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## Syria After the Missile Strikes: Policy Options

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on American policy in Syria. This is rightly a topic of renewed attention in the aftermath of the April 7 cruise missile strike on Shayrat airfield, which came in response to the horrific use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the population of Khan Sheikhouh.

At first glance, there seems to be a tragic repetitiveness to the conflict in Syria—a drumbeat of bombings, battles, and refugee flows punctuated now and then by some new, more extreme outrage perpetrated by the Assad regime, ISIS, or another group. The unrelenting nature of this conflict not only threatens to desensitize us to the tragedies unfolding daily in Syria, but to mask the war’s fundamental transformation from 2011 to today.

The Syria conflict began as a peaceful protest that was brutally suppressed, with an increasingly illegitimate regime fighting its people while creating the conditions for the development of an extremist opposition, albeit one which served as a useful foil for the regime. The United States and others long hoped to contain this conflict, but failed utterly; it is now a regional conflagration whose geopolitical ramifications have been felt far beyond the Middle East. One can draw a straight line from the conflict in Syria to the rise of ISIS, which prospered in the vacuum left by the Syrian state’s decay; to Russia’s reassertion of its power in the Middle East; to the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East; to the political turbulence which played a role in the British decision to leave the EU and continues to roil European politics today.

Our relative neglect of the Syria conflict has thus not served our interests, but has set them back in the Middle East and beyond. Nor has it spared us the expenditure of resources—the U.S. has provided at least \$6.5 billion in humanitarian aid to Syrians (more than any other country), provided at least \$400 million in aid to the Syrian opposition, and spent billions of dollars more on the campaign against ISIS in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

Those who defend American policy in Syria over the last eight years must depend on the non-falsifiable claim that whatever the costs of inaction, a more assertive policy would have been worse. The Trump administration has started out on the right foot by rejecting this approach and acting decisively in service of a clear U.S. interest. I believe the April 7 cruise missile strikes in response to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons stand a good chance of deterring the

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are drawn from “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” Congressional Research Service, April 7, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>.

further use of CW in Syria and reinforcing more broadly the international norm against the use of such weapons, which appears to have been the administration's narrow intent.

Devising and executing our broader policy in Syria will be more complex, but will benefit from a similarly clear assessment of U.S. interests and objectives and the development of options to advance them. In doing so, we cannot afford to focus narrowly on one or another aspect of the conflict, such as defeating ISIS. Instead, we will need to consider how the policy choices we and others make in Syria will impact the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and beyond in the future. That will be the focus of my testimony.

## **BACKGROUND**

The war in Syria today is not a single conflict, but comprises multiple arenas, which are not wholly distinct but overlap with one another:

- First, western Syria, where the regime, supported by Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies like Hezbollah, are fighting an opposition dominated by jihadist groups, primarily Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (which includes the former Jabhat al-Nusra). This fighting is currently most intense around Idlib. Millions of Syrian civilians, including internally displaced persons from other areas such as Aleppo, are caught in it. It is this region that includes Khan Sheikhoun, which was the target of Assad's chemical attack.
- Second, northern Syria, where Turkish-backed and Kurdish forces have both clashed with ISIS, in close proximity to Syrian regime and Russian forces, as they jostle for position. Turkish-backed forces maintain a triangle of territory including the towns of Jarabulus and al-Bab, in large part to prevent Syrian Kurdish (YPG) forces from linking territory they control in northwestern Syria around Afrin with the territory they control in the country's northeast stretching from Manbij to Qamishli, and thereby consolidating control of the entire Syrian-Turkish border area. This has in turn strengthened the incentive for the YPG to cooperate with regime and Russian forces, which control the area south of al-Bab and east of Aleppo, which forms an alternate land route between the Kurdish areas.
- Third, southern Syria. This area is contested by the Syrian regime, opposition groups, and ISIS. While it has generally been quieter of late than other areas, it is of particular strategic importance to two of our closest regional allies, Israel and Jordan.
- Fourth, eastern Syria, which along with a swath of central Syria around Palmyra remains in the hands of ISIS. ISIS' territory has slowly eroded thanks to coalition air strikes in conjunction with a ground campaign being waged largely by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes both the Kurdish YPG militia and local Arab elements.

Each of these conflicts has drawn in various actors from inside and outside Syria. These include the following (NB—Because this testimony focuses on the regional geopolitics of the conflict, only external actors are listed; this is not intended to downplay the central role of Syrian actors in the conflict and its resolution):

- Iran—Arguably the most significant outside actor in Syria, Iran has reportedly provided the Assad regime with tens of thousands<sup>2</sup> of fighters, arms, training, and other forms of support. While most of the Iranian-backed forces in Syria are proxies—most notably

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<sup>2</sup> Majid Raied as quoted in Melissa Dalton, Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, February 14, 2017.

Hezbollah but also Iraq, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia militants—numerous IRGC personnel, including high-ranking officers, have been killed in Syria and other Iranian security agencies have reportedly been involved.

Iran's involvement has been focused not on fighting ISIS, but on fighting opposition forces in western Syria, leading one to surmise that its objective is to defend the Assad regime. Ensuring Assad's survival is vital to Iran's effort to project power into the Levant against U.S. allies, primarily Israel. Were Assad to fall, Iran's channels to Hezbollah and other terrorist groups could be disrupted, and Iranian forces would not likely enjoy the freedom of action they long have had in Syria.

Iran's involvement in Syria has led to several concerning developments. While the IRGC and its proxies such as Hezbollah had typically engaged in insurgency in the past, their defense of the Assad regime has forced a shift to counter-insurgency. Whether this leads to overextension or aggrandizement is an open question, but there is evidence that their experience in Syria has increased their capacity for conventional operations.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Syria conflict appears to have cemented the Russia-Iran alliance, as vividly demonstrated by Russia's use of an Iranian airbase. It should be noted that sanctions barring the sale of conventional arms systems to Iran will lapse in 2020 as a result of the nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), opening further possibilities for conventional military cooperation between Russia, Iran, and Iran's proxies.

Finally, while Iran has thus far been focused on western Syria, one cannot dismiss the possibility that after the liberation of Mosul, Iraqi Shia militias beholden to Iran will seek to become involved in eastern Syria.

- Russia—While Russia's footprint in Syria has been smaller than Iran's, it has played no less decisive a role in safeguarding the Assad regime. With a relatively small (and thus perhaps sustainable) intervention, Russia arguably saved the Assad regime from severe contraction or destruction in late 2015 and enabled it to reverse some territorial losses, providing the air power to complement Iran's efforts on the ground.

Russia, which like Iran has operated chiefly in western Syria rather than against ISIS, also aims to defend the Assad regime but for reasons which are different from Tehran's. It is perhaps the clearest case of what seems to be a global effort by Russian President Putin to restore Russia's status as a great power, in a place that was the last bastion of Russian influence in the region. Moscow likely also aims simply to thwart U.S. ambitions, in response to what it sees as U.S. efforts at regime change in Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere. Russian officials routinely claim that their purpose is to fight ISIS and that they have no special attachment to Assad himself, but neither assertion is borne out by Russian actions.

Russia's intervention has had implications for the freedom of action of other forces. The U.S. cannot contemplate military action in Syria or the surrounding region without taking Russian air defenses into account, though their impact should not be exaggerated. And any action Israel contemplates in Lebanon or Syria also depends to some extent on Russian forbearance.

- Turkey—Ankara is a partner in U.S. efforts in Syria, providing access to the Incirlik air base and taking in millions of Syrian refugees. Turkey has long insisted that Assad

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<sup>3</sup> See Genevieve Casagrande, "How Iran Is Learning from Russia in Syria," Institute for the Study of War (<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/how-iran-learning-russia-syria>) for more on this topic.

should step aside, but in recent months its chief concern in Syria appears to have been the territorial expansion of the Syrian Kurds, whom Turkey considers to be in league with the PKK terrorist group. As noted above, in 2016 (and continuing into 2017), Turkish-backed forces seized a swath of territory along the Syrian-Turkish border to prevent the YPG from linking its territories around Afrin with the area it holds in the east between Manbij and Qamishli. Turkey is likely to remain in control of this territory for the foreseeable future. While much was made of a softening of Russian-Turkish relations last year, the tensions between Moscow and Ankara over Syria are likely to persist, especially if links between Russia and the YPG deepen.

Turkey's concerns about the aggrandizement of the YPG has complicated the US-led campaign to oust ISIS from Raqqa, as the YPG-dominated SDF was seen as the likeliest candidate to lead that effort. The SDF-led "Euphrates Wrath" operation has been clearing territories around Raqqa in anticipation of the city's eventual liberation, while at the same time Turkish-backed opposition forces have stated their intention to roll back both ISIS and the YPG in the same area. Maintaining good relations with Turkey while mounting an effective campaign against ISIS in Raqqa has thus proven a conundrum for the U.S. and its coalition allies.

- Jordan—Amman's chief concerns in Syria are fourfold. First is the flow of refugees from Syria into Jordan, which already hosts nearly a million of them. Coalition operations in Raqqa and western Iraq, or renewed fighting in southern Syria, could trigger another outflow of refugees to Jordan. Second is the possibility of further ISIS attacks against Jordan, beyond the border (although until now all the major terrorist attacks that have occurred in the kingdom have been perpetrated by radicalized Jordanian nationals). Third is the outbreak of renewed fighting near Jordan's borders, whether between the Syrian regime and opposition or Israel and Iranian-backed forces, which could have dire consequences for Jordan's own security. Finally, Jordan seeks to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from establishing a base of operations along its northern border, which could be a destabilizing factor after the war eventually ends. To safeguard these interests, Jordan has been practical, seeking to maintain constructive relations with the Assad regime and Russia in recent months. Jordan has also reportedly been conducting, along with other anti-ISIS coalition forces, air and ground operations in southwest Syria, targeting ISIS and Al-Qaida militants.
- Israel—Israel's concerns in Syria appear to be threefold. The first is deterring any attacks from Syria into Israeli territory, regardless of the source. To this end, Israel has responded proportionately to projectiles originating in Syria and striking Israel, and these exchanges have thus far not escalated. Second, Israel is concerned about the possibility of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, such as the IRGC and Hezbollah, establishing a new front with Israel on the Golan Heights. In fact, the Institute for the Study of War indicates that these groups have already established positions close to the northern edge of the Golan.<sup>4</sup> Third, Israel is concerned about the emerging alliance between Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, which if it advances could severely undermine Israel's qualitative military edge and security broadly. Israel also has a longstanding interest in preventing the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah via Syrian territory, and has reportedly conducted strikes inside both Syria and Lebanon to halt such transfers.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Posture of Syrian Regime and Allies: March 21, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Regime%20-%20Iranian%20Posture%20MAR%202017\\_2.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Regime%20-%20Iranian%20Posture%20MAR%202017_2.pdf).

- Others—Many other outside actors have interests and limited involvement in the Syrian conflict. The Gulf states have provided support to Syrian opposition groups in an effort to counter Iranian regional influence, but over time their focus has largely shifted to the Yemen conflict, which poses a more direct threat to the Arabian peninsula. Iraq is closer to Syria than other Gulf Arab states, and the U.S. should use its leverage with Baghdad—which presumably is stronger now than it will be in the future—to ensure that Iraqi Shia militias do not enter the fray with fellow Iranian-backed forces in Syria after Mosul’s liberation.

Europe is arguably more threatened by the Syrian conflict than is the U.S., given the far larger number of refugees who have fled to Europe and the more significant ISIS presence there. However, the involvement of European states in the Syria conflict has been limited so far. Finally, China has had a small role in the conflict, reportedly cooperating with the Syrian regime on intelligence matters as a result of Chinese nationals traveling to fight with ISIS, and supporting Russian efforts to block UN Security Council action on Syria until Beijing’s recent absence on a draft resolution condemning the Khan Sheikhoun attack. All of these actors are to some extent possible partners for the United States in Syria.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

As the Trump administration crafts its policy toward Syria, it will need to take as a starting point today’s reality. This might seem obvious, but there is a temptation in policymaking to use current policy to correct for past errors. But whatever one’s criticisms of President Obama’s approach to Syria, the mistakes of 2011, 2013, and 2015 cannot be revisited, and the policy recommendations made then must be put aside in favor of ones suited to the present situation.

Today’s realities are stark. As noted above, Syria is fragmented. Reunifying Syria does not, for the time being, appear to be within the power of any Syrian or outside actor, whether the Assad regime or the opposition. While it is still right to insist that Assad is illegitimate and should step aside, it is important to recognize that in reality his government no longer rules the majority of Syria.

Russia and Iran are deeply entrenched in western Syria, and entangled with one another. While their interests are not the same, as noted above, they depend operationally on one another to advance their respective interests, and thus will be difficult to split. In addition, Russia’s presence constricts American freedom of action not just against Assad, but also to a large extent against Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, given their close coordination. However, this does not mean splitting Russia and Iran, or at least limiting the extent of their alliance, should not remain a long-term U.S. objective in Syria. Nor do the constraints on our freedom of action render us impotent; demonstrating this was one of the most important consequences of the U.S. cruise missile strike on April 7.

In addition, the anti-ISIS campaign has already accomplished much of what it ultimately will. The group’s territory has been steadily shrinking, and while it may break out in minor ways, it is unlikely a serious threat to seize territory on a significant scale in Syria or Iraq given our current policy. The coalition must still finish the job, but we should be realistic about the extent of the impact Raqqa’s liberation will have on the Syria conflict at this stage, and we should already be planning for the next phase of that conflict.

Finally, in designing a Syria policy, the Trump administration should resist “solutionism.” The roots of the conflicts in Syria run very deep; the United States will not and should not “solve”

Syria, even if we expend vast resources in the attempt. Instead, the U.S. should determine what objectives are necessary to advance our vital interests, and devise strategies and policies to accomplish them.

These objectives should include the following:

1. *Prevent the Syria conflict from further destabilizing the region.* While the fighting in Syria has already drawn in numerous regional actors and had a serious economic and security impact on the region, it could get worse yet. The U.S. should consider steps that independently stabilize each of the conflict's areas of fighting, and be modest about any grand diplomatic effort to settle them all at once.
  - a. Around Idlib, American options are limited given that both sides—the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian partners on the one hand, and jihadist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham on the other—are anathema to the U.S. Rather than involving ourselves in the fighting, the U.S. should, in conjunction with our European allies, focus on the protection of civilians and the provision of humanitarian relief. Following up on the April 7 strike and to deter Assad and Russia primarily, the U.S. should warn that we and our allies reserve the right to respond with force to atrocities committed against civilians.
  - b. In southern Syria, the U.S. should urge Russia to refrain from large-scale bombing in order to prevent the region's further destabilization. The U.S. should continue to aid Jordan, Israel, and/or non-jihadist opposition forces as needed with any operations to push ISIS, other jihadist groups, or Iranian-backed groups away from their borders. Preparation for Raqqa's liberation should include provision for refugees within Syria, lest they flee for Jordan.
  - c. In northern and eastern Syria, the U.S. should lead a diplomatic effort to calm tensions between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. Washington should seek Kurdish guarantees that they will not seek to extend their territory further, and Turkish pledges to respect core Kurdish territory in Syria. Because of Turkey's concerns about the U.S. provision of heavy weapons and training to the SDF, and local Arab concerns about Kurdish influence, the U.S. should seek to involve both Turkish-backed and SDF forces in any Raqqa operation. In addition, we should consider greater involvement by U.S., European, and Arab forces to minimize the roles of both Turkey and the Syrian Kurds.<sup>5</sup> Assad, Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, and Russia should be excluded from any effort to liberate Raqqa.
  - d. Rather than pursuing a diplomatic settlement in the manner of the Obama Administration, the Trump administration should withhold U.S. endorsement from any diplomatic process that does not require Assad to step aside and hold him to account. U.S. acquiescence is valuable to Russia and Iran, and it should not be given away freely, especially because they have demonstrated little ability or will to guarantee Assad's adherence to agreements. This should not rule out local ceasefires, however.
  - e. The U.S. should create, as CSIS' Melissa Dalton has suggested, a "U.S.-led multilateral forum in which tensions and conflicting objectives can be addressed with

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<sup>5</sup> For a fuller treatment of this issue, see testimony by Ambassador James F. Jeffrey to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 7, 2017.

key allies and partners on the Syria problem set (including Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and the Gulf partners).”<sup>6</sup>

2. *Limit Iran’s projection of power and the aggrandizement of Iranian-backed forces.* One of the most dangerous flash points in the Middle East remains southern Lebanon, as a result of the massive armaments and extensive training that Iran has provided to Hezbollah for the purpose of threatening Israel. It should be our objective not only to prevent the growth of this threat, but to counter Iran across the Levant through the following actions.
  - a. The U.S. should treat Iranian-backed forces as any other foreign fighters, and insist that others do so as well; any internationally recognized settlement to the conflict in Syria should require Iran to withdraw its forces and its proxies from the country. Similarly, any discussion of terrorist groups in Syria should address not only Sunni, but Shia terrorist groups such as Hezbollah as well.
  - b. The U.S. should warn Iran that it reserves the right to use force, or back Israel’s use of force, against any IRGC or Hezbollah positions established in proximity to the Israeli or Jordanian borders.
  - c. The U.S. should aggressively target Iranian entities that violate sanctions on Syria, and block any aircraft sales to Iran unless the recipient airlines can positively demonstrate that they are not involved in ferrying fighters or materiel to Syria. In addition, the U.S. should ramp up sanctions and other pressure on Hezbollah and its supporters in Lebanon and elsewhere.
  - d. The Trump administration should work with the Iraqi government to prevent the travel of Shia militias from Iraq to Syria following the liberation of Mosul.
  - e. The U.S. should reinvigorate efforts, largely dropped by the Obama administration, to support Lebanon’s sovereignty, to ensure that it is not subsumed into western Syria should Syria’s fragmentation persist.
3. *Deny safe haven to jihadist groups including ISIS and Al-Qaida and prevent the return of ISIS after Raqqa’s liberation.* Perhaps the most significant challenge surrounding Raqqa’s liberation is what follows afterward. Unlike in Iraq, there is no established authority to whom the U.S. can pass the baton; one must instead be fostered.
  - a. Any international train-and-equip mission for local Arab forces in eastern Syria should emphasize not only the urban warfare that will be required to oust ISIS from Raqqa, but the follow-on operations that will be required to provide security for the local population and prevent ISIS’ return or the emerge of Al-Qaida.
  - b. Security assistance should be paired with aid to civil society organizations – not only those providing humanitarian relief, but also ones which can help restore law, order, and services in liberated areas.
  - c. The role of both the Kurds and the Turks in eastern Syria should be limited, and Arab states, and to a lesser extent European forces, should instead be encouraged to play a role, especially in counter-terrorism.

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<sup>6</sup> Dalton.

## **OUTCOMES**

The ideal outcome in Syria from the point of view of American interests is a unified Syria with a pro-Western, pluralistic government. This is perhaps the least likely outcome in the foreseeable future, however, given the country's increasing fragmentation and demographic polarization and the failure of diplomatic efforts to date. Equally unrealistic is an outcome in which the Assad regime reasserts control over all of Syria; it lacks the capacity to do so, and even if it had those capabilities, its rule would trigger continued violent resistance from Syrians who reject Assad's legitimacy. More realistic, perhaps, is a federal Syria comprised of semi-autonomous regions. But few actors in Syria or the region favor such an outcome, and they could be expected to resist it long after it had become a reality. The best approach for the United States is to pursue our interests while promoting stability in each of the conflict's disparate arenas, gradually expanding our zone of influence with an eye toward a broader diplomatic settlement down the road.