

Follow/Mention
@HouseForeign

Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA)**, Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing:
U.S. Policy After Russia's Escalation in Syria
November 4, 2015

(As prepared for delivery)

This hearing will come to order. Into its fifth year, the Syrian conflict has claimed more than a quarter million lives and driven 14 million from their homes. Through it all, the Obama Administration's response has been tepid, micromanaged by the White House, and obviously, very ineffectual. When it had the chance to hit ISIS from the air early on, the White House sat paralyzed. This tragic inaction has created a humanitarian disaster, and paved the way for ISIS's rise in Syria and beyond.

Today President Obama still hasn't put forward the broad, overarching strategy needed to defeat these brutal terrorists and secure vital U.S. national security interests. Instead, it is now Russia that is taking the decisive role in shaping Syria's future. Putin saw Assad losing ground, so Russian jets have teamed with Iranian ground forces to solidify the Syrian dictator. The focus of the Russia and Iran's joint offensive is not ISIS strongholds, but opposition forces backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia. Russian bombs have flattened markets, schools and villages.

The Russians are bombing more targets in one day than the United States is in a month. An already weak U.S. air campaign is anemic. The Administration claims it lacks targets, yet the Special Forces it is sending to Syria won't even be spotting targets. Russian aims on the opposition and the slowdown in collusion airstrikes has allowed ISIS to gain territory.

While the President characterizes Russia's moves as a sign of weakness, it is Assad who is growing stronger. Moscow's efforts show no signs of slowing. Russian cargo aircraft have been seen running Iranian weapons into Syria, a violation of the UN arms embargo.

This is especially troubling as we begin another attempt to restart talks between the regime and the opposition on a new constitution and elections. Russia claims its goal is a "united, secular and democratic Syria" but its efforts to prop-up the Assad regime prove otherwise.

How do we expect the opposition to sign-on to any sort of cease-fire as long as Russia and Iran are demanding that Assad, a mass murderer whose regime has lost all legitimacy with the Syrian people, stay in power? Indeed, the statement from Vienna didn't even demand that the Assad regime stop using crude barrel bombs—some filled with chlorine gas—against civilians.

A diplomatic solution is only possible with a strong, coherent moderate opposition that can serve as a bridge from Assad to a new, post-conflict government. Yet, the Administration has done little to help the opposition. Its feeble train and equip program is now defunct. Washington bureaucracy and over-deference to the Iraqi government has held up desperately-needed weapons shipments to the Kurds. And no one believes Friday's announcement of 50 Special Forces will be decisive.

Ultimately, it is President Obama's responsibility to step up and outline a plan to engage our partners and allies, and bring stability to the Middle East. He is the Commander-in-Chief. But here is where I'd start:

If we want an opposition to negotiate from a position of strength, why not help create sanctuary areas in Syria? This would help the Syrian people escape both the Assad regime and the Islamic State. This would also allow for more-effective humanitarian relief, and even slow the exodus of refugees.

We must also push back on Russia and Iran's destabilizing intervention in the conflict. That means passing tough new sanctions on Iran's terrorist proxy Hezbollah—as the House has done—and taking action to uphold the UN arms embargo on Iran, in the face of Russian violations.

Everyone but the White House seems to know the status quo cannot stand. General David Petraeus recently testified to Congress that Syria is a “geopolitical Chernobyl.” And “like a nuclear disaster, the fallout from the meltdown of Syria threatens to be with us for decades. And the longer it is permitted to continue, the more severe the damage will be.”

The whole region is imperiled. The U.S. has strong political and humanitarian interests to do what we effectively can, and there are limits, to see the return to stability, with a laser focus on defeating ISIS and other jihadists, our greatest threat.

I now turn to the Ranking Member for any opening comments he may have.