has allowed Assad and Russia to spoil and discredit it as a workable solution, causing Syrians to begin to look elsewhere. The United States should uphold its objective of enabling a diplomatic settlement of the war, but must first re-establish the credibility of the diplomatic process. Granting Russia and Assad concessions in the pursuit of unattainable near-term wins has done more harm than good. It is time for the United States to re-evaluate.

Despite its success, the US position in eastern Syria is untenable for the long-term at current force levels. The United States faces acute risks in eastern Syria that could overwhelm US forces if they do not receive more support. US forces are stretched thin and cannot provide the scope and scale of local mediation needed to mitigate faltering Arab tribal support for the SDF or reintegrate IDPs.

US forces lack the resources and expertise to provide the stabilization assistance the SDF sorely needs, including the rehabilitation of basic services and governance. Moreover, the SDF's hold on eastern Syria is tenuous due to the combined pressure from ISIS's insurgency and sustained Turkish military pressure, which draws forces away from fighting ISIS. US forces are enabling targeted CT operations and play a role in deterring another Turkish offensive but cannot, at current force levels, bridge the gap in capabilities needed to secure the area.

An increase in attacks by pro-Assad actors could force the US into a contested withdrawal from Syria. Assad, Russia, and Iran are all postured to escalate and have been expanding their recruitment among local populations in eastern Syria including those in SDF-held areas.<sup>61</sup> The most dangerous possibility in the near term is an Iranian escalation in Syria in retaliation for US pressure elsewhere. The DIA reported to the DOD inspector general in December 2020 that "Iran has attempted to recruit local Syrians to collect intelligence on U.S. and Coalition forces in Syria and could attempt to leverage these individuals to conduct attacks on its behalf" including "in response to perceived support to strikes on regional Iranian-affiliated targets and to pressure the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria."<sup>62</sup>

## STRATEGIC TRAPS IN SYRIA

Multiple strategic traps await the Biden administration as it formulates its Syria policy:

- ⊗ **TRAP: Accepting Assad.** The option to accept Assad in return for stability in Syria is a false one. The most likely consequences of such a decision would be to doom more Syrians to detention, torture, and execution; fuel Assad's campaign of revenge against the population that rebelled against him; render the refugee crisis permanent; fuel a new recruitment wave by jihadist groups; empower Russia globally; and allow Iran to establish long-term social roots and military infrastructure which could lead to a major regional escalation with Israel.

Russia is working to draw the United States into this trap, nonetheless. To build pressure for normalization, Russia is making progress lobbying US allies in the Arab gulf to restart diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, welcome it back into the Arab League, and invest in reconstruction projects that will provide the regime a stabilizing windfall that rewards its powerbrokers. Russia is also attempting to foster support in the West for acceptance of Assad by pushing disinformation supporting the following false narratives.<sup>63</sup>

### False Russian Narratives in Syria

- The war is over and refusing to accept Assad needlessly prolongs Syrian suffering
  - Assad protects Syrian minorities
  - US sanctions are inhumane and illegal
  - Western intelligence organizations are fabricating reports of war crimes in Syria<sup>64</sup>
  - Russia can help return refugees to Syria with financial help
- ⊗ **TRAP: Supporting Syrian Kurdish independence.** A US-supported effort to turn SDF-held areas into an independent state would be particularly dangerous. Any significant step towards granting international legitimacy to the SDF's governing body (the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria or AANES) would incite another Turkish invasion that would destabilize northern Syria and

significantly disrupt if not end the counter-ISIS effort. The risk that such an escalation expands to include PKK operations in Turkey and/or northern Iraq is high. Even if a Turkish escalation could be deterred, the recognition of an independent SDF-run state is counterproductive for US interests overall. It would further worsen the prospects of a diplomatic settlement of the war and could invite military escalation by other actors including the Assad regime, potentially with Russian support.

⊗ ***TRAP: Abandoning the Syrian Kurds to Turkey.*** The United States should not withdraw from eastern Syria and allow Turkey to destroy the SDF. Turkey cannot seize and secure all of eastern Syria and would leave a significant vacuum in which ISIS can accelerate its reconstitution. Abandoning the SDF also increases the risk of an expanding PKK-Turkish war. PKK elements currently invested in the success of the SDF as a cross-ethnic political project could instead rejoin the broader PKK insurgency against Turkey. Warning signs of this risk have already emerged in Afrin and other areas Turkey seized from the SDF, where new Kurdish resistance groups are claiming attacks against Turkish forces and their proxies.<sup>65</sup> Iran and Russia would likely also exploit a US withdrawal to gain new strategic positions and potentially access to natural resources in eastern Syria.

⊗ ***TRAP: Normalizing al Qaeda's offshoots.*** The United States must resist the normalization of Salafi jihadist groups as acceptable or mainstream elements of the Syrian opposition. HTS's leader, Abu Mohammed al Joulani, is making a new push for international acceptance, including the removal of the US terror designation of HTS. Joulani is waging a media campaign to bolster HTS's image, granting Western journalists access to Idlib Province and conducting multiple interviews with PBS News and think-tanks writing for Western audiences.<sup>66</sup> Some analysts have already begun to argue that the United States must engage with HTS on humanitarian grounds.<sup>67</sup>

The United States must be prepared to confront Joulani's false narratives and potential pressure to de-list HTS from Turkey, humanitarian organizations, and others. Humanitarian conditions in Idlib Province are dire but the United States must not allow HTS to exploit the situation to extort recognition that will grant it free access to funds and other resources.

⊗ ***TRAP: Expecting Russia either to play a constructive role or fail in Syria.*** The versions of this trap include outsourcing terrorism to Russia, expecting Russia to constrain Iran or deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war, and expecting Syria to become a "quagmire" that weakens Russia.

***Russia cannot deliver acceptable counterterrorism outcomes.*** Russia has falsely attempted to frame its operations in Syria as primarily counterterrorism-focused since its 2015 intervention. Russia has not prioritized operations against ISIS or al Qaeda and has achieved little against either group. Russia does face an acute ISIS threat in Central Syria that is disrupting its ability to execute contracts to operate Syrian energy infrastructure. Russia is slowly allocating more resources to this security requirement. Russia has neither the intent nor capability to defeat ISIS's broader insurgency, however. Russian-backed attacks on Idlib Province have accelerated HTS's takeover while driving the proliferation of new al-Qaeda-linked groups. The minimal impact Russian forces can achieve against ISIS or al Qaeda and its offshoots is far too meager to offset the strategic costs of relying on Russia to do so, including the radicalization Russia's tactics produce and the strategic disadvantage of further empowering Russia on NATO's southern flank and in the Black Sea.

***Russia will not constrain Iran.*** Russia has also sought to legitimize its presence in Syria by convincing Israel and the West that Russia can constrain Iran in Syria. Russia and Iran do sometimes compete at

the tactical level, including for recruits and economic assets, but this friction does not extend up to the strategic level. Russia lacks the capability, including ground forces in Syria, to force Iran out, moreover. For example, a Russian-backed agreement with the United States and Jordan in 2016 to allow the Assad regime to retake Southern Syria included guarantees that Iran would not expand its foothold in the area.<sup>68</sup> Russia wholly failed to deliver.<sup>69</sup>

**Russia cannot deliver a diplomatic settlement that ends the war.** Russia has far less ability to deliver political outcomes in Syria than the United States often assumes.<sup>70</sup> Policy expectations that hinge on Russia pressuring the Assad regime to grant major concessions overlook how the Kremlin views Syria: as a front line in resisting what it perceives to be Western efforts to conduct regime change.<sup>71</sup> Delivering Assad's removal from power or other meaningful change in the regime's behavior is inconsistent with Russia's objectives. Such policy approaches also assume the regime is weak enough to buckle under Russian pressure. In reality, Assad's inability to provide security does not mean the regime itself is fragile. The network of power brokers that comprise the Syrian regime is highly resilient and is not exhibiting signs of the level of internal friction that could lead to major instability within the regime. The United States must not expect Russia to deliver an acceptable political settlement and especially must not grant Russia concessions in Syria in the hope of inducing Russia to try.

**Syria is not a “quagmire” that will weaken Russia.** The United States must also not tolerate Russia's military expansion in and from Syria in the belief that these positions are not sustainable for Russia over the long term. The Syrian war is not analogous to Russia's experience in Afghanistan in the 80s. Russia views its Syrian campaign as a major success and a replicable model of the kind of military operations that will be a defining element of future warfare.<sup>72</sup> The United States should not expect that time is on our side in Syria or that Russia's Syrian operations will drain its resources to a meaningful level. The United States must face the strategic threat posed by Russian operations based out of Syria with the same seriousness the United States treats Russian military leverage in Europe.

## WHAT TO DO

Overestimating what is achievable in Syria is as likely to lead to strategic failure as a complete US withdrawal. There are no quick fixes. The United States must orient on modest goals that build on successes to date and make longer-term interests, including a diplomatic settlement, more achievable over time. Multiple phases will be necessary. The interim outcomes the United States should pursue over the next five years are:

1. Constrain Russia, Iran, and Assad in eastern Syria by enabling the SDF to compete more effectively for recruits and private sector employees
2. Deny Assad normalization and economic windfalls
3. Help the SDF build responsive governance and capable security structures in eastern Syria
4. Realign with Turkey in Syria by supporting it in Idlib and pressing the SDF for reform
5. Ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and SDF-held areas, including the al Hawl IDP camp
6. Prevent an ISIS reconstitution and attacks by ISIS and/or al Qaeda against the west

To start, the United States should take the following steps to shore up its strategic position, posture the United States to mitigate worst-case scenarios, foster local resilience. These steps alone will not accomplish all the objectives listed above but will set critical conditions that mitigate worst-case scenarios and enable follow-on measures.

*Reinforcing successes*

- Evaluate the force requirements to stabilize eastern Syria, defeat ISIS's insurgency in SDF-held areas, and assist the SDF in deterring attacks from Russia, Assad, Iran, Turkey, and their proxies.
- Commit to continued cross-border aid access even if Russia vetoes access in the UN. Pursue a deal with the EU and Turkey for a joint humanitarian aid effort.

*Constraining US adversaries*

- Uphold sanctions and maintain a firm position against political normalization or new financial support to the Assad regime, including from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Apply additional sanctions as appropriate including secondary sanctions against those still investing in Syria.
- Commission a congressional study of Russian war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and other theaters as appropriate in order to combat Russian disinformation and reinforce international laws and norms against such tactics.
- Commit to supporting Turkey diplomatically and economically in Idlib in the event of a future Russian-backed offensive in order to foster cooperation while preventing a dangerous escalation in northwest Syria. Begin talks with Turkey to identify military support that may be necessary.
- Continue high-value strikes against al Qaeda leaders and attack cells. Publicize as much evidence as possible regarding HTS's current and historic role in transnational terrorism including key elements beyond attack planning: foreign fighter recruitment, cross-theater logistics, and international financing.

*Building for the future*

- Launch a new diplomatic initiative to begin an intra-Syrian dialogue through conferences and track II initiatives with inclusion from as broad of a cross-section of Syrian society as possible.
- Evaluate the funding requirements to accelerate stabilization in eastern Syria and identify priority target areas, which should include the al Hawl IDP camp.<sup>73</sup> When security conditions allow, return civilian programmers and diplomats to the area and launch new stabilization programs based on the review.
- Push the SDF to reform its governance model to provide more political inclusion for Arab populations and better accountability mechanisms that improve civilians' trust.

US policymakers still have the power to influence the consequences of the Syrian conflict. Syria is a mess that will continue to export instability while US adversaries use it to evolve militarily. However, a proactive US policy that focuses on attainable near-term goals that reinforce hard-won successes can make a significant difference when combined with sustained pressure on the actors responsible for the worst violence in Syria: Assad, Russia, and Iran. The US has tried a decade of avoidance, and the consequences are unacceptable. It is time to commit to a decade of engagement.

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Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ms. Cafarella.

Thanks to all the witnesses for your really thoughtful testimony today.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each, and pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know. We will circle back to you after you let us know. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I will defer my time, so we will start by recognizing Mr. Connolly for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman, thank you so much and thank you for graciously allowing me to go first. And let me first begin by saying, Omar, our hearts go out to you and your family. It is almost unimaginable the scale and scope of your losses, your personal losses, and those of millions of your countrymen and women. It is a tragedy that is hard to encompass.

Ms. Cafarella, I was intrigued by your critique which I think is quite cogent about sort of from the U.S.'s perspective, 10 years squandered, although I am struck by the fact that for the United States all along, in both the Obama and Trump administrations, it was very hard for us to figure out who are the good guys. Who is it we should support?

And one thing you did not address and I would ask you maybe now to address it and that is the role of Turkey. The one ally we found that was willing to fight on the ground and actually had success were the Kurds. And, of course, the Turks are paranoid about the Kurds establishing a military foothold that it can defend in the Idlib area of Syria, and yet they are the only ones who really had military success in pushing back the Caliphate and, frankly, in going toe to toe with Syria with the Assad forces.

So how does Turkey complicate this and how can we try to engage them in a way that is more constructive and then isn't just focused on deterring or pushing back Kurdish gains that substantially have challenged Assad in that part of the country?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir, for the question. It is an excellent and very important one. I would frame Turkey as both ally and adversary in Syria. And I start there because I think it is important to recognize that the U.S. cannot afford to treat him, to treat the Turkish President as either just an adversary or just an ally. He is behaving in ways that are unacceptable for American interests, in part by driving the conflict by conducting ethnic cleansing as you alluded to. However, the United States still needs Turkey and, actually, Turkey is the largest supporter of remaining elements of the pre-Syrian army and other acceptable elements of the Syrian opposition.

Turkey also intervened to prevent the massacre in Idlib province that Assad and his backers were trying to conduct. The U.S. and Turkey still need each other in Syria. We are still aligned overall on the kind of outcome that needs to occur in order to end the conflict in Syria which is a diplomatic resolution of the conflict that

actually reconciles elements of the Syrian opposition. We need to get there.

What I have offered is a series of first steps to realign the United States with Turkey, in part by providing it economic and diplomatic assistance in Idlib. I also recommended in my written testimony that the U.S. begin discussions of what kinds of military support the Turks may need in Idlib, likely logistical support, and I think the U.S. also needs to work with Turkey to ensure that Russia does not succeed in ending the humanitarian aid access from Turkey into Syria.

That should include access to our local partner in eastern Syria, the SDF, not just Idlib, but I think if the U.S. finds common ground with Turkey and is actually willing to support some elements of Turkey's policies in Syria, we will find there is more room to actually bridge between what the U.S. is doing in the east and what the Turks are doing in the north and farther west. It is difficult. It will take time. But that is where I would start.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, thank you. One of the conditions laid down by Turkey early on was that Assad had to go, that any peace agreement, any settlement had to be done without Assad. And off and on, the United States has tinkered with that as well. Does that remain a realistic goal in light of the reality on the ground and how do we adjust to that in terms of ultimate contours of a peace settlement even sitting down to try to talk about a settlement?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, and thank you. I do think it is an important long-term goal, but I emphasize long term. We will not get there in 1 year, two, or probably even three or four. In order to make that outcome more possible over time to enable some form of a transitional government to come into place, the U.S. needs to build back options to replace the Assad regime that Assad has destroyed since 2011. That starts by committing to support to our current partner of the SDF in the east, but also to supporting Turkey and its local partners.

Long term, we need to align these structures which actually represent governance and security structures that control most of the Syrian population outside of Assad's control, which is a significant component of Syrians that also extends into the Syrian refugee population, which is not coming back to Assad regime-controlled areas. Making Assad's departure from power possible starts with supporting the elements of the opposition that currently survive in Idlib in the north and in the east and realigning U.S. and Turkish policies.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Ms. Cafarella.

And, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

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

I will now turn it over to the distinguished ranking member from South Carolina, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And, gosh, this is an extraordinary hearing. I want to thank you, Chairman Deutch, for putting this together. It is so inspiring the three witnesses we have. Thank you for what you are doing on behalf of the people of Syria, and then I appreciate the bravery that you have of presenting these points, your insight of the witnesses, and some-

thing that it very impressive, you have truly unified people of both political parties in the United States to share a concern.

And I was just grateful to see the comments by Chairman Gerry Connolly. We just want to express such sympathy, Omar, to your family, but I know your family would be so proud to see how vocal you are, how articulate, and how you are making a difference and so I want to wish you well. And, gosh, it is so important that we work together on behalf of the people of Syria and I am just so grateful that we have this hearing today.

With that, for each one of you, beginning with Dr. Khatib, why do you think the Biden Administration has been reluctant to enforce the sanctions against the murderous Assad regime and impose new sanctions under the Caesar Act which sanctions could be implemented now?

Dr. KHATIB. Thank you. On sanctions, I think, all of them. The sanctions that are currently discussed are all urgent. The Caesar Act especially, I think, could be widened and tightened. There is no excuse to lift sanctions right now. There is a lot of lobbying by Russia in particular, which, unfortunately, is having some echo even in places in Europe and the Arab world, saying that sanctions are the reason behind the economic crisis in Syria.

The reality is the sanctions are hurting the Assad regime, but the Assad regime is still able to find ways around them. So in my view, the sanctions are not just all implementable, but can be and should be tightened further. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you.

And our next, Mr. Alshogre?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Yes, thank you. Thank you, Ranking Member, and thank you for your empathy regarding, sympathy regarding my family. I hope they are proud of me today.

Mr. WILSON. Oh, hey. They are, OK.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you. Thank you.

Regarding the sanctions, since the start of the implementation of the Caesar Act, you know, just how the regime in Syria, as soon as the regime, you know, start talking about any sanction hurting them that means actually hurting them. It is not hurting the people. The regime is trying to market the act as it is hurting the civilians of Syria, but the ones who destroyed the economy in Syria are clearly the ones who are killing its own people, right, so it is the Syrian regime.

So we had the names that have been sanctioned, yet are those—answer this question of like how can these sanctions hurt the civilians, it is kind of easy. Just think about names, like how would sanctioning the wife of the president will get him richer while the people in Syria are getting in a worse situation would affect the civilians.

And we have—the Caesar Act as you know have no sanctions on any necessary needs for people on a daily basis. I really think it is so important to keep working on it. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected how fast implementation of the act could be, but I really believe that limiting the resources the regime in Syria can have it is really important to limit the number of people dying every day, so we should not just sanction people who are in Syria. That might be even less effective because the flow of money coming

from outside—the Iranians and the Russians and other allies of the Syrian regime—those are the ones that really should be targeted and that can be limiting the atrocities that is happening in Syria. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you for your insight.

And, Ms. Cafarella?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes. Thank you, sir. What I would only add briefly is I think the United States needs to consider the enforcement of secondary sanctions especially against U.S. allies and partners in the Arab Gulf that have continued to normalize with the Assad regime and may be investing in Syria despite the U.S. sanctions and under significant pressure and enticement from the Russians. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON. OK, thank you.

And as I yield back, I want to thank Chairman Deutch. This is so impressive, the witnesses we have, and it is so refreshing to be working with our colleagues across the aisle. This is so important for the people of Syria. It is so important for the Middle East and what opportunities we have. And so I look forward to continuing working with Chairman Deutch on these issues and our colleagues in a bipartisan manner. Thank you very much. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks very much, Mr. Wilson. I concur fully and appreciate the opportunity to work together on these really important issues.

Next, I will yield 5 minutes to the gentleman from Rhode Island, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. I thank you, Chairman Deutch and Ranking Member Wilson, for calling this hearing to help us understand how we might have more effective policy as it relates to Syria, and thank you to the extraordinary witnesses for sharing your testimony. And in particular, I would like to thank Mr. Alshogre—I hope I pronounced your name correctly—for sharing your incredible story. And I too want to convey to you my sympathy for the horrors you suffered and for the pain of loss of your family. It is just incomprehensible to most of us and I think it underscores the urgency of getting our policy right and doing all that we can to end this regime.

But I want to focus for a moment on the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act because I know sanctions have been put in place, but I am interested to know from you, sir, what impact you think these sanctions are actually having on regime behavior and on the behavior of regime enablers and on the economy in Syria.

And, second, very few designations have been made for non-Syrian entities despite the fact that outside backers were really the main focus of the legislation and as you know, sir, really, as a life-line to the Assad regime. And I know that is in part because the threat of sanctions has deterred some of these from engaging in sanctioned activity.

But there are many non-Syrian regime supporters who would be eligible for designation and I am interested to know whether you would encourage the administration to use the Caesar sanctions more aggressively against non-Syrian, especially Russian, entities.

Mr. Alshogre, that is for you.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your sympathy. And I, at the Task Force, the organization I am working at, we have designed an app called Syria Watch, and this app give you notification on every attack happens on civilians in Syria, and give you a short description of the attack and what kind of attack and how many victims we have.

Since we started the implementation of the Caesar Act, we have noticed the reduced number of attacks on civilians and that is definitely affected by COVID-19—the regime had to create a new strategy—but also, I am sure, affected by the regime limitation to have access to fuel their death machine.

So I definitely encourage the U.S. administration to aggressively use these sanctions against those who are supporting the Assad regime in Syria, because we know the economy in Syria is not great enough to fuel itself, its own death machine, right, so they need external actors. And they are betting on something, especially the Russian.

The Syrian regime without the Russian probably would have fallen a long time ago because Syrian opposition took over most of the country in 2014, and then we get Russians bombing the civilians 2014, 1915, and that is how they actually managed to gather people in Idlib, and people in Idlib right now are in danger. Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

And, Ms. Cafarella, I know you spoke about our relationship with Turkey that they are both an adversary and an ally and it is a complicated relationship, but I know there has been reporting that 200,000 Syrian Kurds were displaced in northeast Syria by the invasion by Turkey, including local humanitarian staff who had been really giving important lifesaving assistance and including as many as 70,000 children.

So I would like to know, what is the status of those displaced by Turkey's invasion? Is the cease-fire durable and is there a significant risk that fighting could break out between the SDF and Turkey in this region once again, and how do we engage with Turkey in a productive way, and also on our, I think, our responsibility to the Kurds who are such a critical partner in our fight to defeat ISIS in that region?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir. To my knowledge, those who were displaced by the Turkish incursion, actually all the Turkish incursions remain displaced and so this is a very vulnerable population that is not able to return to their homes. The cease-fire I do not think is durable over the long term, and I say that because we only reached it by placing significant leverage on the table against Turkey which included aggressive sanctions against high-level Turkish officials.

That was important for changing Erdogan's calculus about what he could achieve in Syria on what timeline and with what cost. I emphasize that because the way to shape Turkey's behavior in Syria and to find opportunities to realign as allies is to actually recognize that this is power politics. This is not allies collaborating in a war zone. This is power politics.

And I testified last year that I think the United States needs to learn from how the Russians have successfully navigated a rela-

tionship with Turkey. They are on opposite sides of the war and yet they have been able to find consensus on a number of issues because they understand the leverage game that they are in and they are both acquiring and using leverage over each other to change their decision calculus. We need to do the same with Turkey. It is possible, and I do think by applying more leverage including reinforcing our relationship with the SDF and signaling clearly that we will not abandon those Kurdish partners and their Arab allies and that we are also serious about ensuring that the Turks will not extend their incursion further, that actually gives us leverage and it enables us to reapproach very tough negotiations that we do need to have with our NATO partner in coming months and years. Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Perry, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, for hosting this hearing and for having it. This is a intrac-table issue and subject and this is really informative. This is great.

Mr. Omar, your testimony brings to—makes real the things that we have heard in the past. And as horrific as it is—it is, indeed, horrific—it is important for your story to be told to the world, and I thank you and I acknowledge how painful it must be to continue to talk about these things, but to encourage you to continue to discuss them so the world can see what has happened. And so we thank you for your presence.

Ms. Cafarella, you know, I am looking for, and I have looked through your six points and I think you are realistic in your assessment. As a representative as each of us are of the American people who are looking for—we have to respond, rightly so, to our constituency and say, well, this is the goal. This is why America is here. This is our interest in being here, and I want to talk to you particularly about the military, the United States military presence in Syria and is there a way to diminish our presence and not diminish our effectiveness?

Is it absolutely necessary, in your opinion, over the short or long term to have uniformed service members of the United States military serving in Syria?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you for the question, sir. In the near term, I do believe, actually, I assess that it is necessary for the U.S. to sustain our uniformed military presence on the ground in Syria. The reason I assess that is because upon an American withdrawal from Syria, the vultures who are currently circling our local partner including the Russians, the Turks, the Assad regime, the Iranians, ISIS, and actually even elements of al-Qaida, will pounce and they will attack the SDF and it will fail.

However, I do think the most important use of American military forces in Syria are to create the security conditions within which the U.S. can help improve the stability of the SDF, be less reliant on the United States over time, to create a platform for humanitarian assistance and development aid to actually stabilize the area, and then to broker an agreement with Turkey that actually

normalizes that relationship and enables the U.S. to scale back down our military pressure.

The approach of by, with, and through a local partner has been extremely successful at a relatively low involvement of U.S. forces in defeating the Islamic State and making this opportunity possible, but if we bail now, we will fail to actually convert that opportunity into an enduring outcome. It is not the time. I do not think that the United States needs to withdraw and I think with a relatively limited further investment, we actually can make a sustainable withdrawal possible in the medium term.

Mr. PERRY. All right. And continuing on that line because I think that is a measured and well thought out approach, but, you know, folks like us, we have to have some expectation and I think it is appropriate that we see the light at the end of the tunnel.

So while you talk about—and I do not want to put words in your mouth but, you know, I think limited or for some period of time, what do you assess are the metrics, OK? And I know that I am putting you on the spot, right, this is tough stuff. What do you assess are the metrics and what kind, and without advertising because I do not think it is appropriate to advertise to your adversaries or your enemies what your timeline is, but some kind of an expectation of how long? So what are the metrics and how long do we expect, would you expect if you can make an assessment on broad terms to have a military presence in Syria?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir. And I would just add, I think it is vital to sustain pressure on the United States to have a clear strategy that includes what does the end of this look like, right, when do we come home? I think that is vital and I think that is how we avoid Syria becoming the Afghanistan, you know, of the future in terms of a U.S. policy disaster.

What I would say is the metrics need to include what the anti-ISIS coalition actually already uses, which is that local forces are capable of preventing an ISIS breakout success and actually providing durable security for the local population that includes, you know, law enforcement and that kind of thing. That is within reach. The SDF is an incredibly capable partner considering that we built it essentially from nothing as ISIS had destroyed much of what was there in eastern Syria.

So I would say establishing those security conditions is the first. And then second, establishing a diplomatic settlement. Not necessarily of the war overall, because again I do not think that is possible in the near term, but we do need a diplomatic resolution between Turkey and either the broader PKK network that applies to Syria or more limited Turkey and the SDF, I think that is possible.

And the timeframe I would offer, recognizing that timeframes are the most difficult thing to predict in war, where I would start is 5 years. And I think if the United States pursues this for 5 years then has continued to fail to generate these options, then it—or these outcomes—then it is time to reevaluate. Thank you.

Mr. PERRY. All right. And with the chair's indulgence then, I would just say 5 years is longer than I was hoping for, but I appreciate your candor.

One last question, the U.N.'s role—and when you talk about power politics, I agree with you in this instance. This is absolutely

what this is and I do not exclude the U.N. from that. We had the adversaries there in Russia and China that are not going to be helpful especially in reauthorizing 2533, as I understand it.

How can the U.S. leverage the United Nations, and understanding the complete circumstances of the United Nations, to further our goals and our outcomes, you know, our described outcomes in Syria?

Mr. DEUTCH. And thanks, Mr. Perry, and the witness can give a brief answer and then we will go to Mr. Malinowski.

Ms. CAFARELLA. Brief, I promise. What I would say on the timeline is, I am under promising and hoping to under deliver here, so I think the goal is less than 5 years, but I would set that benchmark.

In terms of the United Nations, where I would start is by applying much more pressure in naming and shaming Russia for the malign role that it actually is playing in Syria. I would recommend a congressional study of Russian war crimes. I think the U.S. should do whatever it can to raise pressure against Russia in the United Nations, in Syria, in Ukraine, on essentially all of the front lines that Putin is using. Because Putin's campaign is also global. He acquires leverage in other theaters and then uses it to accomplish other objectives.

I think actually putting attention to what the Russians are actually doing in places like Syria is essential because it cuts through the Russian disinformation which is one of Russia's most effective tools including at shaping the United Nations. We need to do much better and I think that starts by simply telling the truth. Thank you.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Of course.

Thank you, Ms. Cafarella.

Thank you, Mr. Perry.

And, Mr. Malinowski, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks, everybody. And I want to start by thanking Ms. Cafarella for under promising. And I actually think you have made a couple of points that I think are extremely wise and that we should think about beyond this hearing, particularly that the United States needs to be more comfortable embracing achievable goals in situations like this.

I think one of our problems as a country, whether in how we address Syria or Afghanistan or Libya, or any of these complex situations in that part of the world, is that, you know, being Americans, we want to solve the problem. And sometimes if we cannot solve the problem in a limited period of time, we walk away.

And we forget that the difference between doing something and only 50,000 people die and doing nothing and half a million people die, is a lot of death and destruction and suffering that is avoidable, even if the best possible outcome with our full engagement is still something that is messy and lousy and unsatisfying. So I think that is a very good frame for approaching what we should have been doing in Syria and what we can do going forward.

I wanted to ask you specifically about Idlib. You and I had an exchange, I think, at the last hearing about, I think at the time we were talking about a proposal to deploy Patriot missiles to Turkey

as a means of establishing perhaps even a de facto no-fly zone over that part of Syria. Where would you be right now in terms of, you know, the most aggressive, realistic measures that the United States could take to provide some protection with others, given all the complexities, protection to the civilian population suffering from air strikes?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, thank you for your continued attention to the crisis in Idlib. I would say I am essentially in the same place as I was a year ago. I would defer to Turkey on what specific requests that it has at this time because it has been able to strengthen its military position since we last spoke.

But I do believe that a no-fly zone or the equivalent that prevents the Syrian regime from conducting barrel bomb attacks and disrupts Russian air is essential in Idlib. I would say that it is a difficult proposition to make, I understand, given the other global force posture requirements that the United States has including with China and with Russia, but in that context I think it is vital to recognize that Idlib is actually one of the most violent and potentially dangerous front lines between NATO and Russia.

That is what we are talking about here. I do not actually think there is a more volatile front line except for possibly eastern Ukraine given the Russian buildup that the U.S. could use as a pressure point against Putin. And again, that has global ramifications. So I would still provide that kind of support and I would emphasize again the necessity of the humanitarian aid inside of Idlib, which is really the most unsustainable element of the crisis in 2021. Thank you.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. All right. So talk about that a little bit. Practically speaking, if we cannot overcome the Russian veto on cross-border, what, practically speaking, can and should be done?

Ms. CAFARELLA. So I have recommended a trilateral deal between the United States, the EU, and Turkey to provide humanitarian aid independent of the U.N. As has already been mentioned in this hearing, U.N. aid is already co-opted by the Assad regime, and what Russia is trying to do is give Assad a monopoly over that aid. We need to ensure that does not happen and we need to ensure that does not happen without punishing all of the Syrian civilians outside of the regime called Syria.

We can do that. The Turks have interest in doing it. I think we need to make sure it also does include our local partner in the east who the Turks might still want to choke off, but I would recommend that trilateral deal as a start.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

And then, finally, for, you know, for maybe—I want to direct this to Omar. One of the extraordinary things about this situation is we are talking about a country, maybe a quarter of its population is now living outside of its homeland and that is probably going to be the status quo for some time. What can be done by the United States, our allies, to invest more in the development of that Syrian diaspora, its education, its development, so that 1 day it is more ready to come back to Syria and contribute to the rebuilding of the country?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you, Congressman. I believe education is the best thing we can invest in, in people and the Syrian people

who are, who left the country, and Syrian people who are internal displaced like in people who lives in Idlib. That the regime will fall. It will take years, but the regime will fall and then we would have the responsibility to rebuild our Nation. And we cannot rebuild this Nation without having an education, without, you know, being supported.

So what we do at the Task Force is we already started a school for orphans and women's center inside Syria where we can support this young generation so they can be ready when the regime falls so they can rebuild it. And, actually, it is people from our council, you know, sponsoring this, this school

[inaudible]. It is very important. That is why I decided to apply to Georgetown University because I knew that at some point, I will be part of rebuilding Syria. I cannot just sit and blame this country or this country for helping or not helping. I need to take personal responsibility and I need somebody to help me take this personal responsibility, right.

So all the flexibilities I get around me, I was being supported by a Congressman, which makes it easier to be supported by the people who voted for you, right, so all the support I'm getting to be educated and to be guided in my life. Everybody needs a guide, right. There is some people need those guides that would really manage to rebuild their country.

And we have so many local councils and—there is some people are being awesome in creating organizations and councils inside and outside Syria, so supporting those councils and organizations is so important to create a body that can actually lead Syria when the regime fall. Thank you.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

And thanks very much, Mr. Alshogre, for that great answer.

Mr. KINZINGER, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, everybody, thank you for being here. I think the point that Mr. Malinowski made is important which is going into things with realistic goals is the challenge, you know, we face and as a self-run government where, you know, in order to get, in essence, the American people to buy in on any kind of military action or foreign policy, you have to have big goals. And I think there is a point that we need to understand whether it is a president kind of selling the reason, so to speak, for involvement or engagement to do it in a realistic way with a realistic outcome.

But I think, you know, another important part to remember is we live in a moment where with information, you know, the ability, for instance, of terrorists to recruit now besides having to meet them, you know, in a dark room and they may be a government agent, maybe not, now it can all be done on the internet. It is just a different world we live in.

And I think we all need to come to grips with the fact that, you know, we have a choice as Americans, we are either going to be involved in the world and that is going to include sometimes making some sacrifices, or we are going to choose to not be involved in the world and that is going to mean that we are in many cases in this new world a victim of things that come to our shores. I think of

Afghanistan. I am sure we will have a hearing on that at some point, I certainly hope, and so it is a big challenge.

But this is an important hearing and, you know, now that we are 10 years of the war, I want to reflect real quickly on some failed policies of both administrations, the international community, and even Congress has really failed to hold Assad and his backers accountable. We took too long to pass the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and people suffered as a result. We did not enforce red lines on the use of chemical weapons. People died. Of course, there is new news about that today. And it is my hope that the current administration does not, you know, repeat the same failed policies regarding Syria as the prior two.

So Omar, it is great to see you. I want to say, you know, as I have talked to you in the past, your story is one of the most inspiring yet daunting ones to emerge from the Syrian conflict. I want to let you know that we will continue to do everything in our power to ensure that all those responsible for these human rights abuses, from Assad down to the most junior prison guard, will answer for their crimes and it is my hope that that is sooner than later.

So let me ask you. Over the past few months, we have seen Assad attempt to normalize his relationship with the international community. What message do you have for those nations looking to provide a lifeline for the regime?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. This regime has killed not only my father and brothers and killed my childhood friends, but it killed everybody I knew in my hometown, almost. And it killed the dream of so many Syrian children, adults, women, men and everyone. And just returning to normalizing the relation with the regime means that you accept all the crimes and you support all the crimes that the Syrian regime has committed against those people, and you deny our rights to democracy and freedom.

And just by getting back, normalizing the relation with them, that means you are one of those who sponsored the death of the Syrian people. You will be responsible. When you normalize a relationship that means you support, which means 1 day the same people who are following all of that and 1 day we will be asking you questions in court just for supporting this death machine. So that is my message. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. KINZINGER. Let me ask you just real quick, if you can give me a real quick answer because I have a question for Dr. Cafarella.

Are you more likely to become—is a person more likely to become a terrorist under a brutal dictator or under a free democracy? Omar?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Yes. I will tell you from friends I had. I have friends who went fighting with ISIS against the Syrian regime and guess why, because they lost their parents, their friends, their school, their life. You had nothing left, like nothing left to live for. The only thing they wanted to do is to commit brutalities against a regime that took everything from them. They did not care if ISIS was right or wrong. What they wanted to do is do what the regime done to them.

They did not—I had a friend who did not care about ISIS values or no values. He just wanted to see the most brutal party to engage with to kill the regime because they got nothing left to care. They

got nothing left to live for. And that is important to understand. We cannot let people suffer in Syria. That, ultimately, will present those terrorist actors as the only, you know, force that is, you know, aiding those people or protecting those people or giving them an option to fight against the regime, right. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you.

Dr. Cafarella, I have some questions I will submit for the record, but I thought I would let Omar go because I think that is a very important point. So thank you, everybody, for being here. And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Well, thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

Ms. Manning, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this incredible hearing.

Mr. Alshogre, I want to start for you, with you. I want to thank you for your tenacity and your bravery. And you have given us the most hopeful and uplifting response when you talked about the importance of educating Syrian youth, who are now scattered, so that they will be ready to go back and build their country when the Assad regime falls someday.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about your efforts and tell us is there a network of others who are working around the world to educate Syrians, the Syrian diaspora, to maintain the culture and the connections so that they will be ready to go back and rebuild as you have described?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you. Thank you, Congresswoman, for your question.

I believe there are so many organizations that can be supportive. But as I am a part of the Syrian Emergency Task Force, I will tell you more about that what we do.

Hopefully, you heard something about Rukban Camp, a camp on the Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi border with 10,000 people, majority of women and kids. They have got nothing there. It is the desert. They have got very limited access to water, and food, and all of that.

And there is big difficulty to access this camp; right? The only reason those people are still alive, not attacked, is because of the Syrian—is because of the American troops' presence in the region. This area the regime won't attack if there are American troops nearby.

So, what we did is we invested in those people. We opened a pharmacy. And we tried to give them some education. We have online education today. You know, this, this pandemic gave us an opportunity to focus on online education. And we have this access. So, the only thing we needed to do was to provide people with some internet connections so we can actually provide them with some, some tools so they can educate themselves.

There are many organizations—there is Syrian Campaign, there is Syrpla. They are small. You know, I love to support those small organizations run by young people, because I think we are the future. But you are very important for us, too, but we still we are the future. We are the ones that are going to lead. And especially in 10 years, 20 years there are so many.

One of the important things I want to mention is the importance of the European countries in saving the Syrian people. And I recently came in Sweden, the second biggest number of people in Swedish universities are Syrians. That makes me proud. It is just awesome, you know.

The process is still, you know, kind of slow though because you are going to stay 1 year, 2 years before you get your residence permit to be able to go to school. This is kind of important, you cannot just freeze for 2 years. So that can be simplified.

I do not know exactly how it is in the U.S., but I think in the U.S. if you manage to find a job, if you manage to sponsor yourself, you can educate yourself, which is really good.

So, I would encourage the U.S. and the U.S. Government to invest in those small organizations. Like, the Syrian Task Force, our budget is \$200,000 a year. And we do work. We have a beautiful team, smart people working for free because they care about the Syrian people.

You know, such organizations are actually operating to provide education, food, water, advocacy, legal work for thousands and thousands of Syrian people. The Rukban Camp, some people in Idlib, and people outside, all of that, such organizations need to be supported. We cannot just expect them to do a great job all the time as they have got no money. Right?

Our operations staff is almost zero. We have nothing except when we go, time to go to lunch together. That is all the expenses we have. Otherwise we are using all the donations we are getting just to support, you know, the people on the ground in Syria. Such organizations deserve to be supported.

Thank you.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you so much. Thank you for your enthusiasm and your optimism.

Ms. Cafarella, I am going to ask you, you talked about all the players in the region except for one. Is there a role for Israel to play in all of this?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, ma'am.

So far the Israelis have actually been quite successful inside of Syria. And that reflects in part the fact that they have established their own reasonable and obtainable goals. They are not trying to do too much, but they have stabilized the security situation in some important respects on the border of the Golan Heights, in part by investing in local communities. There was a very successful operation that was known as Operation Good Neighbor.

And the Israelis have also scaled up their military pressure on Iran as Iran has tried to go further to build out its permanent military infrastructure inside of Syria.

Those two elements of Israel's role in Syria are important and should, in my view, continue. I think asking Israel to do more is probably less helpful in the near to medium term because the Israeli security interests are currently being addressed. And I think what the United States needs to do is to now step in and provide support to Israel in ways that augment and help to make permanent the effect that the Israelis have already been able to create.

Thank you.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you. And I yield back.

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

Mr. Mast, you are recognized.

Mr. MAST. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Cafarella, I want to go back in a minute to something that you were talking about about Israel and the IRGC. But, before that, I want to touch on something that you had brought up in your remarks. And it was about the loyalist populations for Assad being uneasy, having unrest, you know, wanting to see change beyond sanctions.

What pressure do you see putting on them beyond that to help move that ball?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you for the question.

Where I would start is actually with my recommendation to convene a intra-Syrian dialog that includes as much of Syrian society as possible. I think it is important not to overstate how much pressure there actually is internal to the regime. It is not going to oust Assad, it is not going to cause a rapid destabilization, but it has created a wedge. And I think we need to exploit that wedge, both by keeping the pressure on, but by inviting elements of the Alawite community and other Syrian minorities that have remained loyal to Assad into more Track 2 initiatives.

I think this is a perfect role for the United States to play. And it can make a diplomatic settlement of the war possible in the longer term by creating the kinds of conversations among Syrians that the Russians, the Assad regime, and the Iranians are actually preventing from occurring.

Mr. MAST. So, again, ma'am, at the tail end of your last comments you spoke a little bit about the IRGC and about Israel. And I think it maybe even have been, may have been minimized to some degree.

You talked about how they ramped up, the IRGC ramping up their military efforts. I track them in at least 130-plus bases across Syria. That is not a minimal presence. And I think most of us on this committee realize that.

And I want to kind of take that and move that over to you, Omar, because you have been so forthcoming with your personal experiences. And I would ask if you could be forthcoming with what you have seen so viscerally as it relates to the IRGC and their presence across Syria.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. If you excuse me, Congressman, I won't have a comment about that. Thank you.

Mr. MAST. Can you say that one more time?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. I apologize. I won't have a comment about that. Thank you.

Mr. MAST. OK. Well, in that then, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back.

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

I believe Mr. Sherman has joined. Mr. Sherman, you are recognized.

Mr. SHERMAN. I thank you.

Our hearts are moved by the people of Syria. We want to help. I talked to a number of Syrian American activists who are focused on Human Rights Watch, and they have some concerns because the

Syrian Government has developed a policy and a legal framework that allows it to coopt humanitarian assistance and use it to fund its own atrocities, to advance its interests, to punish those who it perceives as its opponents or to benefit its loyalists.

The Government's regular restrictions on access of humanitarian organizations to communities that are in need gives the Government more control, allows the Government to steal aid, and sell it, and syphon it off.

Dr. Khatib, how can the U.S. reduce Assad's leverage over humanitarian assistance, particularly in Idlib? I have been aware that a number of U.S.-based 501(c)(3) organizations, charities, are already working on the ground in Syria. And I wonder whether they would be a conduit for humanitarian assistance that can help the people without going through Assad?

Dr. KHATIB. Thank you very much.

As mentioned by my colleague Ms. Cafarella earlier, there is a way to work directly with organizations through charities, organizations that are Syrian or international that are not the U.N. But at the same time, I think the U.S. should hold the U.N. accountable.

The Assad regime does not only have pressure over where the U.N. directs its aid, sometimes the Assad regime even influences recruitment through venues and agencies in Syria so that the people responsible are selected by the Syrian regime. And the regime basically sometimes refuses to give U.N. staff permits to work in Syria if it does not approve of their presence and work.

And, therefore, I think when it comes to aid there are two separate tracks: one is working on a micro level to get aid to cross through Turkey into Syria; but at the same, the issue of U.N. accountability is very important.

Thank you.

Mr. SHERMAN. Moving toward the U.N. and its unaccountability, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 remains the cornerstone of the political process in Syria. Under its authority, the U.N. established the Syrian Constitutional Committee in 2019. We hope that is a step forward.

It includes the Syrian civil society groups, opposition groups, government officials, neutral legal observers. But the Assad regime has essentially ignored and obstructed the U.N. process and likely believes that it is in power.

Apart from applying more pressure on the regime, what can the U.S. do to strengthen the Geneva process?

I wonder which of our witnesses is most anxious to comment on that question?

Dr. KHATIB. If I may.

Mr. SHERMAN. Go ahead.

Dr. KHATIB. I would like to, sir. Thank you. I wrote about this in my written statement as well.

Unfortunately, the regime and Russia view the U.N.-led peace process as going nowhere. They are not taking it seriously. They are deliberately stalling it. They want to show that this is all a waste of time and that, ultimately, the world should normalize relations with Assad. That is why they want it to fail.

So, it is very important not to let this die. However, I stress that in my view we cannot rely on the U.N. peace process to kick-start peace in Syria, even though it is meant to be a peace process. I think the issue of Syria is now also not in the hands of Syrians, unfortunately, as a first step.

It has become an international conflict. It has allowed Russia to present itself as a new emerging superpower once more. And that is why I advocate that the United States start bilateral negotiations with Russia on Syria.

There are certain things, some concessions that the U.S. can offer Russia that would not hurt U.S. national interests, such as having Russia retain a naval base on the Mediterranean, or having Russia retain a degree of political influence—

Mr. SHERMAN. Let me see if we have—

Ms. KHAJIB [continuing]. In Syria.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. Time to have Mr. Alshogre also comment on that question.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. I believe, I believe in the importance of the U.N.'s role in the Syrian issue. There was a big purpose of creating the United Nations, to make the world safer, to make the world better. And right now I believe that the erratic system or the wrong leadership maybe in the U.N. is affecting how they are doing it.

The Syrian people need to be supported on the ground. And that can be, that can be done in multiple ways. Now we notice that the aid going from the U.N. through the Syrian regime, through the Syrian regime that happened many times. And the regime, you know, is seizing people, killing people, cannot actually be giving the aid to, to give back to the people; right?

So, if those people are seized to be starved by the Syrian regime, we cannot give aid to the Syrian regime. That needs to be changed. Those people on the ground in Syria need to be, need to be supported directly to them through their local organizations.

Thank you for that. And I wonder, I have faced some technical issues. I did not hear—

Mr. SHERMAN. I do want to, my time is expiring and I just want to add one final comment.

And that is we have to remember the Assad regime exists because Iran supported it, particularly at the beginning of this conflict. And that when we look at hundreds of thousands of dead Syrians we know that the arrow points to Tehran.

And with that, I yield back.

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

Mr. Burchett, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thanks, Chairman Deutch. I appreciate the opportunity here.

What are the operational  
[inaudible.]

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Burchett, I think you muted yourself.

Mr. BURCHETT. Actually, I unmuted myself and I think you all muted me. So, sorry for crashing, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to start over.

What are the operational capabilities of the Syrian Government forces? And does Assad enjoy the support of the soldiers under his

command? Or is he completely reliant on the Russians and Iranians for support?

Ms. CAFARELLA. I am happy to offer some comments on that, sir.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes.

Ms. CAFARELLA. Assad's ability to control elements, surviving elements of the Syrian Arab Army is actually quite small. There are some Syrian units that remain coherent and that do remain loyal to Assad. However, many elements of the pro-regime forces that exist on the battlefield and that are most decisive are either stood up by Russia and Iran, or have been coopted by Russia and Iran over the course of this war.

So, the amount of combat power that Assad can independently generate is actually quite low. Now, that does not mean that Syrian forces, unfortunately, aren't loyal to Assad. He remains a focus personality and has convinced remaining elements of his force that he is their only option. However, I do think it is important to keep in perspective, as your question so astutely does, what Assad can independently do versus what his backers make possible.

Thank you.

Mr. BURCHETT. What is the status of the U.N.-backed Constitutional Committee? And are the elections and the elections in Syria—I know Mr. Chairman had mentioned that earlier, but I wonder if somebody could further delve into that?

Dr. KHATIB. I would be happy to, sir.

The Constitutional Committee had five rounds of talks. There is going to be a sixth round. The U.N. envoy expressed frustration with the way the process is going. And this is, again, being so because of the behavior of the Assad regime, that it is not cooperating, it is using it to just waste time, so that anything created with the U.N. peace process is dead, unfortunately.

So, unless there is a significant change in the work plan, it is not likely that the Constitutional Committee is going to come up with a new constitution in the near future.

When it comes to elections in Syria, Assad is planning on being reelected in summer of 2021 when Presidential elections happen. So far for Russia, it regards itself as winning in Syria and, therefore, is not seeing an alternative to Assad. So, therefore, it will be happy if he is reelected. However, I stress that Russia will be willing to sacrifice Assad if it sees that there is a compromise to be done internationally.

And that is why the weaker Assad is, the more Russia benefits because it can influence what happens in Syria in a greater capacity. But this also gives, I think, the United States in particular a diplomatic opportunity so that it can influence Russia to then take the U.N. peace process seriously.

I stress the U.N. peace process is important, should continue, but it is not effective because Russia is not taking it seriously. So, we need to pressure Russia and negotiate with it at the same time.

Thank you.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. Anybody else on that?

Ms. CAFARELLA. If there is time, I would like to comment.

Mr. BURCHETT. Go ahead.

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir.

So, I agree with what my colleague just briefed in terms of the fact that, unfortunately, the U.N.-backed process is essentially right now dead in the water. The U.S. does need to maintain the U.N. as the legitimate vehicle for a diplomatic settlement. And there will need to be a Russian role in that future settlement.

What I would offer is that it is vital that the United States ensure that those negotiations do not happen on Putin's terms. Putin does not seek to come to the negotiating table. He seeks to force us to come to his table, which will be rigged, if not to keep Assad the man in power, to keep the system in power and to safeguard Russian interests which, again, in Syria are actually part of his global military leverage.

I think the United States needs to consider what additional leverage we need to place on Russia rather than what concessions we can offer him. And I think the United States needs to reiterate the basic components of what a negotiated settlement would require, which Syrians have often in the past included as a condition for the withdrawal of foreign forces which, of course, Russia is not going to be willing to do. But I think it is important, actually, not to just cede at the outset of negotiations, we need to use it as leverage.

Thank you.

Mr. BURCHETT. What, realistically, what does Syria look like in 5 years if we continue down this path? And what needs to be ideally what you all want? In 5 years, what would it look like?

Mr. DEUTCH. And the witnesses can answer briefly, although time is up.

Mr. BURCHETT. I am sorry, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. That is OK. If you want to direct that perhaps, Mr. Burchett.

Mr. BURCHETT. Well, why do not you tell me who would be the best one to answer that, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. I will leave it up to the witnesses then.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. It is the first one that pops on, I will listen to that and that will be it. Thank you. Sorry, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. No, that is OK. Thank you, Mr. Burchett.

Ms. CAFARELLA. All right. I will volunteer as tribute.

It is a really impossible question to answer. But I would say 5 years hence where Syria will likely be is still a war zone that is contributing more fighters to international wars. I mention that because both the Turks and the Russians are mobilizing Syrian mercenaries to go fight in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Venezuela, and potentially other theaters.

Syria will continue to export more violence the longer this war continues.

Now, where I would like us to be in 5 years, if the U.S. recommitts to engagement, is that we have stabilized the northeast, we have realigned with Turkey, and there is essentially an arc from Idlib up to the north into the southeast of a zone of Syria that is beginning to recover, that can offer an alternative over the long term to the brutality and violence of the Assad regime.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, ma'am.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Burchett. That is an important question and response which all gets to the reason that we are holding this hearing. So, I appreciate that very much.

Mr. VARGAS. Mr. Vargas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you very much.

The first thing I would like to know is how did you mute, Mr. Burchett? Mr. Chairman, I have been trying to do that for a long time. If the technical person could figure and did that, just let me know, I would love to know that.

Sorry, Tim.

But in all truthfulness, thank you very much for this. This has been a great hearing, and I appreciate it very much.

Back in October 2019, I recall a friend of mine who had served, from San Diego, calling me being completely outraged because of the decision that the Trump administration had made to remove our forces from Syria and allow the Turks basically to come in and attack the Kurds.

And I remember him saying that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains, which is an old term that is used.

And I do also recall a few months later that the Secretary of Defense General Mattis also resigned, and this was one of the principle reasons—there were others—but because of this. And, again, I thought it was tragic myself.

I do think that we need to be involved. I do think it is important for us to be there. I haven't disagreed much with others.

But I would say this, not in defense of President Trump—I would never do that, never defend him—but I would say this, and he did say this: "I do not want to stay there for the next 40 years," Trump said. I am not going to do anything—"It is not going to do anything." Excuse me. "I campaigned on the fact that I was going to bring our soldiers home, and bring them home as rapidly as possible."

"Part of keeping that promise," Trump said, "is not thrusting U.S. forces to even more conflicts that have no end in sight."

We interject ourselves into wars and we interject ourselves into tribal wars, and revolutions, and all these things that are very that kind of thing that you settle the way you would like to see settled. It just does not, it just does not work that way. And it is time to come back home.

Now, I think he said that because that was the sentiment of a lot of Americans, just to be frank. I think a lot of Americans feel, you know, why are we involved in these endless wars, and why are we involved in places that most Americans couldn't point out on a map if they had to?

I do not look at the world that way. I think it is very important if we are not involved there that we are going to have problems. So, for example, when people now are complaining about all the issues at the border, right, we are having all these issues. Although I live at the border in San Diego, it is one of the safest places in the United States. We all should live in San Diego; it is very nice. But that being said, it is because of all the problems that are going on in Central America.

Europe, too, with all the issues that they are having, and stuff going on in Syria.

So, even apart from this self-interest, I think it is the right thing to do. But there is also self-interest for our country.

So, what really should we be doing? How should we be involved so this is not a 40-year war?

I guess I will ask—well, actually, who wants to take a shot at that? I do not want to prejudice anybody like the chairman did. I thought that was very judicious.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. I can take a shot.

Mr. VARGAS. Yes, go ahead.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Yes.

So, I think the consequences of the U.S. not being involved are dangerous because when the U.S. does not get involved it gets Russia involved. Right? Look at the Syrian case. We did not get the U.S. really involved enough in that case, and we got Russia. And so far we have more than half million people dead.

And, the Russian support to the regime in Syria created the brutality, that actually created the body of the extremist, you know, actors in Syria like ISIS. We just mentioned 10 minutes later before that, you know, the more brutality the people goes through, the more, you know, extremist parties will show up because they will, they will be feeding on the fear, on the brutality the people went through.

So, we have to think about the consequences of being involved or not. Now I am talking like I am an American, but you know, you know what I am trying to say is that the long-term consequences of not being involved are going to be dangerous because let's imagine that we do not get involved anywhere as the United States, we do not get involved anywhere. And the extremism, you know, will grow up. And then that will be endangering national security, that will be a national security issue for the U.S. anyway. The U.S. at some point needs to be involved again.

So, stepping out of this, the involvement of these nations, you know, we won't be able to survive being out for a long time. We have to go back again for our national security; right?

And that's that, so.

Mr. VARGAS. I agree. And one of the things I think you said that is important, I think that was said well in *Les Misérables*: now we see each other plain when it comes to Russia. I think in the last Administration we did not see each other plain. We did not see Russia for what it was. And now we do. And I think that is important.

Now I want to say that, not for everybody, like I say most of my Republican colleagues saw Russia plain, but I do not think the Administration quite did.

So, again, thank you. My time is up, so I won't ask another question. I did have more questions. But I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Vargas.

Mr. Steube, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEUBE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My questions are for Ms. Cafarella.

Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen has acknowledged that she plans to pursue a general special drawing rights allocation at the

IMF that would provide billions of dollars to genocidal regimes and State sponsors of terrorism. Under this plan, China, Russia, Venezuela, Iran, and Syria could receive 70 billion from the IMF.

In particular, under Syria's quota in the IMF, the Assad regime would receive at least \$390 million in the upcoming allocation. A recent guidance issued by Treasury even admits that "some countries whose policies the United States opposes will receive an SDR allocation."

Do you believe the Assad regime in Syria will use such funds for COVID-19 relief, or do you think such aid will instead be used to prop up his brutal regime?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir, for the question and for the opportunity to answer: categorically, no. The U.S. should not provide this aid to the Assad regime which will be used to repay the war criminals that have prosecuted this war. And it will be used by Assad in an attempt to shore up his position, as my colleague already mentioned, ahead of what will be a sham Presidential election this summer in Syria.

Thank you.

Mr. STEUBE. Well, and I just do not understand why we are even considering doing this. It to me does not make any sense.

Is there anything else that you think that this money would go to? And do you have any idea?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Well, I think the intent behind the money is, of course, to provide COVID-19 relief. But the trap the United States is in in Syria is that the Assad regime is deeply corrupt and lies. And they will not use the aid for whatever they promise to use the aid to do.

And, again, as my colleagues have already rightly outlined, Assad has even managed to acquire leverage over elements of the U.N. process that allocates that aid and that delivers it.

So, while I can understand the broad humanitarian principles that sometimes animates these proposals, the reality that we are in in Syria is that this money will reward a war criminal. I wish that weren't true. I wish he wasn't able to hold his own population hostage. But that is why this war has been going on for a decade, because he does it so well, and because the U.S. has fallen into this trap before.

Thank you.

Mr. STEUBE. And I agree with you.

Switching gears a little bit, as of this year, ongoing policy challenges include countering extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda and responding to the threat posed by ISIS remnants and detainees. Iran, in its regional proxy military forces, maintain and, arguably, have expanded their influence in the region where they have increasingly come into direct conflict with U.S. forces and allies. Particularly, Iran has bolstered the Assad Government in Syria in providing support to the Houthi rebel movement in Yemen where recently Secretary Blinken delisted the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization.

Where are the points of tension between Assad and Iran? And where do you think their interests diverge?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Thank you, sir. It is a difficult question because Assad is buried in deep with the Iranians. Right now their interests do not, in my view, meaningfully diverge.

At the tactical level, sometimes there is competition between Syrian units and the Iranians. And the Iranians certainly subvert Assad regime's sovereignty within Syria because they operate outside of his control. However, Assad is perfectly capable and, it seems, comfortable navigating that dynamic. He needs the military's support. He is actually aligned with them on a number of regional issues.

I think the question of Israel and how imminent regime desires are, for example, to reclaim the Syrian Golan Heights, or to conduct that kind of escalation, is probably the biggest point of potential diversion. But what we have actually watched is Assad enable Iran's buildup on the Golan. So, I would offer even if that is a diversion, an intended priority on the ground, it hasn't actually led to that significant of a gap yet between the two.

Thank you.

Mr. STEUBE. Is there a path to ending Iran's military presence in Syria? And if so, what would that look like?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes, sir. I would say ending Iranian military presence in Syria is a long-term goal. It should be a focus of a future diplomatic resolution of the conflict. But I think in the near term there is a lot the U.S. can do to first stop the build-out of Iranian influence, and then set the conditions to roll it back over time.

In my written testimony, I discuss one of Iran's elements in Syria that has gone almost fully unaddressed, which is its social, cultural, and economic outreach at very local levels, including in Sunni Arab majority areas along the Euphrates River Valley that could position the Iranians to have long-term and deep roots in Syria that could actually remain, even if Iranian military forces withdraw.

The U.S. needs to combat that. I recommend starting by actually, again, reinforcing the SDF, which is the only other reasonable job provider and security provider in the area.

Thank you.

Mr. STEUBE. Thank you. And thank you for being here today.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Steube.

Mr. Keating, you are recognized.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having the hearing.

Omar, our thoughts are also with the losses you suffered and everything you have gone through.

My question is this: announced today were sanctions against Russia. Included among those is sanctioning Yevgeny Prigozhin. You know, what came front and center with that is his involvement with the Internet Research Agency. But he is also a principal as well with the Wagner Group.

Now, the Wagner group has been involved in, I think, using the COVID pandemic, you know, to their advantage. It is purportedly distributing in the Syria region aid in terms of PPE, protective equipment, and vaccines.

To what extent, how do you view that kind of activity by, you know, this front, shadowy mercenary group sponsored by Russia engaging in these kinds of activities? What should we be looking out for?

Ms. CAFARELLA. So, I am happy to offer a comment, sir.

Mr. KEATING. Yes.

Ms. CAFARELLA. The Wagner Group, as you rightly noted, is a key tool of the Kremlin inside of Syria and the broader Middle East. Right now they are involved in the mobilization of Syrian mercenary fighters to fight, as I mentioned previously, in Libya, at the time in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Venezuela, and now potentially elsewhere.

Wagner is also involved in Russia's efforts to extra oil revenues from Syria to fund the campaign of air strikes, for example, that the Russians continue to conduct against Syrian civilians. And there are some indications that the Wagner Group has also participated in front line fighting, which makes them directly responsible for Syrian lives.

I think it is essential that the United States continue to put pressure on the Wagner Group and its enablers. I think that should include sanctions on Prigozhin, as has happened, potentially on other elements associated with Wagner, and should also make an effort to highlight and to disclose the role that this organization is playing in order to deny Putin the plausible deniability that he seeks.

Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

Certainly, you know, those sanctions were warranted with his activities, not just in Europe, and Russia, and Ukraine, but also in expanding global footprint as well.

Just a question about any thoughts you might have. You know, there's 2,000 foreign fighters being detained right now, you know, associated with ISIS. There's 12,000 militants that are there. There are 60,000 associated family members, many women and children. And some of them are starting to be—[inaudible.]

In any case, let's hear what you have to say about that, if you could, how that should be conducted, what we should be watching out for, how it has occurred so far.

Ms. CAFARELLA. Sorry, sir, I lost your audio for a moment, but I believe that question was directed at me, so I will offer a comment.

Mr. KEATING. Go ahead.

Ms. CAFARELLA. The SDF is a non-State actor that is not capable of performing the scope and scale of the detainee operations that are necessary to handle this ISIS detainee population, nor to deal with the very complex and, actually, dangerous situation in the awful camps.

Now, I would offer U.S. support has actually enabled the SDF to be surprisingly effective in managing this at the level that they currently are. They actually recently conducted a raid inside al-Hol, which is a very risky enterprise. But that was necessary to root out a number of actual ISIS elements that were operating within the camp, including, if I am not mistaken, a recruiter and some financiers. And they found ISIS tunnels. So, the situation in

al-Hol is both a grave humanitarian crisis and a huge security requirement. The U.S. has addressed both of those issues.

We should be leading an international effort to provide humanitarian aid at al-Hol that is enabled by a security platform that can ensure that ISIS actually is not able to operate freely within the camp, and that the humanitarian aid organizations have the kind of security conditions necessary to deliver their services.

Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you. My time is waning, so I will yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks very much, Mr. Keating.

Representative Jackson is next.

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it. And thank you to the witnesses for your testimony and your answers so far.

The United States taxpayers have contributed almost \$13 billion to this crisis over the last 10 years, yet the Syrian citizens still face displacement, starvation, and violence, as we have been discussing. The United States faces three main threats from Syria:

The first, the lingering threat from terrorism, including ISIS and groups like the al-Qaeda;

Second, the political and ethnic divisions streaming from civil war that is now in its tenth year;

Last, we face the problems from the involvement of foreign bad actors, particularly Iran and Russia.

My concern is toward this last of the three problems, and I will focus my question on this. Specifically, I am concerned about the undue influence that China and Russia hold in this crisis, particularly when discussing this conflict in the U.N. Security Council.

Ms. Cafarella, I think I will direct this at you, if you do not mind. Can you discuss how Russia takes advantage of the U.N. system and its permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council to help the Assad regime and inflict suffering of civilians?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes. Thank you for your question, sir. It is very important.

The Russians began manipulating the U.N. by essentially leveraging their veto power in order to ensure the international community could not apply greater pressure on Assad. But what the Russians have started to do is to try to repurpose U.N. processes to actually actively enable Assad's consolidation. That is what we are seeing the Russians do while they try to shape the diplomatic process and to change its terms to ones that will essentially preserve the regime.

And we are also watching the Russians do that now with humanitarian aid. As I referenced earlier, the Russians are trying to give Assad a monopoly on humanitarian aid in Syria. And the Russians are using the U.N. to do that.

Finally, the Russians are trying to discredit sanctions as a tool of American Statecraft on grounds that they are inhumane or illegal, which is flatly untrue. But the Russians are also using the U.N. as a vehicle to do that through, among other things, Putin's demand for a U.N. summit at which he intends to address the sanctions issue.

The United States definitely needs to push back on this. I think a component is, as I mentioned earlier, highlighting the role Russia is actually playing in Syria and breaking through the disinformation that it uses to manipulate actors, including too often European States, to back a Russian proposal that amounts to concessions to Assad. But, I think the U.S. should also be judicious in what we expect to achieve via the U.N. Security Council, recognizing that we are not likely to get any resolution, for example, on a diplomatic settlement, and we may not even get the resolution we seek on humanitarian aid.

We need to block the Russians and then we need to do what we need to do outside the U.N. to reestablish leverage in the theater that, hopefully, over time can help us revalidate the U.N. as a legitimate, you know, entity inside of Syria. Because one of my fears is that we talk about Assad radicalizing Syrians, and Russia and Iran radicalizing Syrians, we do not often talk about the fact that the U.N. losing legitimacy is also a source of disillusionment and potential radicalization for populations that should be able to trust the United Nations, at the minimum on humanitarian grounds.

Thank you.

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you. I appreciate that. I agree with you 100 percent. Thank you.

I have one more quick question and I will just direct this to you as well.

The Trump administration identified the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces as a main policy goal in Syria. As the Biden Administration develops their agenda for Syria, I hope they are going to continue the same stance.

For the committee awareness, could you briefly describe Iran's military, political, and cultural entrenchment in Syria? How deep do you think their reach and their control currently is?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes. Thank you for the question.

The first element of Iran's presence in Syria is its physical military presence that includes the military bases and other infrastructure the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force uses, in part to send weapons and other—and missiles and other weapon systems to Hezbollah in, but also to fuel the Assad regime's war effort.

But it also includes a deeper layer that I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about for this, which is Iran's cultural, economic, and social outreach. That occurs through a number of local charities and Iranian-funded organizations, including, for example, the Lebanese Hezbollah Jihad al-Bina organization which provides, you know, charitable works for Hezbollah soft power inside of Lebanon. It is also operating inside of Syria.

I think it is important not to overstate how deep those social roots are now. Right? It's not like Syrian populations that are desperate for basic salaries are fully card-carrying members of, you know, Iran's regional axis resistance simply due to this outreach. But this is one of those steps where if we give Iran a decade to continue to try to root itself into local communities inside of Syria, that picture may look very different.

I say similar things about the risk of al-Qaeda, you know, soft power outreach. That people do not believe this ideology, but give them a decade of violence and it may actually start to sink in.

Thank you.

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you. I appreciate that answer. And I see my time is up.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Chairman, if you would allow, Chairman, if you would please allow me to——

Mr. DEUTCH. You may.

Mr. ALSHOGRE [continuing]. Reply to, to Congressman Mast, as I missed because of technical difficulties.

But regarding Iran, as was the last thing to be mentioned, Iran is, like, Iranians are already buying houses in Damascus. They are taking over places. In addition to recent news we got from the ground that Iranians are being, Iranian, you know, officers being responsible for some prisoners. They will trade prisoners.

Like, I was bought out for just \$20,000. My mom invested someone to get me out of prison. And they are now being responsible in some parts of Damascus, some prisons, to be the ones responsible to sell those prisoners. So, prisoners are an economy.

More than that, when I was in Branch 215, a prison, one of the most brutal prisons in Syrian, I was numbering the dead bodies. And among the dead bodies I would see one they used screw drivers to draw the Iranian flag on their bodies. They will use whatever hard machines to draw the Iranian flag on their bodies.

So, the Iranian forces committed brutal crimes against the Syrian people. They actually, you can feel like they were enjoying doing that. Even in the massacre in May, May 2013, when they killed my family, they actually, they were there. So, the regime was there, supported by the Iranian militias.

So, that is what I wanted to say. I am sorry, again, for Congressman Mast for missing his question.

Mr. DEUTCH. No, appreciate it very much, Mr. Alshogre. And thanks, Representative Jackson.

We will now go to Representative Schneider. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Chairman Deutch. And I want to thank you for having this hearing. And I want to thank the witnesses for spending time with us.

In particular, Mr. Alshogre, I want to thank you for sharing your story, it is a story full of grief, and illustrates the atrocities of the Assad regime. But it is also a story that is full of hope and inspiration. And we are very grateful to that.

I remember, I did not make the connection when you were accepted to Georgetown, the video posted on You Tube was an inspiration to me back in November. And it is an honor to have you here now. And we are so glad to have you at Georgetown and look forward to great things for you.

In my time there are three things I want to touch on, and I will be brief, but the humanitarian crisis; holding Assad and his regime accountable, making sure that they do not gain legitimacy again; and addressing the Iranian influence.

In July of last year, the U.N. Security Council reauthorized for humanitarian assistance in Syria for a year. Unfortunately, Russia and China vetoed and restricted it for a single crossing point. This

single crossing point severely restricted aid flows into the remaining pockets of Syrian civilian and non-regime held areas.

Similar action is up for reauthorization this July. And we are hearing that Russia is again considering a veto, rightfully hoping that the threat of a veto will pressure the U.S. to make concessions in other areas.

Dr. Khatib, how has the reduction to a single crossing point impacted humanitarian assistance? What do you think the U.S. should be doing? And how do you suggest we hold the U.N. accountable?

Dr. KHATIB. Thank you. The U.N. itself estimates that 75 percent of Syrians in northwest Syria depend on U.N. aid. So we can only imagine the humanitarian catastrophe that would happen if that cross-border authorization is not renewed.

The U.S. has to exert pressure on Russia at the same time it negotiates with it to get it to cooperate. The reason why Russia is increasing the dose of its pressure is because it feels it can get away with it. And that is why it is important not to let Russia get comfortable in Syria.

One leverage the U.S. has over Russia is that Russia is hoping that the world would normalize relations with the Assad regime and money would flow into Syria for reconstruction, and Russia would be set to benefit from that.

Increasing sanctions on the Assad regime and anyone associated with it, whether Syrian or not, would prevent countries from normalizing with the Assad regime, even in a de facto, if not formal, manner.

One of the issues that we can also do is pay attention to how the Syrian conflict is really part of a regional picture. It's not just about Syria. It is also about regional interventions by Iran. It is also about what is happening in Iraq.

The conflicts are actually quite linked, including economically. And one example I will give you here is suitcases full of cash are being flown from Baghdad into Beirut Airport to fund Hezbollah. And Hezbollah uses that money to fund its own operations in Syria.

And, therefore, I think when it comes to engaging with Russia to pressure it, using the economic leverage is important, but at the same time addressing Russia's and Iran's regional roles is also very important, which means negotiating beyond Syria, not just on Syria.

Thank you.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Absolutely. And thank you.

And let me turn to Mr. Alshogre to address this a little bit.

Germany has successfully used the thought of universal jurisdiction to sentence an intelligence officer, Syrian intelligence officer to four-and-a-half years in prison for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity.

And there lessons that you think the U.S. can draw from this, what other countries are doing to investigate the Assad regime? How can we better promote accountability?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. I am glad, I am glad to receive this question. I am glad to highlight it, that those who committed crimes are actually being followed. Those who tortured me in prison are now, some

of them are captured and will be, you know, are being questioned or will be questioned. That is really important for the survivors. That is important to Syrian mothers, parents who while their kids were being tortured, died in torture, the families of the people in the seizure photos. It is very important to everyone.

So, we have five legal prosecutions. We have cases, legal cases. We have one in Germany and one person is sentenced now. We had one in Swedish—in Sweden. We had one in Norway, and Spain, and France. All of them are very important. We need one in the U.S. It is very important.

We cannot ignore the power, and the knowledge, and the experience the U.S. has in this field. So it is important we raise. And we try to work with that with the partners that these cases matter for in the U.S. And, hopefully, soon something good can be announced about legal cases, criminal cases, civil cases against the Syrian regime in Syria.

Because you have it is not just caring about the Syrian people, it is caring about the American people because you have Americans who died under torture in Syria. You have Layla Shwekani. You have Americans who are being tortured in Syrian detention centers in Syria. You have Austin Tice, Majd Kamalmaz, and other Americans who are not, their names are not public yet. So, it is important we do that.

And when the U.S. thinks about it, it is important to think about their own citizens as well, not only the Syrian people. It will be easier to find evidence regarding the death, the torture of the Syrian people.

And, hopefully, you managed to watch our, the Syrian Task Force interview on 60 Minutes talking about this legal prosecution that is supported by our colleague Mouaz Moustafa and Ambassador Stephen Rapp which will give more detail about that, and the importance and the role the U.S. can play in legal prosecution.

Thank you very much for this amazing question.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. And my time has now expired. I yield back. And thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing. And I look forward to discussing the issues with Iran later on.

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

And I will now yield myself 5 minutes or so for some questions.

Dr. Khatib, I want to ask about Iranian influence, Iran and their proxies in Syria, and Turkey's view of that influence. And we have talked about Russia a lot. Are there ways we can coordinate more with Turkey on a common interest in diminishing Iranian influence in Syria?

Let me start with that.

Dr. KHATIB. Thank you.

For Turkey, early on Iran was a direct competitor in many ways in Syria because Turkey was seeking the removal of the Assad regime when Iran was supporting the Assad regime. However, things have changed over the years because Turkey's main focus in Syria remains the Kurdish issue rather than the removal of the Assad regime.

And that is why I think to get Turkey to cooperate more, whether on Iran or any other issue, when it comes to Syria what needs to happen is governance in northeast Syria that is currently Kurd-

ish dominated needs to become more inclusive, and accountable, and transparent, and effective. Because this is what is going to lessen the tension between the United States and Turkey.

Turkey will be able to cooperate more if it feels reassured that there is not going to be a Kurdish-led autonomous region at its border in Syria, which is its main concern because it sees that as being an extension of PKK activity that will threaten its national security. If it feels reassured on that front, I think further down the line there can be talks between Turkey and the PKK. But to get Turkey to cooperate on Iran, we need to reassure Turkey about the Kurdish issue.

That does not mean, of course, abandoning the SDF, it means making the autonomous administration of the northeast more accountable, transparent, and inclusive of all ethnic groups, and working to lessen tension between Arabs and Kurds more generally in that area.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Dr. Khatib.

Ms. Cafarella, you were nodding. Would you just continue that analysis of Turkey and the Kurds, how they are connected in order to work together to confront Iran in Syria?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Yes. And I would agree with my colleague. And I would simply add that I think the U.S. has undervalued what we can accomplish with the SDF because we have not had a coherent political strategy on the ground inside of Syria. And so it can feel like a monumental task to change the SDF governance.

But we have actually never done that. We simply allowed the SDF to go forward and build a formal governance that it wanted to, which was responsive to the desires and the political ambitions of the senior Kurdish leadership linked with the PKK.

There was nothing inevitable about that. We were passive and we let it happen. If the U.S. takes a more active role, I think we actually will find we have common ground with Turkey to advance a common secure government framework in the northeast. It will require hard work.

I agree with all of Ms. Khatib's comments about how the U.S. has accomplished reform, accountability, et cetera, within the SDF. And I would simply offer that I think there is an opportunity here because the Kurdish leadership has been surprisingly adaptive and have been willing to make difficult concessions in order to hold onto their project. I do not think the Kurdish leadership will love a lot of the reforms that will need to happen, but I think it is entirely possible that they will recognize that it's in their interest to do so.

And I do think that frees up the U.S. and Turkey to stabilize this area, prevent Iran from continuing to expand its presence there, and then potentially to do more to partner against Iran more broadly.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. OK. How does that work? So, assume we get to that point, what happens then, what are we then in a position to do with Turkey vis-a-vis Iran?

Ms. CAFARELLA. Sure. So, the first thing that happens is that area becomes interdicted to Iran, which is not currently true. The

Iranians are actually able to operate in northeast Syria. They are in Raqqa city, and they are in other places.

So, the first thing is to exclude that presence and, therefore, to deny Iran one of its cross-border access points into Syria, because they actually use northeast Syria to get into and out of the country.

The second thing I would offer is that it actually opens up regional opportunities. And we do not have time, so I won't go into detail. But the Turks and the Iranians are actually on opposite sides of a major flashpoint in Iraq, in Sinjar, just across the border from the Syrian Kurdish area. And that is another opportunity for the U.S. to play a diplomatic role in stabilizing the situation, bolstering Turkey and countering Iran.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you for that.

Just as we prepare to close this really helpful, informative hearing, I wanted, I also wanted to talk about going forward and what things will look like. And we have, I think, acknowledged that Russia, and Turkey, Iran and its proxies have played, one way or another have been in the driver's seat, I think, in this conflict.

None of them share our general strategic interests in the region. Each is using Syria, I think we can agree, to advance their own very specific goals. We cannot ignore the parties, if we want to resolve the conflict and end the suffering.

Here is my question. Mr. Alshogre, we will let you wrap up.

At this point in the conflict, as you look ahead, is there a, is there an end in which, in which Russia leaves Syria, in which Iran leaves Syria, in which Turkey leaves Syria, ultimately in which Assad leaves Syria?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. As you have probably noticed, I am a very optimistic guy, so I always look at the brightest side possible.

Mr. DEUTCH. Whatever way you can do it.

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you.

So, I believe that we actually can find a solution to that. Every country, obviously, is looking for their own interests, Turkey, Iran, Russia. Nobody cares about the Syrian people; right? And that is an obvious thing.

But there was always, you know, when the Syrian, when the Syrian people are supported to lead, they can leave those countries outside. They will be leading themselves. Right?

When we have, when we have the knowledge, the experience, that community to lead, we will be leading, and everybody can be kicked out if they are not doing good for the Syrian people. I know we always have this narrative that the regime actually told us about that the conflict in Syria is so complex that it is difficult to engage, it is difficult to do good because you did not know who is good, who is bad.

That is not true. We actually know who is good. We know actually know who is bad. The Syrian people against the regime are the ones that need to be supported. Those people who want to demonstrate against the regime, went out to the streets asking for freedom, and holding flowers in their hand, are the ones to be supported. And most of them are in Idlib right now.

Some people with argument about Hayat Tahrir al-Sham wants jihad, but actually the Syrian people as soon as they got some flexibility when they had enough food and water, they would actually

be fighting the regime and the other extremist groups around because they asked for freedom. Right? And the Syrian people paid a lot for that: lives, and money, and they invested everything they had just to get a new country, a democracy and representation.

And we have the will. The will is very important in this conflict. We have the will. We need the support from the world.

And in 2013 when I was in prison I remember when people started talking about other countries being involved to help the Syrian people, and we had so much help in prison, and the guard himself who was torturing me on a daily basis had so much fear because he thought, oh, now the world is going to react, is going to help the Syrian people in their revolution against the regime, so we may finally be asked in court about our crimes.

So, I encourage everyone, as an individual and as Congressmen, to help the Syrian people, to try to care. And, you know, telling the stories is so important. I focus on that because I know the value of that, why you should come to your kids, to your neighbor so everybody is aware. When everybody is aware, everybody will care and they would find a solution. There are so many there like mine, not only those from Harvard or Georgetown to work in business. Adult smart people to work in solving conflicts and people earning, earning this money all the time.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Alshogre, I know I speak for all of my colleagues when I tell you that the pain that you felt in your life, the losses experienced in your life, and the way that you have taken that to advocate not just, not just to advocate for the people of Syria but to do it in, as you point out, this optimistic way which recognizes that as long as we continue to pay attention, as long as the world is focused there, there is a way forward for the Syrian people, I am grateful to you and all of the witnesses for joining us today.

And you have our commitment through this hearing and our ongoing focus on this issue that we will not forget the people of Syria. We will continue to press ahead with good allies like you, and with the insight of talented witnesses like Ms. Cafarella and Dr. Khatib.

We are really grateful. This has been a really wonderful and important hearing. I thank all of you.

I thank the members who have participated in this hearing. The level of participation today I think is remarkable. That shows, among other things, Mr. Alshogre, our commitment to you and the people of Syria.

Thanks everyone so much. And with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:16 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

## APPENDIX

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

**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chair**

April 15, 2021

**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 virtually by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

**DATE:** Thursday, April 15, 2021

**TIME:** 10:00 a.m., EDT

**SUBJECT:** 10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria

**WITNESSES:**  
Lina Khatib, Ph.D.  
Director  
Middle East and North Africa Programme  
Chatham House

Mr. Omar Alshogre  
Syrian Public Speaker and Human Rights Activist  
Director of Detainee Affairs  
Syrian Emergency Task Force

Ms. Jennifer Cafarella  
National Security Fellow  
Institute for the Study of War

**By Direction of the Chair**

## COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism HEARING

Day Thursday Date 04/15/2021 Room Cisco Webex

Starting Time 10:09 AM Ending Time 12:16 PM

Recesses 0 (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_)

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**Presiding Member(s)**

*Chair Theodore E. Deutch*

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*Check all of the following that apply:*

Open Session  Executive (closed) Session   
Televised

Electronically Recorded (taped)   
Stenographic Record

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**TITLE OF HEARING:**

*10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria*

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**SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

*See Attached*

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

*Steve Chabot, OH*

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

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

*SFR - Rep. Gerry Connolly*

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TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_  
or  
TIME ADJOURNED 12:16 PM



Subcommittee Staff Associate

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS***SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM*

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	David Cicilline, RI
	Ted Lieu, CA
	Colin Allred, TX
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	Kathy Manning, NC
X	William Keating, MA
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Juan Vargas, CA
X	Brad Schneider, IL

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
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X	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Lec Zeldin, NY
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Greg Steube, FL
X	Ronny Jackson, TX
X	Maria Elvira Salazar, FL

## STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD CONNOLLY

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

6.7 million internally displaced people. 5.6 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. More than half a million Syrians buried by their loved ones. Two million Syrians living in extreme poverty. Tens of billions of dollars invested in humanitarian assistance from countries around the world, with even more desperately needed. This is where we are after ten years of war in Syria. While the Islamic State (ISIS) no longer controls Syrian territory, U.S. officials estimate that anywhere from 8,000 to 16,000 ISIS fighters remain in Syria and Iraq and constitute a “significant security threat” not only to locals but to Europe and North America as well, even as they expand their reach into Africa. We need no further proof that the current U.S. policy towards Syria has failed and must change if we want to prevent another ten years of war and suffering.

Last year, President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, allowing Turkey to clear our Kurdish allies from near the Turkish-Syrian border and driving the Kurds into the arms of Russia and Bashar al-Assad. In one rash move, Trump effectively gave the Syrian government control of the country’s northeast for the first time in years, further emboldened Turkey and Russia, and dramatically undermined our leadership and ability to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis or contribute to a political settlement. We also completely abandoned the Kurds who have been invaluable in our fight against ISIS. Combined with their refusal to offer strategies or commit new resources to achieve their purported five “key end states,” including an enduring defeat for ISIS and the safe and voluntary return of displaced Syrians, American intervention in Syria under the Trump Administration served only to make a catastrophic situation even worse.

The Biden Administration has the opportunity to rewrite our Syria policy, alleviate humanitarian suffering on the ground, and help bring about a political solution to the conflict. I support the Administration’s continued call for a political settlement pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254. To attain that goal, the Administration needs to firmly establish what our end goal in Syria looks like, identify the concrete and measurable steps that will be required to get there, and decide what our relationship with Assad will look like moving forward. Earlier this year, the State Department said that our policy towards Assad has not changed and that there is “no question” of the United States normalizing relations with the Assad government, while at the same time emphasizing that we have no interest in regime change. We can’t have it both ways and attempting to has undoubtedly been to our detriment.

I am particularly heartened to see President Biden’s renewed commitment to humanitarian relief efforts, after President Trump’s erratic cuts and freezes on humanitarian aid provision, including a \$700 million cut to Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza in 2018, which I spoke out against at the

time. In contrast, last month, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced an \$596 million in new humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis response, bringing total U.S. humanitarian assistance to Syria to nearly \$13 billion since the start of the crisis. It is equally important that we continue to sanction Syrian officials who hold responsibility for the atrocities committed against the Syrian people. The United States has maintained some level of economic sanctions on Syria since 1979, largely focused on their sponsorship of terrorist groups and development of prohibited weapons. In response to the current crisis, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 directs the President to sanction any foreign individual providing significant support to the Assad regime or providing military support within Syria on behalf of Syria, Russia or Iran. I was proud to support this legislation when it was first introduced and believe it has the power to drive political change within Syria while safeguarding the well-being of the civilian population. With only 15 individuals sanctioned to date, we certainly have more work to do with this law.

Finally, as we know too well, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe with roughly half of the country's prewar population displaced. Countries that are hosting Syrian refugees are facing challenges of their own trying to support them. That is why I wrote the Trump Administration, urging for the renewal of the Temporary Protected Status designation for Syria and resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States. I have introduced the Lady Liberty Act (H.R.977) to set 125,000 as a minimum for the number of refugees admitted annually. It is time for the United States to ramp up our humanitarian efforts and show the world that we are not indifferent to the grave suffering of the Syrian people.

We can all agree that after ten years of fighting, a few dozen Tomahawk missiles do not constitute a Syria policy. Political negotiations and a concerted multilateral diplomatic effort are the only meaningful and realistic means to bringing relief to millions of desperate Syrian civilians and creating lasting peace in this war-torn nation. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how the U.S. Congress can be a partner on this effort, and how we can avoid having this same hearing again in another ten years.

