

**THE BETRAYAL OF OUR SYRIAN
KURDISH PARTNERS: HOW WILL
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND
LEADERSHIP RECOVER?**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Wednesday, October 23, 2019

House of Representatives

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:13 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Eliot Engel (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman ENGEL. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the length limitation in the rules.

We meet today to examine President Trump's decision to withdraw from northern Syria, clearing the way for Turkey to attack America's Syrian Kurdish partners. It is a decision I view as disastrous.

To our witnesses, welcome to the Foreign Affairs Committee. Welcome to members of the public and the press, and thank you to our friends from C-SPAN who are broadcasting this important proceeding.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

This committee has a long tradition of bipartisanship. Mr. McCaul and I work on that every day. I think we are the most bipartisan committee in Congress.

The main reason is that members on both sides tend to share a vision of American foreign policy and that is firmly rooted in and guided by our values, particularly, support for human rights and human dignity.

We know that American leadership can and should be a force for good in the world. We know that on the world stage our country thrives on the power of partnerships and alliances.

But as Congress, we are limited in what we can do to actually make foreign policy. We can advance legislation and send strong messages, and conduct oversight that we hope will push policy in the right direction.

But at the end of the day, the tools to make policy largely reside with the President, and what we have seen these past 2 weeks has been just devastating as far as I am concerned.

It was around 2 weeks ago today that President Trump had a phone call with Turkey's President Erdogan, who more closely resembles an autocrat than the President of a NATO ally.

Despite the Administration's spin, we all know that Trump gave Erdogan the green light to charge into northern Syria. What fol-

lowed was completely predictable for anyone who's paid attention to the Middle East—a brutal campaign of violence against the Syrian Kurds, our partners who courageously stood alongside us in the fight against ISIS. All the worst case scenarios we imagined played out at stunning speed.

To start, the betrayal of our Kurdish partners. We handed them over to be slaughtered and ethnically cleansed from a region where they have lived for generations with no warning and for no good reason.

How could the United States do something so senseless, so disgraceful, so contrary to our values? What message does it send to our other partners and allies? To our adversaries? To our brave men and women in uniform who served alongside the Kurds?

We also have to address the humanitarian crisis this has created. Already tens of thousands have been displaced—families, women, and children. There are stories of gruesome killings, torture, and abuse, all set into motion by the President's horrific decision.

And this decision was a body blow to our national security. President Trump has handed a gift to America's enemies—ISIS, Russia, and Iran.

Coalition efforts to fight ISIS began under the Obama Administration and it had made a lot of progress. We had reclaimed territory and put thousands of ISIS fighters in prisons.

Who ran those prisons? Our Kurdish partners. Now the Kurds are fighting tooth and nail to survive Turkey's assault. And so the fate of those thousands of ISIS fighters is now dangerously up in the air and more than 100 have already escaped.

It is safe to say ISIS is celebrating President Trump's foreign policy right now. He's handed them their biggest victory in over 4 years.

But they are not the only ones rejoicing. Assad regime forces in Syria, backed by Iran and Russia, are now filling the vacuum left by America's withdrawal.

To see Russian-backed forces triumphantly moving in, taking over our American bases, is just disgraceful. It hurts. It is embarrassing, and Putin knows it.

And for all these disastrous effects of Trump's initial decision, the President's actions to try to paper over this mistake has only done more damage.

Last Thursday, the Administration announced they had negotiated a quote/unquote, "cease-fire" with Turkey. This is a pattern of President Trump's presidency. He likes to play the part of the fireman when really he is the arsonist who started the fire in the first place.

I know Mike Pence, the Vice President, worked hard on this. But it was impossible to put out the fire. The reality of this 5-day so-called pause is that Turkey got everything it wanted and that arrangement ended yesterday with no real plan from the Administration for what comes next.

This is the worst example I have seen of what I call this Administration's fly by the seat of your pants foreign policy. One minute the President is shouting from the rooftops that he is fine with what Turkey is doing.

But next he says he will destroy Turkey if they continue. One day he is bringing our soldiers home. The next he is moving them to continue their mission but just over the Syrian border in Iraq. And the day after that he is suddenly saying that some will actually stay in Syria after all, not to protect the Kurdish fighters, which we should do—the Kurdish fighters, who stood shoulder to shoulder with our personnel—but to protect the oil fields there.

It is all a mess. There is only one thing that is certain here. The President, yet again, has created disaster. This is a troubling moment in our history, a stunning defeat for the United States offered up willingly by a president whom I believe is doing serious damage to American leadership around the world.

Today, we need to hear how the Administration plans to grapple with the consequences. What sort of signal do our friends take from this whipsawed foreign policy?

And our adversaries—what kind of message does it send to the world when the President cannot be trusted to act in the interests of the United States?

How can America be trusted to keep its word when we betray one of our close partners? And how do we handle the threats of ISIS, Iran, and Russia, now that they have been handed a remarkable victory by the President of the United States?

I look forward to hearing our witnesses address these issues. But first, let me recognize our ranking member, Mr. McCaul of Texas, for any remarks he might have.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The American-led campaign to destroy the so-called Caliphate in Iraq and Syria was a great military success in our ongoing war on terror.

This achievement would not have been possible without the courage and sacrifice of our partners on the ground, including the Syrian Kurds, Arabs, and others, thousands of whom died on the battlefield in our shared quest to defeat ISIS.

Our military partnership with the Syrian democratic forces is vital to our ongoing counter-ISIS operations to fight ISIS's insurgency, and that is why I have been so concerned about the possibility of withdrawing all U.S. troops from Syria.

I firmly believe we need a residual force in Syria to best continue counterterrorism operations so that we can protect the homeland.

I am worried that a full withdrawal will create space for ISIS to regroup, grow and gain more strength. We learned from President Obama's reckless retreat from Iraq that power vacuums are exploited by America's worst enemies.

We do not want to repeat the same mistake. We must learn from history. I believe our Syrian partners deserve better. What kind of signal does it send to the international community that the United States will turn our back on our allies who suffered so much?

We cannot achieve our goals on the world stage if we undermine our credibility and I am deeply concerned by Turkey's decision to begin military operations in Syria.

Civilians on both sides of the border have killed. Over 170,000 people have been displaced in the past 2 weeks in a region already experiencing a refugee crisis.

The only people who benefit from more violence and more chaos are America's adversaries Vladimir Putin, Bashar al-Assad, the terror-sponsoring dictatorship in Iran, and Islamic extremists in the area and around the world as shown by the deal that Erdogan struck yesterday with Putin.

Today, members will have the opportunity to ask our witnesses questions about the Administration's approach to these critical issues, such as what are the implications of the past 2 weeks for the future of counter ISIS operations and the global coalition to defeat ISIS?

How will we prevent Assad from expanding his war against the Syrian people to northeast Syria? What are we doing to prevent Turkey from forcibly displacing Kurds and resettling Syrian refugees along the border?

How can we prevent Iran and Russia from exploiting this situation to their benefit?

Last week, I was pleased to see a strong bipartisan majority of the House pass a resolution that I authored with Chairman Engel calling on Turkey to end this operation.

Fortunately, I would say that Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo were successful in brokering a temporary cease-fire.

But if Turkey continues its destructive campaign, we will quickly pass new bipartisan legislation that will bring hard-hitting sanctions against Erdogan's government.

But I hope this cease-fire works, and I know, Ambassador Jeffrey, I really look forward to your testimony here today. I know you are going to give some insight within the Administration as to what has taken place the last 5 days with the cease-fire.

I want to thank you, sir, for being here right now. I know there will be a press conference at the White House in probably 35 minutes.

And let me just say also, sir, that I believe that you are the right man for this job at a very challenging time, and I personally want to thank you for your public service to this country and this Nation.

And with that, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. McCaul.

Now I will introduce our witnesses.

Ambassador James Jeffrey currently serves as the Secretary of State's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and as Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS.

He has held several senior national security positions including Deputy National Security Advisor and Ambassador to Iraq, Turkey, and Albania.

Mr. Matthew Palmer currently serves as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, with responsibility for Turkey, the Western Balkans, and the Aegean.

He previously was the director of the Office of South Central Europe. He has served in Belgrade and Nicosia, the U.S. mission to the United Nations, and various positions in Washington, including the secretary's Policy Planning Staff and at the National Security Council.

We also requested that the Department of Defense provide a witness for today's hearing, given their role in Syria, and this committee's jurisdiction over war powers and U.S. intervention abroad.

Unfortunately, after initially committing to send a witness, they failed to follow through, which is unacceptable. I do not intend to let it lie and we will deal with it in the future. But we are not going to accept it.

However, I do want to thank the witnesses who have appeared here today. Without objection, all the witnesses' prepared testimony will be made part of the record and I will now recognize the witnesses for 5 minutes each to summarize their testimony.

Let's start with Ambassador Jeffrey.

STATEMENT OF JAMES JEFFREY, SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR SYRIA ENGAGEMENT AND SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE GLOBAL COALITION TO DEFEAT ISIS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. JEFFREY. I thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the committee. It is an honor to be here today.

Let me start with agreeing with the chairman that the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria is a tragedy. It was longstanding U.S. Government policy in two administrations to keep that from happening and we, clearly, were not successful.

What I would like to do is to explain what we did when we were faced with this threat and what we have done since the Turks marched in.

But first, I would like to turn to the larger situation that this is all embedded in in northeast Syria, which is the Syrian crisis since 2011.

That crisis brings together the three disruptive destructive forces in the Middle East: A local dictator, who, as Ranking Member McCaul said, is a threat to his own people more than a beneficiary to them, with half of the population having fled his misrule; an ideological state on the march—Iran, that has dug in in Syria and threatened its neighbors including Syria's neighbors including Israel; and third, various Islamic fundamentalist terrorist forces that have also grown up in the midst of this Syrian civil war since 2011 including, in particular, ISIS, but there are others as well.

American policy has been to do three—pursue three objectives: first, the enduring defeat of ISIS, and secondarily, other terrorist forces in Syria; second, to find a political solution working with the U.N. and the international community to the civil conflict that would produce a different kind of government than the one we have right now with President Assad; and three, to see the removal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria. They have no positive role whatsoever to play there.

In pursuing that policy, much of our attention, of course, has been in northeast Syria, which is where we carried out, as Ranking Member McCaul said, our very successful campaign against ISIS.

But this was done with considerable friction from 2015 on with the important neighbor and NATO ally to the north, Turkey. Turkey long was very suspicious of the alliance we had with the local largely Kurdish force, first the YPG, which is an offshoot of the

PKK, the recognized terrorist group that has been trying to conduct an insurgency against Turkey for some almost 40 years, and various other allies that are organized into what we now call the SDF—the Syrian Democratic Forces.

For Turkey, for us these were an ally and a very good ally against ISIS, a very effective ally that lost over 10,000 people killed.

For Turkey, this was a threat to their borders, and our policy had been to try to find a way forward to balance Turkey's legitimate security concerns, our, and the people of northeast Syria's legitimate security concerns, particularly against ISIS but also to keep Turkey from going in, and our own interests, as I said, in pursuing ISIS and in finding a solution to the Syrian conflict that would, among other things, see the withdrawal of Iran.

Turkey acted unwisely and against, as I will get to in a second, our advice and very strong admonitions. In doing so, it represents another phenomenon we have run into elsewhere in the Middle East; that is, powerful neighboring States that have different interpretations of their own security interests than we do.

We felt that we provided enough security that Turkey did not have to worry about its southern border, at least in the northeast, and did not have to worry about the SDF.

Turkey, beginning with its leader, President Erdogan, and most of the population thought otherwise and that was a tension that we dealt with, again, over two administrations.

Things came to a head in October after we had actually worked an agreement with the Turks to do joint patrols and other joint activities in agreement with the SDF in a band that reached 30 kilometers deep along the whole northeast of Syria—of northeast Syria.

And at that time, on the 6th of October, President Erdogan, in a call with President Trump, announced that he was going forward with an offensive.

As President Trump indicated later that day in a press release, we had long known that Turkey was preparing for this thing. Turkey had had troops in place actually for almost a year and had been threatening to do this.

Our position provided to Turkey countless times, including by the President on the 6th of October, had four basic elements.

One, and first of all, we did not approve of and would not in any way endorse such an operation.

Second, even though requested by the Turks, we would not provide any support of any sort to such an operation.

Third, we would act to counter such an operation but we would do so through diplomatic and other means such as the sanctions that were mentioned by Congress and the sanctions that were immediately slapped on Turkey by the Administration.

But, third, and Turkey had long known this, we would not oppose a Turkish incursion by military means. I know of no decision at any point in either administration to use military force to deter Turkey from going into the northeast.

We had done patrols in the Manbij area across the Euphrates at one point because we were concerned about Turkey coming in. But

we never communicated to Turkey that we would use military force to stop them from moving across their border.

Rather, we used diplomatic, economic, and other tools to persuade them that that would be a very bad decision, and it was a very bad decision.

At this point, what we are focusing on is trying to stop this offensive. With the cease-fire that we negotiated on the 17th of October, we succeeded in getting Turkish forces to freeze in place—they called it a pause—while the YPG forces, which were the core Kurdish forces—and the SDF withdrew from the central portion of what we call the safe zone, essentially, 130 kilometers wide and 30 kilometers deep in the middle of the northeast.

Turkish forces by and large lived up to that, as did the YPG, and last night the Turks announced that they would make this pause essentially permanent by halting their forces and ending their whole operation.

So we saw that as a success. Meanwhile, Turkey tried to find ways that it could penetrate other parts of the northeast.

President Erdogan yesterday went to Sochi, Russia, to talk with President Putin and Putin would not allow the Turks to penetrate into the other areas but, rather, they agreed on a joint patrolling regime rather similar to what we had in August with the YPG to pull back, supposedly.

But we have to see the details of that agreement. Again, right now, the northeast is quiet, other than some minor shooting and some minor movements between the Turkish and the YPG forces, and we expect it to stay quiet.

What we are doing now is to urgently determine what our future policies are in the enduring defeat of ISIS and we are considering options for our forces.

the President has ordered all American forces in the northeast on the ground to withdraw in a deliberate and orderly withdrawal that will take some time.

But we are also looking at what the options are for military and other support to the SDF to continue the fight against ISIS and to maintain stability in the northeast.

Again, no final decisions have been taken. This is under review at this time. So I cannot tell you what the decision will be, simply, what the basic parameters are, what our goals are, and the various ways we are trying to achieve such a success.

I will stop there, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jeffrey follows:]

U.S. Department of State

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Assessing the Impact of Turkey's Offensive in Northeast Syria

October 23, 2019

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on this important issue. As you know, I have just returned from Ankara and I look forward to discussing the October 17 Joint Turkish-U.S. Statement (October 17 Joint Statement) on northeast Syria, which established a five day pause in Turkish military operations in the northeast running to October 22, a withdrawal of Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) forces from those areas controlled by the Turkish military, and if all goes well a more permanent halt to the Turkish operation, as well as joint Turkish-U.S. efforts towards the population in the affected 'safe zone' area to ensure security, decent treatment of religious and ethnic minorities and restoration of the security smashed by the Turkish offensive beginning October 8.

The conflict in Syria has raged for over eight years, fueled by Bashar al-Assad's regime and his despotic and barbaric treatment of Syrian citizens, Russia's continued enabling of Assad's brutality, and Iran's malign influence in the region.

U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates in Syria, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence; and resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms favorable to the United States and our allies and in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. A sound strategy for use of our assistance resources is key to achieving these goals.

The United States has worked closely with our local partners, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria, in the campaign to defeat ISIS since 2014. Our cooperation led to the territorial defeat of the so-called "caliphate" earlier this year. During this time, the United States and our Coalition

partners provided assistance to restore essential services, support local security and governance, to alleviate humanitarian needs, and to help restore the local economy in areas liberated from ISIS. These efforts helped meet basic needs and create an area of relative stability in Syria, and enable the enduring defeat of ISIS elements there.

One longstanding issue in this campaign has been Turkey's belief that there is no distinction between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both the United States and Turkey have designated as a terrorist organization, and the YPG and our partner the SDF. Turkey thus views the YPG – a key component of the SDF – as an existential threat which receives support from the United States. To Turkey, our cooperation with and support to any of these bodies is akin to supporting a statelet on its southern border run by a terrorist group it believes has declared war on Turkey. The State Department has led efforts over the past year and a half to reduce that friction and achieve better coordination of U.S. and Turkish efforts regarding Syria.

When President Trump announced a strong, deliberate and coordinated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria in December 2018, the Administration said we were transitioning primary responsibility for the defeat of the few remaining ISIS remnants in Syria to our allies and partners on the ground inside Syria.

Beginning in January 2019, the Administration worked with Turkey on implementing a safe zone in northeast Syria that would prevent the resurgence of ISIS, protect Turkish security interests vis-a-vis the SDF/YPG, facilitate stabilization, and create conditions to enable the safe, voluntary, dignified return of

refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This effort culminated in U.S.-Turkish military-to-military arrangement in August for a security mechanism; the SDF was informed and supported the elements of that arrangement. The United States, Turkey, and the SDF all began executing the arrangement in late August. We believe we very quickly implemented the initial steps of the arrangement to create an area along approximately 140 km of the border region in the northeast. This included YPG voluntary withdrawal to approximately 5-14 km from the Turkish border of armed personnel generally, displacement of heavy weapons to 20 km from the Turkish border, U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Turkish air activity over northeast Syria, and joint U.S.-Turkish patrols in the relevant area.

Turkey from President Erdogan on down disputed the conduct and implementation of security mechanism activities, but, more importantly, pressed beginning in early September for an entirely different concept – one Turkey had tried and failed to foist on the United States and, through us, the SDF since January: a 32 kilometer zone to the key east-west highway, M4/10, along the entire northeast from the Euphrates to the Iraqi border, and sole Turkish military, as opposed to joint U.S.-Turkish engagement on area security. Turkey also began stressing its desire to move up to four million Syrian refugees now in Turkey into cities to be constructed in the area, an initiative that went far beyond the scope of the military-to-military arrangement. The United States at every level has underlined our resolute opposition to this plan as a threat to our SDF partners, the fight against ISIS elements, and overall security in Syria.

Indications grew in September 2019 that Turkey was planning for a large-scale unilateral operation. Again, all levels of the U.S. government warned Turkey not to act.

Erdogan, however, said that Turkey would soon move forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria. He was told clearly, including by the President, that U.S. Armed Forces would not support or be involved, and that the United States does not endorse such actions, but that we would not put U.S. forces in harm's way. President Trump also publicly warned Turkey that the United States would take measures sanctioning the Turkish economy if Turkey were to take steps that the United States considers "off limits."

Turkey launched this operation despite our objections, undermining the D-ISIS campaign, risking endangering and displacing civilians, destroying critical civilian infrastructure, and threatening the security of the area. Turkey's military actions have precipitated a humanitarian crisis and set conditions for possible war crimes. As the President warned Erdogan, we have used diplomatic and economic tools available to us to press Turkey to halt its military actions.

On October 14, President Trump signed an Executive Order designed to encourage Turkey to halt its offensive military action in northeast Syria and adopt a ceasefire. It provides the United States with the authorities to deliver severe economic consequences and apply additional pressure if Turkey continues with this offensive. The United States has imposed sanctions on three senior Turkish Government officials: Hulusi Akar, the Minister of National Defense; Suleyman Soylu, the Minister of the Interior; and Fatih Donmez, Minister of Energy, and on two ministries, Defense and Energy. Turkey must follow through on its

commitments from the October 17 Joint Statement with the United States to avoid further sanctions under this new E.O.

The United States undertook various diplomatic initiatives to reinforce our sanctions, including a Presidential letter to President Erdogan on October 9 and a Presidential message to him three days later. In the latter we warned the Turks that the SDF was likely to turn to Russia and the Assad regime if Turkey continued its offensive, which then occurred. The President then dispatched the Vice President, Secretary Pompeo, and National Security Advisor O'Brien to Ankara to negotiate with Turkey the terms of a ceasefire and the YPG's evacuation from affected areas. As I indicated already, on October 17 those talks, including five hours with President Erdogan, produced a Joint Statement outlining a pause that will lead to a ceasefire -- that Turkey and the YPG are adhering to -- for 120 hours to allow the withdrawal of the YPG from the Turkish-controlled safe zone. In return, the United States committed not to impose new sanctions under the October 14th E.O., "Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria." Turkey has committed to a permanent ceasefire upon completion of the YPG withdrawal; in return, the United States would lift the sanctions now imposed under the E.O. This solution will save lives and contribute to long-term stability in the region.

Assuming the pause moves to such a longer-term halt, we will work with Turkey and local residents on the humanitarian and social commitments of the October 17 Joint Statement, cooperate with our local partners against ISIS even as the U.S. military continues the withdrawal directed by the President, and press for full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the only hope for a long-term resolution of the underlying Syrian conflict.

To these ends, we are looking to organize a number of senior level meetings with our international partners involved in the Defeat-ISIS Coalition as well as our Syria-focused group. Our intent is to re-affirm with our Coalition partners the shared goals of ensuring that ISIS does not re-emerge.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. DAS Palmer and I look forward to taking your questions.

Chairman ENGEL. I thank you.
Mr. Palmer.

STATEMENT OF MATTHEW PALMER, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. PALMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I do not have a formal opening statement but I do look forward to answering any questions members of the committee may have specific to the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship.

Thanks.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Ambassador Jeffrey, let me ask you this.

According to media reports, including Fox News, President Trump went off script during the October 6th call in which he was supposed to tell Erdogan to stay north of the border.

Instead, the President capitulated, gave the green light for Turkey to invade, then announced the United States would withdraw all troops from northeast Syria ahead of a Turkish operation.

Let me ask you, first of all, were you consulted ahead of the October 6th call with President Erdogan?

Could you push the button, please?

Mr. JEFFREY. I was consulted almost daily on that and other Syria questions by Secretary of State Pompeo, and I know that Secretary Pompeo discussed this issue and many other issues on an almost daily basis with President Trump.

This is something that we have been working on since President Trump first raised the issue publicly of withdrawing forces in the spring of 2018 and, of course, he had taken a decision to do so that we were slowly executing in December 2018.

So, in that sense, yes, I was consulted.

Chairman ENGEL. Do you agree with the President's decision to abruptly announce the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Syria following the October 6th call?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is the duty of a Commander in Chief to make such decisions with the support of the consultation of the U.S. Congress and the American people.

It is not my job to decide on whether we should keep troops in a very dangerous situation or not. My job is to explain what will happen if you do pull these troops out.

And the President was well aware that with the troops being withdrawn we would have less ability to work with the SDF against the remnants of ISIS.

But he also, as the Commander in Chief, had as his first responsibility force protection for our troops. We had a situation we knew that the SDF would ask for the Russians and the Syrians to come in, and they did so, and we had told the Turks that would be a direct result if they came in.

We had Turkish troops and Turkish supported very, very dangerous and, in some cases, extremist opposition elements coming in, and the President had a responsibility to keep his forces out of the way.

That was a major consideration in his decisions including withdrawing forces.

Chairman ENGEL. I am glad that Vice President Pence was able to negotiate a cease-fire temporarily so that our Turkish allies could get out of their territory with their lives intact.

But are we not really aiding and abetting ethnic cleansing by allowing them to do that?

Mr. JEFFREY. We have not seen any widespread ethnic cleansing in that area since the Turks have come in. Many people fled because they are very concerned about these Turkish-supported Syrian opposition forces, as are we.

We have seen several incidents which we consider war crimes. But we have, as part of the agreement with Turkey, specific language on the proper care of civilians and our monitoring responsibility that we have to work with the Turks to ensure that exactly that does not happen in that area.

Chairman ENGEL. But it is true that as a result of Turkey's actions over 176,000 Syrian Kurds have been forcibly displaced, which amounts to a concerted effort to displace Kurds from their native lands. So, again, sounds like ethnic cleansing to me.

Mr. JEFFREY. The numbers are correct. But the area that the Turks came into, Mr. Chairman, that is mainly an Arab area. We did not do a survey of who these people are.

But, as I said, most of the people in that area are ethnic Arab, not ethnic Kurdish, and they withdrew on their own. There was no effort that we sought to try to push them out.

Now, it could be that the behavior on those incidents that we saw and other incidents that we may learn about soon provoked some departures of people. But we saw no widespread effort to try to push people out of their homes in that area where the Turks moved into.

Chairman ENGEL. But how will—two questions. How will the U.S. counter increased Russian, Iranian, and Assad regime influence and control, which are directly from the result of the U.S. withdrawal and what is left to prevent the Turks—the Turkish military and its affiliated militias from continuing to ethnically cleanse northeast Syria of Kurds?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, through diplomatic means. The thing that provoked all of this was the very unwise, very tragic Turkish incursion into northeast Syria. That provoked a whole series of events that we are discussing today.

As I said, we have stemmed that Turkish movement forward through this agreement, and right now we are going to work with the Turks and the Russians—we do not work with the Syrian regime—and our SDF partners to continue the fight against Daesh and to try to do exactly those things that you said to maintain civility.

We have had some successes with the Russians in Syria and we have had some failures with them in stabilizing areas. We will see how this one works out.

Chairman ENGEL. Well, let me ask you this.

Yesterday, in testimony to the Senate, you confirmed the State Department is aware of you said dozens of detained ISIS fighters that escaped SDF custody following the Turkish incursion.

Also yesterday Secretary Esper stated to CNN that a bit more than a hundred ISIS detainees have escaped. We know from pre-

vious briefings these ISIS detainees are among the most dangerous fighters intent on attacking the United States and our allies.

So let me ask you this. How many ISIS detainees have escaped? Does the U.S. have an idea where these individuals are and is the U.S. able to monitor or effectively operate against ISIS, given the withdrawal of U.S. forces?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, as Secretary Esper said, we would say that the number is now over a hundred. We do not know where they are. Almost all of the prisons that the SDF were guarding are still secured.

The SDF still had people there. We are monitoring that as best we can. We still have forces in Syria working with the SDF and one of the top priorities is these prisons.

Chairman ENGEL. Let me just say, in conclusion, that I think what we did is so catastrophic it really affects our ability to operate in that part of the world.

It affects our ability to be effective in that part of the world. I am—I always speak my mind on foreign policy. I do not care what Administration it is or what party the Administration comes from.

I did not particularly like the Iranian agreement and I spoke out and voted against it. I think what happened here with the removal of American troops is catastrophic. Absolutely catastrophic. And has the worst repercussions for this country for days and weeks and months to come.

I am just sick over it and I think that is why we got this strong bipartisan resolution in the Congress condemning it.

And I just—I have been here a long time. I hardly remember policy that has been as bad as this, in my opinion.

Thank you.

Mr. McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador, I just want to give you an opportunity to clarify what I think has been very confusing about what took place over the last week or so.

We were in the White House, the Chairman and I, with the President, Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Milley.

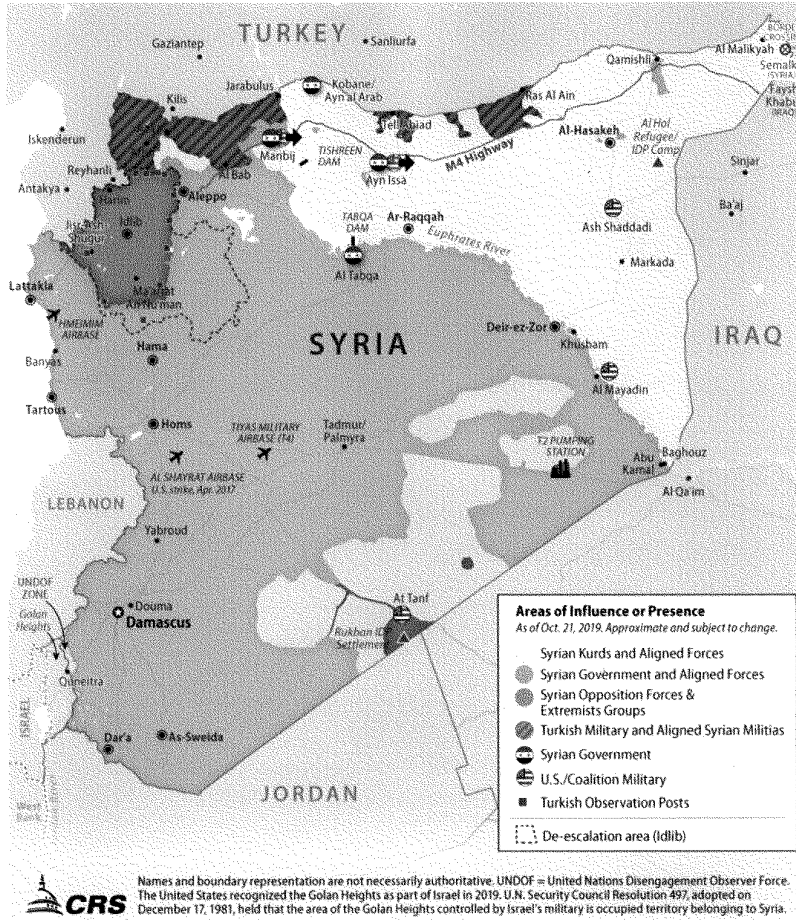
And I know the President had a conversation with Erdogan. There has been this talk of green lights being given to allow the Turks to come in and invade Syria.

But then when I talked to General Milley, he told me that it was his recommendation because the Turks were threatening our soldiers and that they were in harm's way.

So can you perhaps add some clarity to how this decision was made and what actually happened?

Mr. JEFFREY. Sure. It is a little hard to do this without a map but I will try.

Mr. MCCAUL. And I think we do—we do have a map, and I want to turn to that in a minute. But this is more of a sequence of events in terms of this Turkish invasion.



Mr. JEFFREY. OK. First of all, I think, to set the record straight, I know of no American policy or commitment by anyone in a position to give a commitment—and that is a senior official, military or civilian—to either Turkey or to our SDF partners that we would use American military force to stop a Turkish incursion into north-east Syria.

On I think it was the Stephanopoulos show on Sunday former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter from the Obama administration said that explicitly.

Our commander at that time in the field, Tony Thomas, a little bit later on “Face the Nation,” made similar comments. When he was pressed, he said, well, we talked to the Kurds about—by the Kurds we mean by that the SDF—about a possible role that we wanted in a future democratic Syria through the U.N. process and such.

But I know of no commitment to protect them by military force nor did I ever see any indication that the Turks felt that we were using military force to protect them.

In fact, what you had was, as you look at the map, most of the American forces in Syria were along the Euphrates, south of that reservoir because that is where ISIS is and that is where most of the SDF forces were, too, fighting the remnants of ISIS.

You had a small American force in Manbij across the Euphrates to the west, and just to the east of the Euphrates in Kobane, you had American—an American air base, essentially, and the logistical and command and control headquarters.

That was where many of the American forces were. That is, there were no American forces in that area that is now kind of blue where the Turks came in other than two outposts that have been put out there back in November 2018, largely, because of showing from the Turkish side into Syria and accusations from the Turks that they were being fired on and that they wanted to return fire.

So we said we will put some observation posts out to see who is firing at who to ascertain that. We never told the Turks that those two observation posts were a defense against Turkey coming over.

They had about 12 people in each covering a perimeter—well, there was a third one but between the three it was about 300 kilometers. Nobody on the Turkish side ever thought that that was a deterrent or that that was a signal that we would stop them militarily. What—

Mr. MCCAUL. And my time is going to expire and I had several other questions. But I think maybe you could clarify for the record the sequence of events and how this decision was made to withdraw and I think that as we talked before, there was no green light given to the Turks.

I think they were going to invade one way or the other, it sounds like, and now we have to make this cease-fire happen.

What I did stress with both General Milley, the Secretary of Defense, and the President was I do not want to make the same mistake we made in Iraq—10,000 troops, ISIS formation caliphate.

I was promised that we were not going to withdraw from Syria—that there would be a residual force to protect the homeland. Is that still the case today and where would that residual force be in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. We are working on possible options. I cannot commit to a final decision on a residual force in the northeast. The President did decide that we would keep a residual—we would keep our force in al-Tanf.

Al-Tanf is that blue area at the bottom of the Syrian map. That decision has been taken. We did not take a decision one way or the other on air, and a decision on whether we would keep some forces on basically in the eastern half of the yellow area is still under review at the highest levels.

Mr. MCCAUL. When I was with the General at CENTCOM he said he was going to recommend to the Secretary of Defense the—where oil fields are in the northeastern quadrant of Syria, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is my understanding. But again, these are recommendations that are still part of internal—

Mr. MCCAUL. I hope the President takes that advice.

Who is going to fill the vacuum?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is one reason why we are doing this review, to see how we and our SDF forces almost all of whom are intact because the fighting did not—we think that the casualties on the SDF were in the hundreds in the battle with the Turks.

So they are still a force and being of many tens of thousands. At one point, there were 100,000.

Mr. MCCAUL. I think the Russians and Assad and Iran are going to fill the vacuum. That is my opinion.

Refugees—is there any threat that Turkey's going to dump their 4 million refugees in this northern buffer zone?

Mr. JEFFREY. We never thought that that was a realistic option and we told the Turks that many times.

Mr. MCCAUL. So there has been some discussion, and you can clarify it, there is going to be 20 miles—20 kilometers or 30 kilometers into Syria, this northern buffer zone. Then it was just the middle part. Now it is the entire northern part of Syria.

What is the final agreement that was reached between Putin and Erdogan with respect to how large of a swathe are we talking about?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, where you see the blue in the middle that is, roughly, the area that we have our agreement with the Turks. To the west and to the east of that, all the way to the Euphrates and all the way to the Iraqi border and in two areas to the west of the Euphrates. That is Manbij right north of the reservoir and a small area on Tal Rifaat near Aleppo.

The agreement is that the Russian military police and some Assad border police would escort or find some way to negotiate for the YPG/SDF to depart. In the case of the northeast, they would pull back 30 kilometers and that for 10 kilometers south of the Turkish border there would be eventually Russian-Turkish patrols—

Mr. MCCAUL. So it is gone from 30 now to 10 kilometers so it is a smaller buffer zone?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is not only smaller but this idea of having done joint patrols with the Turks and seeing how difficult it is, essentially, the Turks have no territory passed to them as part of this agreement with the Russians.

Mr. MCCAUL. Final question. The prisons—who is securing the prisons with 10,000 of the worst of the worst of ISIS?

Mr. JEFFREY. The SDF are still securing the prisons.

Mr. MCCAUL. Well, do you feel confident that they can do that?

Mr. JEFFREY. We are confident at this point that they are doing that.

Mr. MCCAUL. OK. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Before I call on our next member, I have to just say, Ambassador Jeffrey, you have a very hard job in defending what is not defendable and I, again, want to just voice my disgust with what the President did and allowed to happen.

I think that will affect us for years and years and decades to come, and I think will go down as one of the major American blunders in history. I just think what we have done there is shameful.

Mr. Sires.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Ambassador.

Ambassador, I have a picture here that was yesterday in the Washington Post. I know you cannot see it. I could get a larger one.

But it basically is Trump, Putin, Erdogan, and the President's has his arm around Putin. OK. To me, I find that picture disgusting. This is a man who is hell bent on destroying democracies, hell bent on destroying America, and we always seem to give in to him.

This is a man that now that we have a void there is going to move in there. He is creating problems all over the world. He is now in the Western Hemisphere, creating problems in Venezuela.

It is all to destroy our democracy and I cannot for the life of me understand why this President is so—I do not know. It is like his best buddy. This is not someone that is out to help us or work with us. It is out to destroy us.

I grew up in a communist country before coming here, and this is the guy that was the KGB. Now he is the leader of the Communist Party. He is the one that was going to put nuclear weapons 90 miles from this country.

When is this President going to wake up to the fact that this guy is not our friend? I think he is playing him like a fiddle, and this decision to abandon the Kurds plays right up to him in Iran and Erdogan.

Maybe there is no cleansing going on now. But there is a history in Turkey of doing cleansing, especially with the Armenians.

So I am concerned that maybe not now because the world's eyes are all over him, but sooner or later he is going to start his cleansing and taking, taking more territory. And what are we going to do about it?

We have no real way of stopping him. And you know what is more disgusting? I saw pictures yesterday in the news people throwing potatoes at our armed forces.

Someone who relishes this country, I cannot—it just turned my stomach yesterday that our people—that our armed forces who have defended this country forever, defended democracy, and we have people throwing potatoes.

I do not know about this President but I have to tell you, the military cannot be happy with this guy. So, I mean, I have a ton

of questions to ask you about who is going to fill it, what are we going to do.

And you know what is wrong with you saying that we are going to sit down and figure out the policy from now on? Does not make any sense because with this President one phone call and he changes.

He does not take advice from the people who know. This guy cannot even run a casino in New Jersey, let alone our foreign policy that is so important to this country.

So when you say to me that we are now evaluating what are we going to do, look, I get it. You are a professional. You are a smart man. You are a credit to this country and you have a very hard job to do.

But I just do not believe that anything or any policies that people put together is going to make any difference to this President. I am very concerned about America. Very, very concerned.

Because we are the bastion where people look up to us. Everywhere around the world nobody's trusting us because of the decisions that are being made by the White House, not necessarily by the people who know.

So, Ambassador, I feel that you have a very difficult job and I know you will do the best you can for this country. But, again, I just—this picture just turned my stomach when I saw it, and I apologize if I gave you a tirade.

And I have no questions.

Mr. JEFFREY. I understand, Congressman. One comment—my instructions from Secretary Pompeo from day one, and I have every reason to believe they were to him from President Trump, was to act to counter Russia's efforts in the Syrian conflict, to obtain a military victory over Assad and his Iranian henchmen and that is what I was doing every day and that is what my orders remain to do, at least on the Syrian account.

On others, you have to ask other people up here for their problems because I am pretty occupied with this one, and that is a big part of my mission is to contain Russia.

Mr. SIRES. I thank you for your hard work.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Chris Smith.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome. Thank you for your service to our two distinguished witnesses.

You know, back in 1991, tens of thousands of Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein traveled to the Kurdish border. They were blocked from gaining entry.

President George Herbert Walker Bush initiated operations to provide comfort, largely organized out of Incirlik. It provided masses amounts of food, clothing, and shelter. U.S. Special Forces saved probably thousands, certainly hundreds, from exposure and sickness before the NGO's could kick in.

I traveled with a group of members to the border back then. Biggest takeaway—the Turks absolutely refused to help men, women, and innocent children and, second, they were seething with animosity toward the Kurds, and I am telling you something that you already know. Most people, I think, know it as well.

But I was struck by that animosity. Reminded me of the hatred they had for the Armenians that led to the Armenian genocide. It was just seething.

One man took a meal ready to eat—MRE—from a pallet left there by our government—by our military—and he shot him in cold blood, the day after we left.

Fast forward to now. When given the opportunity, they will seize it. So I have a couple of questions. My good colleagues before had asked many of the questions that I have.

But, frankly, I would like to ask about the use of white phosphorus, a terrible, terrible chemical agent. When it is used for camouflage, it is one thing. When it is used to kill innocent people, and there is at least some indications that it has been used against at least six people who inhaled it. The Red Crescent for—the Kurdish Red Crescent said six patients with burns are watching. If so, this is a war crime. I wonder what you could tell us about that.

On sanctions the PACT Act and a bill introduced by Liz Cheney makes clear that we want sanctions. One goes further and says even Erdogan should be sanctioned. But there was the sanctions put out by the President, Executive Order 13894.

If you could speak to that and how well that is being implemented, which went after the defense minister and the interior minister. It ought to go right to the top, I would respectfully submit.

Erbil—I have been to Erbil. I know the Kurds there and the Christians—the Yazidis who fled, obviously, for their lives from ISIS. They have been very much concerned about an incursion there. Your thoughts on what happens there?

And, again, if you could speak to this use of weapons. And finally, in both bills—the chairman's bill and Mr. McCaul, of course, is the lead Republican sponsor—I am proud to be a co-sponsor as well—also talks about denying military assistance to Turkey. Both bills do it. Do you think that is a prudent act?

We all remember back in 1974 when the Turks went into Cyprus. They used our materiel, what we provided to suppress Cyprus and to kill many. We ought to hold them to account and I do hope Section 4 of both bills had that sanctions on providing any kind of military assistance to Turkey.

Your thoughts on that?

Mr. JEFFREY. On the white phosphorus, we have seen one report of the use of white phosphorus. We are looking into that. White phosphorus is tricky because, as you indicated, it has military uses and you have to almost determine not what happened but what the intent was. But as I said, we are looking into that. There was only one incident of that, I believe.

In terms of the sanctions that we imposed on three ministers and two ministries on the 14th of October on the basis of the Executive Order that was published that day for Syria sanctions because of the incursion, we started implementing immediately.

As part of the agreement with Turkey on the 17th of October last Thursday we agreed not to impose any new sanctions under that Executive Order and, based upon the fact that the Turks have declared in accordance with our agreement that their offensive is

over—what they call Peace Spring—as of last night we are about, I believe, to lift those sanctions.

But I want to underline the sanction Executive Order remains in place. We can just as quick as we did last time impose new sanctions under that Executive Order if we are not happy with the behavior of the Turks or anybody else that is covered in that very, very broad and very, very powerful sanctions instrument.

In terms of congressional sanctions, again, there are a number of them out there. I saw how helpful they were in getting the Turks to a cease-fire. But I have to say that we would want to look at these very, very carefully for two reasons.

First of all, we are concerned about very important military relations and very positive ones that we do have with Turkey. And second, as a general rule, we see sanctions as incentives to change behavior, which means that there has to be waivers or other Presidential decisionmaking involved—executive branch involved in such sanctions.

If there are no waivers, if it is absolute even when the behaviors change, it is often very hard to get these things lifted, and then we have the worst of two worlds. We do not get the behavior changed and we are punishing people that—in other places and on other issues we want to work with.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Deutch.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Jeffrey, Mr. Palmer, thanks for being here. Thanks for your service.

Were—Ambassador Jeffrey, were you on the October 6th call with President Erdogan?

Mr. JEFFREY. I was not.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Palmer, were you?

Mr. PALMER. No, sir.

Mr. DEUTCH. Do you know—Ambassador Jeffrey, do you have a list of who was on that call?

Mr. JEFFREY. I do not.

Mr. DEUTCH. Is it possible for you to get that list?

Mr. JEFFREY. As a general rule, we do not publish who is on the list of people who listen to the President's telephone calls.

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand. Is it—is it possible to get a transcript of that call, Mr.—Ambassador Jeffrey?

Mr. JEFFREY. That you would have to ask of the White House. Again—

Mr. DEUTCH. We have asked. There is a request in. But is there any reason not to provide that?

Mr. JEFFREY. As a general reason, executive privilege covers that.

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand, as a general rule. In light of this conversation I hope you can understand why we think it is so important.

Ambassador Jeffrey, in testimony before this committee in May you stated that the Administration is pursuing three mutually—reinforcing whole of government strategic objectives: the enduring defeat of ISIS, the removal of all Iranian-led forces from Syria, and the resolution of the Syrian crisis through a political solution.

Your written statement submitted today claim these three objectives main the goals. So I just have some questions.

Does the rapid removal of U.S. troops from northeastern Syria make a revival of ISIS more or less likely?

Mr. JEFFREY. Congressman, those troops were sent in—

Mr. DEUTCH. Ambassador Jeffrey, I am just asking your opinion. Does it make it more or less likely that ISIS will be reconstituted after this is—

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, not in my opinion. It was U.S. Government policy. We had the troops there—

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand the policy. Do you think it is more or less likely that ISIS will reconstitute as a result of this decision?

Mr. JEFFREY. If those troops are withdrawn fully, a very important tool we had to keep ISIS under control will be gone. That is correct.

Mr. DEUTCH. That would make it more likely.

Does the withdrawal of U.S. troops make reducing and expelling Iranian influence from Syria more or less likely?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is a tougher one to give you a yes or no on because that was not the mission of the troops, particularly in the northeast.

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand. I understand. It is tougher, but this is your—you are in charge of Syria policy. Iran and the threat Iran poses in Syria is of vital interest to me and this committee. So I am just asking your conclusion here.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, and I will stick with the troops were there to participate in de-ISIS and removing them—

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. Is a challenge to that mission.

Mr. DEUTCH. Is it a challenge also to preventing Iran from establishing greater influence?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is a challenge to maintaining stability in the northeast which, in turn, puts—pushes Syria in a good direction.

Mr. DEUTCH. I will take—I will take that as a yes.

Does the removal of U.S. troops diminish or strengthen our ability to shape an ultimate political solution to the conflict?

Mr. JEFFREY. The troops were not the primary tool—

Mr. DEUTCH. I understand. I understand. I understand, and I have great appreciation for all you do. I am just asking about this decision and whether this decision to remove the troops without consultation with our allies and to do it as rapidly as we did and to turn our back on the Kurds and everything that we have discussed already today does it diminish or strengthen our ability to shape a political solution with the conflict?

Mr. JEFFREY. Our focus on the troops, the withdrawal, and what we might do including looking again at the withdrawal is mainly focused on the de-ISIS issues. We can find other ways to pursue our broader political—

Mr. DEUTCH. So we are just as strong—our diplomatic ability is just as strong—is your testimony that our diplomatic ability is just as strong today as it was before we removed our troops?

Mr. JEFFREY. We will have to make certain adjustments to our policies on the basis of that.

Mr. JEFFREY. OK. Ambassador Jeffrey, yesterday you told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the President did not consult you, his point person on Syria, before this decision.

When was the last time you briefed the President on your efforts as special representative for Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have never briefed the President nor would I have expected to brief the President. I work for Mike Pompeo.

Mr. DEUTCH. And when was the last time you briefed Secretary Pompeo?

Mr. JEFFREY. Almost daily for the last 14 months.

Mr. DEUTCH. Including October 5th? Was there a briefing on October 5th or October 6th, the day before or the day of the call?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am almost certain that between the 4th and the 6th—

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. I had at least one conversation with him.

Mr. DEUTCH. And was Secretary Pompeo consulted before the President made this decision?

Mr. JEFFREY. You would have to ask Secretary Pompeo that specific question. What I can say for the record is Secretary Pompeo has been consulted very, very frequently—almost daily—by the President on Syria issues and the question of U.S. forces there has been a very important part of that discussion.

Mr. DEUTCH. I appreciate that, Ambassador Jeffrey.

Before we wrap up, I just want to flag a few things that you have said—you have said today. I note the contrast between seeing it as a success that Putin, you said, would not allow them to go into other areas. Would not allow them.

In our case, you said that Turkey acted unwisely and they acted against our advice. It was our advice that we not—that they not do what they did, and if it was our policy, as you have said, that throughout this entire presence in Syria—throughout the entire presence, all we were doing was advising and the moment—and is it your testimony that because we never intended to use our troops to defend the Kurds that the moment Erdogan made a phone call to President Trump and said, I am going in, this was always the inevitable result?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, I knew I was going to get in trouble when I said Putin would not allow. By that sense I mean Putin has certain diplomatic and economic—

Mr. DEUTCH. Leave Putin out. Answer—if you could answer my question. Was this always—was it inevitable, since all we were doing was offering advice and, as you testified today, we were never going to defend the Kurds militarily?

Was it simply inevitable that eventually this was going to be the result of our policy? Is that your testimony today?

Mr. JEFFREY. No, not at all. Quite the contrary. We had—first of all, the President had very powerful tools to be used both as incentives and sticks with Turkey including the CAATSA sanctions, including \$100 billion trade package, including a visit to the United States. These were all raised in the October 6th call. So the idea we—

Mr. DEUTCH. And I raised—and then I would just conclude, Mr. Chairman—and, ultimately, if we had all these tools then the President either failed to utilize them or he simply rolled over for Erdogan. Is that not right?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. I would say a third alternative. That is, that the Turkish government made a terribly bad and very, very dangerous decision—

Mr. DEUTCH. That has resulted in not—as you have said, not widespread ethnic cleansing—not widespread ethnic cleansing, but at least, apparently, some ethnic cleansing, and there was a reference, you said, to war crimes and to the extent there are war crimes is there—my last question—is there consideration of taking—of taking Turkey to the Hague if that is—if war crimes have been committed?

Mr. JEFFREY. On the war crimes we are looking into those allegations and we actually have a set of packages. We have taken steps to—we have sent a high-level demarche to Ankara demanding an explanation and we will look at the various options.

But you are absolutely right. One reason we tried so hard to stop the Turks from coming in is that we knew it could lead to all of the things you mentioned and more.

Mr. DEUTCH. Right. I am sorry they did not take our advice.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I have the utmost respect for you and my colleagues on the other side—Mr. Sires. But I find the level of hypocrisy is nowhere close to bipartisanship in here.

You know, what I see is you do not like President Trump. You do not like his policies, and I hear that coming out through the last member that testified.

President Trump, you said, through his actions, created a humanitarian crisis—that is terrible. I agree, there is a humanitarian crisis but there has been a civil war going on over there for over 8 years. Eight hundred thousand people have died. The largest exodus of people on the planet since World War II—

Mr. DEUTCH. Will the gentleman yield? If—

Mr. YOHO. I will yield if I reclaim my time.

Mr. DEUTCH. I would be—I would be more than willing to engage in a discussion about whether this action to withdraw our troops at this moment, turning our back on the Kurds, has created a humanitarian crisis for the Kurds. And if the gentleman is suggesting it has not, then perhaps that is worthy of a longer conversation.

Mr. YOHO. I will happy—reclaiming my time—and I am happy to do that and I think we should do a special order on this.

But to say that President Trump has caused this I think is erroneous.

Mr. Sires, you were saying that the picture of Putin and Trump and Erdogan was terrible. Did you feel that way about this picture with President Obama and Raul Castro?

You know, so the hypocrisy—

Mr. SIRES. May I—may I answer you?

Mr. YOHO. Go ahead, since I—

Mr. SIRES. You know that I did. Okay.

Mr. YOHO. But I do not hear it—I do not hear it. You know, it is like it is Okay there—

Mr. SIRES. No, but you were on the committee with me and you know how I did not disagree.

Mr. YOHO. I am on the committee. I am reclaiming my time.

Mr. SIRES. Good.

Mr. YOHO. So, Ambassador Jeffrey, you stated that Turkey had been staged in the northeast area for approximately a year. Is that true?

Mr. JEFFREY. Turkey had what in the northeast?

Mr. YOHO. They have been staged there with troops and—

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, along the border they had threatened to go in if they could not get certain concessions that we would not make to deal with what they saw was a existential problem of 100,000 people under, again, what they thought was PKK control.

Mr. YOHO. OK. I am going to ask you, Mr. Palmer, because you look lonely there—since you said you were the number guy, how many troops did they have there in the northeast area of Syria?

Mr. PALMER. I apologize, Congressman. I cannot give you a hard number on that. I would have to come back to you.

Mr. YOHO. Ambassador Jeffrey.

Mr. JEFFREY. It was 25,000 across—

Mr. YOHO. Twenty-five thousand troops.

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, that is—at this point but they had the numbers fluctuated between the fall of 2018 and at present. At present, it was about 25,000.

Mr. YOHO. All right. Let me ask you this. How many troops did the U.S. have in that area where Turkey was going in to do what they did here?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, I have—I will get to the answer. It was—

Mr. YOHO. Was it thousands?

Mr. JEFFREY. It was less than 30. But, again—

Mr. YOHO. Less than 30 troops?

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. The mission was not—this is not even apples and oranges. It is kind of apples and, I do not know, rocks.

Mr. YOHO. All right. So the troops we are talking about withdrawing are approximately 30 in that area, right?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. But one of the problems, to be honest, is when we talk about withdrawals in all of this discussion we are talking about two withdrawals.

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Mr. JEFFREY. A very specific withdrawal on the 6th of October on General Milley's recommendation of those two tiny outposts because they were in the area where there was going to be fighting.

Mr. YOHO. Of approximately 30 troops.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right.

Mr. YOHO. OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. And then there was the overall withdrawal of everybody, which was a separate decision taken some time later.

Mr. YOHO. I just want to get things in perspective. So this was not a massive troop withdrawal in that area. Now, there are 2,000 troops that are going to be removed later on, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. It was under a thousand troops but they have been reinforced—

Mr. YOHO. OK. So it is not a massive—and I agree, the Kurds have to be protected in some form. How long have we talked about creating a safe zone in the northeast corridor of Syria and Turkey?

Mr. JEFFREY. We have had conversations on doing something like that since the Obama administration.

Mr. YOHO. Right, and I have been here for 7 years and we have talked about a safe zone—a free safe zone between that area so that we can put refugees in that area so that they are protected.

Is that what is happening between Russia and Erdogan now—Erdogan? They are talking about a safe zone, that 20-mile area, roughly?

Mr. JEFFREY. I happen to be pretty cynical about this agreement.

Mr. YOHO. I am going to be real cynical about it. But if they can accomplish that, is that not what we have been trying to do?

Mr. JEFFREY. They are not going to accomplish anything good with that agreement, Congressman.

Mr. YOHO. Well, and that goes to the underlying problem. There is not a good solution to this Syrian outcome because you have Assad. He is trying to fight the ISIS rebels and he is doing genocide over there.

Then you have Turkey trying to get Assad out for their reasons. You have got Russia propping up Assad for their reasons and they are going to work with Turkey that wants to get rid of Assad. Then you have Iran in there for their reason, working against us.

So I think any way that we can get out of there with protection to the—to the Kurds and give them as much support but God help them and the other people because we have to look at the genesis of how we got into Syria and why we got into Syria.

And it was the rapid withdrawal of massive amounts of troops coming out of Afghanistan and Iraq that created the void that ISIS filled, and then the no-fly zones in Libya that took out Gaddafi's defense that allowed ISIS to have training camps and recruitment camps that went into Syria, that allowed them to get to where they are at.

So we are dealing with the aftermath of poor foreign policy. We need to get the hell out of there as quick as we can and let Russia own it.

They did such a great job in Afghanistan that let them do it again, and the Americans need to come back and we need to focus on the Western Hemisphere and other things.

I rest my time.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Bera.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I like my colleague from Florida, Mr. Yoho, and I think he did articulate a little bit of how I think President Trump is looking at this foreign policy and looking at U.S. engagement in the Middle East.

We do not have to guess that the President's wanted to get out of Syria for a while. He campaigned on it. Last December, I happened to be in the region, met with our commanders in the field, met with our special envoy at that time, Brent McGurk. You know, returned back home and the following week the President issued his famous tweet now that said we are getting out of Syria.

Nobody seemed to know that was coming—nobody in the field. The special envoy certainly did not because he wrote it in an op-ed and there were some moderating forces that were able to slow the President down and walk that back and try to think about this strategically.

So while I was shocked by the decision a few weeks ago, I was not surprised by that decision and, if we are going to change our foreign policy approach to the Middle East and the region, we ought to have a concrete discussion that involves this body.

The fact that we took a big vote last week and the majority of Republicans expressed their displeasure with the decision and the rapidity of the decisions suggests that this body, both the House and Senate, are not in favor.

I do not disagree that the President has the ability to set out and change foreign policy, but there is a real danger if we do it rapidly and then if a new Administration comes in and tries to reverse it.

We ought to have a real honest conversation about how we approach this region because the reality is what has happened in the last couple weeks has strengthened Assad.

So if our policy is we are not going to do business with Assad—we are not going to support a Syrian solution that includes Assad, well, we just went in the wrong direction.

If we do think of Russia as an adversary and we do not want to cede influence and control in the Middle East to Russia, well, we just went in the opposite direction.

So our foreign policy in this region is changing. When the President says, well, it is not issue—that is 7,000 or 9,000 miles away, the reality is ISIS is most effective and the biggest threat to us here.

Yes, they are fighting over there and they are committing atrocities over there. But they are also very effective in the use of propaganda, very effective in the use of identifying individuals in Europe, individuals in the United States, building a relationship with those folks online and creating home-grown terrorism.

Well, we just ceded that and we just went backward on our ability there. So we have to have an honest conversation about what our long-term strategy is not with a Democratic president or Republican president but long-term because the Middle East is not going to get resolved in the next 4 years or the next 8 years.

This is a long-term issue and I think every Syrian expert and, again, Ambassador Jeffrey, I think you would probably agree with this—there is not a easy solution to Syria with the number of refugees, with the amount of devastation and with the political instability there.

Would you disagree with me that this is a—if we are rethinking foreign policy in the Middle East the Administration ought to have this conversation with Congress and we ought to all get on the same page?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely. Decisions taken on the Middle East, given its impact on our own security from world energy supplies, which still impact us despite our energy situation here, to the threat of terrorism and the threat of weapons of mass destruction and radical forces on the march affect the American people, not just us in the Administration.

And we cannot do our job without the resources, the legal basis and other authorities that we can only get through Congress. That is one reason why in a little over 6 months I have been up here before this committee three times and have talked with many of you on the side. We do believe in this.

Obviously, as I said, we do not want this to happen. This has been a significant setback and that is obvious and clear in how we put out the Executive Order describing the impact of this Turkish move.

It is good that we looked into how this decision came—not the decision—how this event came about, what we did right, what we did wrong. That is what I am trying to do today.

What I want to underline, though, is two things. One, we did not—whatever else we may have done or not done, we did not give a green light to this operation, and second, on this one issue U.S. policy in Syria and U.S. forces and whether they should be in Syria or not, there was almost obsessive reviews, consultations, and discussions at every level of the U.S. Government. It was not something that was done serendipity—

Mr. BERA. Was Congress part of that—those discussions?

Mr. JEFFREY. Certainly, it was part of my discussions up here three times.

Mr. BERA. Well, I would—I would make the case that the Administration ought to spend more time with the relevant committees and Congress in consultation so that Congress and the Administration can be on the same page so that when we are projecting to the rest of the world what our foreign policy objectives in that region are, we are all speaking from the same page.

Mr. JEFFREY. I understand, sir.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, and then let me express my frustration again that Congress was not a part of that discussion.

Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for being here. I appreciate your great service. I do not envy you having to sit in that chair right now. But I appreciate you being willing to do it.

I want to be clear about the green light. I have to take issue. I think this absolutely was a green light. Maybe the phone call did not say yes, go do it. It was a proverbial green light, if we want to parse words.

I talked to a leader of a European NATO country that told me—their foreign minister that told me that—he said Turkey may have attacked a hundred of my troops there but, he said, they never would have attacked 24 or 25 American troops backed by American air power and American security, and we all know that is true. I do not think anybody would—really would think that had the President put a hard line down that they would have attacked.

This is a moral question to me. A couple of points in want to make and then I do have a couple quick questions.

First off, this idea of war fatigue that is being told over and over to us—you know, it is like when your grandma tells you, you are tired and need a nap, eventually you feel tired and need a nap. That is what is happening right now in the political discussion. This country is not war fatigued. War fatigue came after World

War II when we should have left or could have left Europe and left it to those people over there 5,000 miles away. And, instead, we made a commitment after entire towns of young men were lost in World War II to stay and stand for American values.

The military's job is not to be protected only. The military's job—when people say we want to protect the military as the chief goal, the military's job is to do what 99.9 percent of Americans do not want to or should never be asked to do. These are young men and women that voluntarily sign up to do the dirty work of American security to make sure that Americans are not hurt.

And so using military troops as the excuse to reinvigorate ISIS, and I do not—look, the President did not intentionally reinvigorate ISIS. I want to be clear. But that is not the end goal.

We have the luxury now in this country of not thinking about terrorism because we have not been attacked on our soil in a big way in 19 years.

That is not because the intentions of the terrorists changed. It is because we have destroyed their ability to do it. We hear the forever war caucus that uses cheap slogans and sayings, come out and say things like forever wars. By the way, this is the exact model they advocated for so we did not have to put 150,000 troops in Syria.

This is it. But the forever war caucus forgets that it is not their choice. The terrorists have decided to commit a forever war against us, and we can do that in spurts. Every time we get hit, 20 years, 20 years later we pull back and get hit again, or we can stay on the offense, which is my preference.

So I think this was a major mistake and, Mr. Ambassador, I totally respect you are doing your job defending this. But I do have a couple of very quick questions on this.

Specifically, our visibility on ISIS after the pullout—did we lose or gain visibility on the location of ISIS and their objectives after this?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, the pullout has just begun and the troops that we pulled out—you saw the convoys and such—were not the folks in the field advising, assisting, and accompanying—

Mr. KINZINGER. But they can—but they can get intelligence—

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. Right. Yes. I mean, obviously, there is—when you pull out command and control and communications, you lose certain things. But I want to underline today we have people out there with the SDF pursuing ISIS.

Mr. KINZINGER. And then, second, is this a moral victory to ISIS? I guess if you are a recruiter for the—for ISIS and you say, yes, the Caliphate was defeated but now we are going to be reinvigorated—this is exactly what was foretold—we would go through tough times but we are going to invigorate now, do you think our pullout actually helped the recruiting efforts or hindered that?

Mr. JEFFREY. ISIS is pitching this as a victory for them.

Mr. KINZINGER. And do you think—is it true—did Turkey—let me ask this. Did Turkey threaten to attack even if we did not withdraw our troops?

Maybe you do not know.

Mr. JEFFREY. I do.

Mr. KINZINGER. OK.

Mr. JEFFREY. And some of it I cannot say here, but everything I know including the things I cannot say here is absolutely consistent with what I am telling you and from the open sources.

There was never a consideration in the Turkish decision chain about U.S. forces being in the way or anything else—

Mr. KINZINGER. OK. I appreciate that.

Mr. JEFFREY [continuing]. Because they never felt that they were being blocked by the U.S. forces.

Mr. KINZINGER. I appreciate that. So that—I will take that personally. You do not have to say it. I would take that as a threat.

If they are going to move anyway our troops are there. They would take that as a threat. They told the President. That, first off, is a NATO ally. So as we talk about sanctions here and there is discussion about maybe we should not do it, NATO basically threatened to overrun U.S. positions.

That did not change with a cease-fire. And so I look at that and I am, like, that is interesting to me. You know, it is interesting when we look at what a NATO ally did as we talk about, well, they have a cease-fire with Russia now, not with us—maybe we could have, like, negotiated something. But probably this is bad enough that we never would be a party to it. It is an interesting thing to keep in mind as we deal with what to do.

Look, we are in a tough position now. A lot of tough decisions. I could not even give you an answer that I think is right right now and where to go forward. But I think as this body decides what to do in terms of future behavior, I think taking a strong stand and saying the United States will not be pushed over without consequences is important.

To both of you, again, deeply respect you being here and your hard work. I know you have put in a lot more time in this than I could ever even imagine doing myself.

So God bless you and thank you for your service.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Espaillat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you both for your testimonies.

Mr. Jeffrey—Ambassador Jeffrey—could you shed light, a little bit more details on how toxic or how conflicted is the historical relationship between Turkey and the Kurds?

Mr. JEFFREY. I could, but, technically, my colleague, Mr. Palmer, is responsible for Turkish things and he is dying to answer this question.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Oh. Good.

Mr. PALMER. Thank you, Congressman.

There has been a longstanding confrontation between Turkey and the PKK. Over the last four decades, there have been as many as 40,000 casualties in Turkey of Turkish civilians, Turkish police, Turkish military, as a function of that conflict with the PKK, which Turkey considers an existential threat.

The PKK is not the same thing as the Kurds. There is a very large Kurdish community in Turkey, much of which is very well integrated into Turkish society, considers themselves Turkish citizens participating fully in Turkish life.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. But the Turkish military clearly has a great military advantage over the Kurds?

Mr. PALMER. Congressman, I am not entirely certain what you mean by the Kurds in this context. If you are referring to the SDF YPG in—

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Yes, that is correct.

Mr. PALMER [continuing]. Northeast Syria, yes, that is absolutely true. Turkey is a NATO member, has a significant military and significant military capabilities.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. So given this historical conflict between the Kurds and Turkey and the fact that the Turkish military has this clear advantage, it is safe to say that the Turkish forces up there at the border are in clear and imminent danger if there were—if they will stay there and face a Turkish incursion or military action?

Mr. PALMER. Congressman, I think there are sensible reasons to why the SDF has chosen to withdraw from those positions.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. And our presence there, obviously, contributed to providing some level of safety and security for those minority groups that are at a clear military disadvantage, correct?

Mr. PALMER. Congressman, I think that Ambassador Jeffrey's testimony was quite clear on this point that there was never any commitment that was made on the part of the U.S. military or U.S. civilian leadership to have U.S. military in place in northeast Syria to defend the SDF YPG from Turkey.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. But our presence there creates—sends a message, if you may, to the Turkish government that we are concerned about that region—that is a troubled region of the world and that in fact we want some level of peace and coherence there, correct?

Mr. PALMER. We have an ongoing conversation with Turkey and Turkish authorities about the issue of northeast Syria, our interests in that region, and our concerns about Turkish aspirations.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. What are your—to any of—you are not off the hook yet, Ambassador.

What is your opinion, either one of you, of the potential for what many have described as either ethnic cleansing or maybe even genocide in the area?

Mr. JEFFREY. In Syria?

Mr. ESPAILLAT. In the region. In the conflict region in the border.

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, in any region.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Yes.

Mr. JEFFREY. In any—in that region, in particular?

Mr. ESPAILLAT. In that region in particular.

Mr. JEFFREY. You are always facing the possibility of something that approaches ethnic cleansing to essentially get borders shaped so that only your kind of people are in those borders. This is something we have faced in many, many conflict.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. So the U.S. pullout has basically created a vacuum of leadership that has allowed for both the Russians and the Syrians to have an upper hand in that region. Is that your assessment, Ambassador?

Mr. JEFFREY. They were not in that region 3 weeks ago. They are in that region now because, A, the Turks came in, and B, the SDF, our partner, seeing the Turks coming in decided that they would

form essentially an alliance with the Russians and the Syrians to see what kind of deal they could get from them.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Just my final question. Do you think that the SDF it is still in peril—do you think they are still in danger? We still have not defined nor have we projected what is going to happen to them in the future.

Mr. JEFFREY. One of the complications that I have had to deal with since taking this job and had to deal with it as a foreign policy writer when I was outside of government was we never did have a long-term answer to that other than a political process that they and everybody else in Syria would become a part of.

That is, we did not have an agenda. We neither said we will protect you militarily nor did we say we will endorse your particular vision which, as they told us, was an autonomous region in that area that we had seen on the map that was yellow up there a little bit earlier.

We did not take a position as a government on either of those—well, we took a position not to provide military force to support them and we—against the Turks and we did not take a position on the long-term solution to their political issues within Syria or Syria as a whole other than it has to be a democratic process run by the Syrian people, which is the U.N. resolution that is relevant here.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you both.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank our witnesses for being here again today.

I am, along with so many of my colleagues, deeply grieved by Turkey's outrageous offensive against the Kurds in northeast Syria. I remain worried about the consequences and the long-term effect Turkey's actions will have on our national security and our Kurdish allies who made immense sacrifices to defeat the Islamic State.

Our top priorities must be to contain ISIS so terrorists cannot regroup, to prevent a genocide of the Kurds, and conduct a safe repositioning to ensure stability in the region.

I do not want our troops to be in Syria indefinitely. But we must act wisely, consult with diplomats and, certainly, Defense officials and ensure that we are not creating a bigger mess for ourselves and others in the region in the future.

Ambassador Jeffrey, Turkey wants to clear Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG fighters, from a swathe of land nearly—supposedly 20 miles deep and 270 miles long.

The YPG leads the pro-democracy Syrian Democratic Forces—the SDF—which have been the heart of the fight against Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad.

Ambassador Jeffrey, how will the evacuation of Kurdish forces from Turkey's so-called safe zone affect the SDF and is the U.S. continuing to cooperate with SDF forces and in what capacity?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, the SDF generally was not fighting the Assad regime but, rather, was focused on fighting Daesh, which was more than a handful.

Mrs. WAGNER. Yes.

Mr. JEFFREY. At times there were engagements—fire fights—between the two. But that was not their primary responsibility.

In terms of the withdrawal from the zone, there has been for a good number of years no real strong ISIS presence in that area. Manbij, where, according to the Russian-Turkish agreement, the YPG is also to be withdrawn, again, I have big questions as to whether that will happen.

But if it did happen, I would be worried about Manbij because there are some ISIS elements there. Where most of the ISIS elements are, south of that reservoir along, as you are looking at it, the Euphrates down to the Iraqi border, that is where the SDF has most of its forces and where we still have our own people.

As I said, we are executing a deliberate and a strong withdrawal but we are doing this in a way that allows us to consider should we keep some troops on, should we keep—

Mrs. WAGNER. So cooperation is still ongoing with the U.S.—

Mr. JEFFREY. And the cooperation is still ongoing as we work our way through what the longer-term situation will be.

Mrs. WAGNER. And I know that we have touched on this a bit with previous questioners, but hours before the U.S.-brokered cease-fire expired, we know now that Turkish President Erdogan held talks with Vladimir Putin.

Ambassador Jeffrey, what do we know about the content and outcome of the talks and how are we engaging with Turkey to prevent Russia from increasing and improving its long-term operating ability in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. The agreement calls for a Russian military police and Syrian—that is, Assad's border police—to move into those areas along that strip that you described to the east and west of where we worked the cease-fire deal with the Turks—the central 130 kilometers—to, supposedly, negotiate a withdrawal of the YPG, not a military action but a withdrawal of the YPG, and then to allow joint Turkish-Russian patrols 10 kilometers deep.

This is somewhat similar to what we negotiated with the Turks back in August that they then, basically, reneged on when they launched their offensive.

Frankly, our deal was a better deal for the Russian—for the Turks than the Russian one is, and so I am very cynical about—sceptical, rather, about what the Turks are going to get out of this deal.

Mrs. WAGNER. And so we do believe that this agreement, so to speak, has done more to increase Russia's long-term ability to operate in Syria. Would that be a fair assessment?

Mr. JEFFREY. Anything that allows Russian forces or Assad to move into other areas is a problem for us in trying to find a decent and democratic solution to the overall Syrian crisis.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you. We thank you both for your service. And I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Ms. Wild.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, I am so deeply distressed about this situation, first and foremost, for our allies, the Kurds, and for the Syrian people, but equally so for our troops who have essentially had to endure

the humiliation of abandoning their friends and their comrades and then being pelted with rocks and bottles as they left.

It, literally, makes me cry to imagine. My family has a long history of military service. My father was a career Air Force pilot. I lost an uncle in Vietnam.

Multiple other family members have served, and just the thought of those troops who have served this country being put in that position of what, as I said, is literally humiliation is just so wrong, and I do put this squarely at the feet of the Administration in terms of its actions.

I want to ask you this, Ambassador Jeffrey. In your testimony, you noted that President Trump told President Erdogan that U.S. armed forces would not support or be involved in a Turkish operation in northern Syria and that the United States does not endorse such actions but that we would not put U.S. forces in harm's way.

Is there any reason to think that if the United States had maintained its military presence in Syria, if we had not abruptly withdrawn forces from the region that Turkey would still have felt emboldened to launch military operations there?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is a very good question because it allows me to come at this from a different direction.

The Turkish troops crossed over the border before the President went public with the withdrawal of all of our forces from northeast Syria.

That was something that he was in the process of thinking through. He had been in the process of thinking through that since the fall of—the spring of 2018 and that precipitated the withdrawal.

The Turks did not base going across on either the withdrawal or the those two small outposts which were in the area or the decision to withdraw the forces from all of northeast Syria, almost all of whom were nowhere near where the Turks were.

In fact, what we did in response to your colleague's question was we gave the Turks the coordinates where all of our forces were and the Turks very carefully avoided hitting them.

Ms. WILD. Right. So let me—I am going to reclaim my time here, because then that leads me to this question. If it was an ongoing process that the Administration was so aware of, why then did our closest allies not get consulted about this decision?

Alarming, President Macron of France has publicly said that he found out at the decision on Twitter and the U.K. government reportedly was not consulted about the decision either, and my question to you is if we do not consult our closest allies on decisions that directly affect their troops as well, how do we expect them to trust us in the future?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is a good point. It is basic diplomatic hygiene to consult with allies. We did not do that in this case. Frankly, this is not the only case.

This is not—and not with this Administration but in every Administration I have been with it is something that our allies criticize us for fairly frequently, unfortunately, and it is not a good thing.

Ms. WILD. Well, were there any foreign leaders that were consulted as part of President Trump's process in making the decision to withdraw U.S. forces? Any foreign leaders at all other than Erdogan?

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, absolutely, because—and I think, Congresswoman, you put your finger on it when you used the word process. It is not only OK, it is necessary on something like this to look at the decision, why it was made, whether it was a good thing.

But I can assure you this was not one that the President had never thought about it and then suddenly on the 6th of October said, oh, troops, Syria—get them out.

This is something that had been one of the major debates within the Administration that the President had talked about at various levels and with other foreign leaders and they had talked about with him, including replacing American troops with coalition troops from France and other places.

Ms. WILD. But talking about it as some future thing and actually doing it without consulting with those foreign leaders or at least advising them in advance so they do not learn about it on Twitter is really, really bad for diplomatic relationships with our allies, is not it? We can agree on that?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely, and I just conceded that point 2 minutes ago. What I am trying to say is the President had the benefit of the views of Macron, of the various Prime Ministers from the U.K. and other countries in the back and forth for the 18 months before we pulled out.

Ms. WILD. Then all the more—all the more reason if they had been involved in an ongoing discussion that they should have been told and not learned of this on Twitter, right?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am agreeing with you, for the third time.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. Thank you.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Mast.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let's just start with the title of this hearing. I do not know what snide staffer put the title on it, but it says "Betrayal of Our Syrian Kurdish Partners," and I think it requires a little bit of self-reflection because we all have our lanes.

The military has their lanes. State has their lane. Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives has their lane. So let's talk about that word betrayal and say, in my opinion, betrayal is to our service members—Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard—who, what do they do? They volunteer heroically to stand in front of all threats to our Nation and anybody in our Nation, as my—as my colleague, Adam spoke about so eloquently earlier.

But in my opinion, the betrayal is is that they are not told the totality of their mission. When was the last time that our service members were given the totality of their mission?

The betrayal is to send our troops off with marching orders but with no final destination for those marching orders. Or to give them a mission that never reaches mission accomplished.

So when—and I will ask this question rhetorically but more specifically in a little bit—when was the last time that this body authorized or authored an AUMF?

That is the lane—that is one of the lanes of this committee. When is the last time we did this? I am not talking about what goes on in the NDAA and going out there and talking about different things that we might do through DOD.

When is the last time this body went out there and undertook those actions? When has this body speaking about support for the Kurds, expressed its sense of support for an independent Kurdish State, if that is something we support—something that I wholeheartedly support that I would love to see?

When was the last time that this body or your staffs went to work to actually write an AUMF even though it may not have gone through? When were the last times these things occurred?

When did this body author the left and right limits to what our engagement should be in Syria? When did that occur? When did we go out there and do this?

And so since the withdrawal or even prior to the announcement of this withdrawal, who here has gone out there and proposed some sort of AUMF for any action against Turkey if our troops come in conflict should one of our soldiers be attacked by somebody from Turkey?

When did that occur in this body in our lane, outlining that authority, not just—as I said, not just to provide assistance or to counter ISIS? When did that occur?

So my point here in all of this is this. If you want to support continued action in Syria absolutely, go out there and make your case for what it is that you want to see.

But task your staffs. Use your own efforts to go out there and author those left and right limits. Give them their marching orders. Let them know where we reach mission accomplished. Author those things. Take the time to do what is absolutely in our lane as members of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

So if you do not want to betray our service members who we should have no greater commitment to, then have the stones to specifically outline when we reach mission accomplished.

And if you are worried about the signals that might be sent, then send a clear signal from Congress about exactly what it is that we authorize against Turkey and Erdogan or against Assad, not just through State but specifically militarily.

And so my one question that I have is this. It is not to any of you. Mr. Chairman, will this body, as some people have expressed support for doing—it has not occurred on either side of the aisle—this knife cuts both ways—will this body work toward an AUMF?

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Mast, I think that the Congress, frankly, has been negligent in its time for several years under administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and I think it is the AUMF which is now being used as a catch-all to basically give any administration any power that they want to do anything they want militarily is something that needs to go by the wayside, and I would hope that the Congress—it was not done when Republicans were in the majority and it has not been done since Democrats were in the majority because, quite frankly, you know as well as I do it is

very difficult to get consensus to find that middle that everybody—

Mr. MAST. Mr. Chairman, I am going to reclaim—

Chairman ENGEL. Go ahead.

Mr. MAST [continuing]. And just ask it again. I do want to give you time to answer. I respect you.

Chairman ENGEL. No, I—

Mr. MAST. Will we in this committee work to authorize, work toward an AUMF? I agree with you. That knife cuts both ways, Republicans and Democrats.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Mast, if you would—if you would like to work with us on AUMF I would be delighted to work with you.

Mr. MAST. One hundred percent, sir.

Chairman ENGEL. OK. Thank you.

Mr. MAST. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. I would like to chime in on the—Mr. Mast's comments and, obviously, his patriotism is demonstrated to us every day.

We passed an AUMF that authorized going after al-Qaida. ISIS is an offshoot of al-Qaida. My colleague, Mr. Schiff, has written an editorial saying that AUMF does not apply and I have written one say that it does.

But I, for one, would not vote for an AUMF saying America should go to war with Turkey over the control of a 30-kilometer strip across Syria.

the President came to this country and said we were voluntarily withdrawing because that was his philosophical belief. What may have actually happened is the Turks threatened us with war and we blinked, and rather than tell the American people the truth, which is, as powerful as we are, we are not going to go to war against Turkey for this strip of land. As loyal as we are to the Kurds, not that loyal. Instead, he packages it as if this is some great machismo exercise in withdrawal.

On October 11th, 2019, Turkey launched multiple artillery rounds near the U.S. base in Syria, effectively, bracketing the base.

Ambassador Jeffrey, if we had left our troops there would Turkey have been willing to kill them to achieve its goals?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely not, and Turkey never thought that those—as, again, the troops we are talking about in the area that the Turks were even contemplating moving into were three, roughly, 12-soldier outposts along the Turkish border.

The Turks were—never considered these to be a threat. They never thought that they had to get America to withdraw them. It just was not a calculation. All they wanted to do was to know their grid coordinates for those and any other troops—

Mr. SHERMAN. You are saying if we had left our troops there Turkey still would have displaced the Kurds from this strip; they just would have bypassed our forces?

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, absolutely. In fact, we did have them bypass our forces—

Mr. SHERMAN. And then—so our forces would not have helped the Kurds under that scenario. Turkey would achieve its objectives and but at least we would not have withdrawn. Is there any—

Mr. JEFFREY. Exactly.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. Is there any explanation as to why American troops are withdrawing south of the 30-kilometer strip?

Mr. JEFFREY. The President was faced with a—obviously, a very fluid situation. As with every president that I have worked with, the first concern is force protection.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mm-hmm.

Mr. JEFFREY. A large part of our overall force was either just to the east or just to the west of the Euphrates in the Kobane Manbij area and that was going to be cutoff by Turkish forces, the road leading to Iraq—Turkish forces, Turkish-supported and very ill-disciplined opposition militias, ISIS elements possibly.

Mr. SHERMAN. I need to go on to another question.

We did not break Syria. We did massively reduce the amount of chemical weapons that would be used in that conflict.

Even so, even though we did not break it, someday we will be called upon to help fix it. Should the U.S. condition American rebuilding assistance on removal of Iranian military and proxy—Iranian proxy military from Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is one but on the only condition for us providing any stabilization assistance.

Mr. SHERMAN. Came here 23 years ago. One of the things I thought was morally incumbent upon Congress was to recognize the first genocide of the 20th century—the Armenian genocide.

We were told, but Turkey's a great ally of the United States; do not put that at risk. How is that working out for us?

Mr. PALMER. If I may, Ambassador.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Palmer.

Mr. PALMER. Yes. Thank you for that question, Congressman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Does the dishonoring of America and the undercutting of our reputation for speaking the truth, was that worth it? Did we get some great help, alliance, love, and loyalty from Erdogan?

Mr. PALMER. Congressman, I do not think that was ever the calculus, and I do appreciate what you are saying about the talk about the—

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, no, no—yes. I mean, the historical facts are clear. We chose not to formally recognize them because many thought that Turkey would behave well if we did not. How is that working out?

Mr. PALMER. Let me, if I may, Congressman, begin by underscoring our view that the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 was one of the great crimes of the 20th century, and that is not in dispute.

When we look at the relationship with Turkey, I am reluctant to attach the word great to that relationship but it certainly is consequential, and I think what it is that you have heard from administration after administration—

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, our relationship with Hong Kong is consequential. We do not fear to pass just 2 weeks ago three measures that Beijing really hated because—

Mr. COSTA. Would the gentleman yield?

Mr. SHERMAN. Yes.

Mr. COSTA. Just in context of the question you asked, I am wondering how much the relationship has changed between Turkey and the European Union when years ago they went on record of recognizing the Armenian genocide.

Mr. PALMER. The relationship between Turkey and the European Union is fraught and complicated. Turkey—

Mr. COSTA. And so is ours.

Mr. PALMER. That is correct, Congressman. Yes.

Mr. COSTA. OK.

Mr. SHERMAN. I would point out that immediately after recognizing the genocide in the next several years, French exports to Turkey tripled in spite of the fact that the one consequence Ankara said France would face was a diminution in such exports.

So we have cowered. We have dishonored ourselves in front of a paper tiger that the French were—had the courage to confront and we have achieved nothing in terms of being able to call Turkey a great ally.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Watkins.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you, and thank you for being here.

I attempt to approach these dealings emotionlessly but it is tough. I was embedded with the Turkish Peshmerga in Iraq for many years and have so much respect for the challenges they face.

Peshmerga, of course, means those who face death, and they do, and helping to train them, working with them, is something that I carry with me during these dealings.

So I know that Iraq is not center mass on the conversations today. Do you have any comments on the Peshmerga and as they act as a divide between Syria, Iran, and others? Do you have any comments in that regard?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have also worked with their political leadership since the late 1990's very extensively including 3 years in Iraq.

Mr. WATKINS. The Barzanis?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes.

Mr. WATKINS. Or Talibanis?

Mr. JEFFREY. All of them.

Mr. WATKINS. All of them.

Mr. JEFFREY. And we have the utmost respect for them. They have found a—first of all, a very—they are at peace. Their economy is in pretty good shape. They took in hundreds and hundreds of thousands of refugees from ISIS and they treated them well.

They have a good relationship with Turkey. They are a constituent part of the Iraqi body politic. It is a good news story in part because they were able to defend themselves effectively with our help, Congressman.

Mr. WATKINS. Thanks.

the President just held a press conference and he announced permanent cease-fire and the end of sanctions now. Even in the press conference he admitted that permanent is a strong word to use.

I want you to just comment on the confidence that you have in ending sanctions and the confidence you might have in a permanent cease-fire.

Mr. JEFFREY. I am chuckling about the word permanent because we looked at the statement and said—I actually said it is OK because it was not in the agreement with the Turks. But it does describe the way the Turks presented their decision to stop Operation Peace Spring last night to us. So it is OK.

It is as permanent as anything else and we differentiate that between the 5-day pause that we had before with the cease-fire. I mean, we are using all these semantic words because that is what you have to do in diplomacy.

But in the language of normal people it is a relatively permanent cease-fire. And in terms of the Executive Order, we have lifted those sanctions that were imposed on the 17th of October.

But the Executive Order that was passed that day remains in effect and that Executive Order is aimed at anybody who challenges the peace, stability, security, or the territorial integrity of Syria or the political process to try to find an outcome of the civil war.

That is a very, very powerful administration tool and this Administration is ready to use it again, be it against Turkey, be it against others, if they violate the provisions of the Executive Order. So we are happy we have it.

Mr. WATKINS. That is great. And I just want to say again how much I hold the Kurdish people in such a high regard. It is very personal to me as a veteran and as a prior defense contractor who worked in Kurdistan—the Kurdish northern region of Iraq.

I lived in Erbil for stretched of time in my career and many of us are dedicated to doing everything we can to support the Kurdish people.

So thank you for being here. I appreciate your time and your insight. I yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE [presiding]. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Lieu, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador Jeffrey and Mr. Palmer, for being here and for your public service. None of what I say with my questions are meant to impugn you. I understand you are simply trying to do the best, given Donald Trump's disastrous decision in Syria.

I do not oppose withdrawing troops from Syria. I oppose how it was done. Because of the impulsive decision of the President, with no planning and coordination, has resulted in some ISIS terrorists being set free and Turkish forces slaughtering our allies, the Kurds, and it is emboldened Iran and Russia.

Last week, Donald Trump tweeted that one reason he did this—in fact, the primary reason—is to, quote—to basically bring, quote, “our great soldiers and military home,” unquote.

Our troops in Syria actually did not go home. They went to western Iraq. Is that not correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is still under consideration, Congressman. That is, in terms of the withdrawal, the one who came out by road, obviously, went to western Iraq. There was no place else to go.

And what their status will be, whether they will—some of them will stay in Iraq, some of them will go home, some of them may be used in other areas—right now, Secretary Esper is working that with the Iraqi authorities.

Mr. LIEU. Some might also stay in Syria. Is that not correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, first of all, we will have some great soldiers remaining in al-Tanf to the south and that is very fortunate, from my standpoint, of the overall political process, and people are reviewing, as I mentioned earlier, at the highest levels of the government exactly how we are going to do this withdrawal and if there is going to be any residual force.

You will remember last time when the President announced a withdrawal in December 2018. In February 2019, he said, I am going to still keep a residual force. So that discussion is back and forth. I do not know what he will finally decide. But it is a very actively debated issue right now.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

So we were given images of Russian forces taking over at least one U.S. military facility. Is that true?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is true.

Mr. LIEU. OK. There was also public reporting that the U.S. military had to bomb some of our own facilities such as a weapons depot to prevent it from getting into enemy hands. Is that true?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is true.

Mr. LIEU. OK. I just want to say both those incidents are an embarrassment to the United States. I served in active duty in the United States military. I never thought that that would happen.

All right. So I would like to talk a little bit now about the President's conflicts of interest in Turkey. I have an article I would like to submit for the record from the Daily Beast. This is dated April 13th, 2017. The title of it is "Donald Trump's Huge Conflict of Interest in Turkey." Talks about two Trump Towers in Turkey receiving between \$1 million and \$5 million since the beginning of 2015.

So if we could put that in the record, Mr. Chair.

Mr. CICILLINE. Without objection.

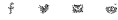
[The information referred to follows:]

Donald Trump's Huge Conflict of Interest in Turkey

DOUBLE TROUBLE

A businessman who allegedly helped the Iranians duck U.S. sanctions used to operate in one of the Istanbul towers bearing the name of the next American president.

Tim Mak Updated Apr. 13, 2017 11:34PM ET
Published Dec. 09, 2016 1:00AM ET



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Two buildings in Turkey may have more potential to upend American national security than any of president-elect Donald Trump's other foreign business dealings.

Trump's business ties in the country center around two massive buildings mixing residential and office known as the Trump Towers Istanbul. Trump does not own the towers, but instead licenses his name to the developers, receiving between \$1 million and \$5 million since the beginning of 2015, financial disclosure documents show.

"I have a little conflict of interest 'cause I have a major, major building in Istanbul," Trump said last year. "It's a tremendously successful job. It's called Trump Towers—two towers, instead of one, not the usual one, it's two."

Watchdogs that focus on ethics in government say that these business deals are especially sensitive due to the importance of Turkey to American interests—the county is a NATO member and a part of the coalition to fight ISIS.

"In terms of potential conflicts, Trump's business in Turkey is certainly one of the biggest," said Jordan Libowitz, spokesman for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Government.

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is a country that gets a lot of attention in the war on terror. And that's not something you want to hear at the same time as 'conflict of interest.'"

Even before the president-elect has entered office, his projects in Turkey have been the subject of serious controversy, and illustrated how his business ties abroad could be affected by foreign actors.

During the presidential campaign, Trump's proposal for a Muslim ban led Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to call in June for the businessman's name to be removed from the towers—in essence, threatening the revenue source Trump gets from licensing his name there.

But Trump defended Erdogan a month later, saying the U.S. shouldn't criticize the Turkish strongman for his crackdown after a failed coup—and there has been no mention of taking Trump's name off the tower since.

"Erdogan has demonstrated again and again that he knows no limit in using business deals to reward or punish his counterparts," said Aykan Erdemir, a former member of the Turkish Parliament who is now a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracy.



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Trump's licensing agreement in Turkey also puts the president-elect's imprimatur on the towers, whether Trump happens to agree with a tenant or not. For example, Reza Zarrab, an Iranian businessman who allegedly helped Iranians dodge Western sanctions, ran his business out of Trump Towers in Istanbul. If Zarrab had run the operation during Trump's time in office, would actors in the region presume it had the American president's tacit blessing?

Since Election Day, the president-elect has done little to separate his business and his new powers. In a call with Erdogan one day after he was elected, Trump praised a Turkish business partner who had worked on Trump Towers Istanbul as a "close friend." Not long after the election, Trump's son Eric Trump spent three days hunting deer in southern Turkey, at the invitation of an unnamed Turkish businessman.

The conflicts of interest, especially in Turkey, have drawn the suspicion of Rep. Adam Schiff, the highest-ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

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"If you look at the history, in Turkey alone, of the Trump businesses, the Trump Towers there... The fact of the matter is we shouldn't be having these questions... these are not questions the American people should be asking of a new president once he takes office," Schiff said, at a breakfast roundtable with reporters. "There shouldn't be any doubt that the president is acting in only one interest: the national interest."

Schiff openly questioned whether Trump's team had a financial relationship with the Turkish government, pointing to an op-ed written on Election Day by Michael Flynn, urging closer relations with Erdogan and suggesting that the United States no longer host Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric living in Pennsylvania who Turkey has demanded extradited. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general who was pushed out as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency by President Obama, was a vocal Trump supporter during the campaign who was named days after the election as Trump's White House national security adviser.

"Some of the things that the president-elect's team has

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economic motivation," Schiff said. "It causes me profound questions about what's really motivating this. Is it policy? It certainly can't be the intelligence. Is it economic interest? Is it [a] consultant relationship with his firm?"

Trump's business dealings in Turkey may also be more vulnerable to blackmail and foreign influence, principally due to the power held by Erdogan. For example, Trump's business interests in Canada would be protected by a robust judiciary and the rule of law, and less subject to the whims of a powerful and illiberal head of state.

"Rule of law and checks and balances have eroded in Turkey. There is extreme centralization of power in the hands of President Erdogan," Erdemir argued. "He can singlehandedly decide on the fate of investments, choosing to reward or punish businesses. Thus, President-elect Donald Trump's business interests in Turkey would be solely at the mercy of Erdogan."

Ultimately, the extent of Trump's conflicts of interests are not clear because the president-elect has declined to release his tax returns, bucking decades of bipartisan political convention.

The most thorough information available to the public is in the financial

disclosure Trump filed in

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pieces of information about his Turkish projects but not the full picture watchdogs believe is necessary to provide accountability, especially given the country involved.

"We have locations, we have some general descriptions... but it's hard to discern whether there's profit-sharing, whether performance of some of these buildings, like the rent, then translates into money for the Trump organization," said Project on Government Oversight spokesman Sean Moulton. "[With] our ongoing international relationship issues in the Middle East being of such high importance, it is particularly concerning."

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Mr. LIEU. Do you know if Donald Trump's business interests in Turkey was a factor in his decision to withdraw the troops from Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am sure that that was not part of the decision tree.

Mr. LIEU. How do you know it was not part of his decision-making?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am basically sure as far as I can say.

Mr. LIEU. On what basis do you have?

Mr. JEFFREY. On the basis of having been involved not with the President himself but with his top advisors on all the pros and cons of this question of keeping troops on for the last—for the last—since I have had the job 14 months.

Mr. LIEU. You were not on that phone call with the President of Turkey, were you?

Mr. JEFFREY. No, I was not.

Mr. LIEU. You do not know what was said in that phone call?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have a pretty good idea.

Mr. LIEU. Do you know if any business interests were discussed?

Mr. JEFFREY. I did not hear of any business interests being discussed.

Mr. LIEU. OK. And you do not know the President's—what is going on in his mind, right? You have no way of knowing if business interests had a factor in this at all, do you?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. But as a government official, I can just explain to you as best I can how these policy processes take—

Mr. LIEU. Well, let me ask you—do you think any business interests factored into the President's initial decision to have a G-7 at Doral?

Mr. JEFFREY. Once again, in terms of the decisions on Syria, I cannot say anything about any business decision ever coming up. I have never heard of one. I have never heard even the slightest rumour of one within—

Mr. LIEU. But you do not know? Were you informed of this decision to withdraw from Syria before the President did it impulsively after that phone call? Was there any prior coordination? You were surprised, were you not, at what happened?

Mr. JEFFREY. We were—we were informed—we were informed and consulted on the President's weighing of the options to withdraw forces almost daily for 18 months before this decision was taken.

Mr. LIEU. So let me just say this. It should never happen that American people and Members of Congress even have to ask that question and you have no way of knowing, sir.

Respectfully yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Mr. Burchett, the gentleman from Tennessee, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here.

Sir, how do you—how do we ensure that the situation on the border between northeast Syria and Turkey is not abused by Iran to expand its presence in the country and solidify a land bridge between Tehran and Beirut?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is one of our concerns, Congressman. It is one reason why the President decided to keep our U.S. forces on the ground in al-Tanf, which is astride, in part, because that is the reason they are there to continue the operations against ISIS. But it also sits astride the main east-west road between Tehran and Beirut. So that is the first thing we will do.

Second, we are working very closely with the Turks on this cease-fire that has just been announced by the White House and that we negotiated now 6 days ago.

And while we do not deal with the regime, we do deal with the Russians, as I said earlier sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully in Syria. But we have a very extensive both military and—a military deconfliction, because that is the only word they can use, and political exchange on Syrian issues.

And, finally, we have every intention if things work out to continue our relationship with the SDF, which still controls much of the terrain in the northeast.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right.

When you look at everything Turkey has been up to recently like the S-400 purchases from Russia, Halkbank helping Iran evade sanctions and firing on our troops, just to name a few, can we even trust or rely on Turkey as an ally now?

Mr. PALMER. The relationship between the United States and Turkey is complicated and multidimensional, Congressman, and we are going through a particularly different patch right now.

You have identified some of the key challenges in that relationship. Our goal is to work through this problem set, come out the other side in a position that is stronger, that is more stable, that is more productive and positive than it is currently and we are committed to working through all of those issues and building over time to strengthen and improve the quality of the U.S.-Turkey alliance.

Mr. BURCHETT. And without our U.S. troops in northeast Syria, does anyone have the capacity to make sure that ISIS does not resurface?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, as I tried to say earlier, I cannot convince this body or any other body that we had troops there for no reason. We, obviously, had troops there for a mission. The mission was defeating ISIS.

So if you remove those troops before that mission is complete, then you have a problem, and we do have a problem right now. We are working our way through it.

We are looking at various options of how we will maintain a relationship with the SDF, what kind of military coalition, because we are one of 80 nations and organizations—what kind of coalition presence, if any, will be in the northeast, how we can do this by other means.

But, of course, it would be nonsensical for me to tell you all that it makes no difference whether we had troops there now when we had troops there 3 weeks ago risking their lives to carry out a mission.

So, of course, by taking those troops out before that mission is completely and decisively done means that we have to deal with the consequences of that, and we are doing that right now.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize the distinguished gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Phillips, for 5 minutes.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I have to start by saying that I share my colleagues' grave concerns—dismay, disgust, and even heartbreak over our country's recent actions.

The world notices how we treat our allies and I believe that we have compromised our ability to affect our foreign policy over the years to come because of it.

We have heard from a lot of people in my district, a lot of warriors. One of them wrote, quote, "At the core of this issue are our American values: trust, commitment, sanctity of human life, human dignity. When we make commitments, especially when we make them with the vulnerable with the promise that we will prevent harm, we should keep those commitments," end quote.

I am afraid this is an example that will be used at West Point and war colleges—I know you are a graduate, Mr. Palmer—across the country as an example of how not to conduct ethical and strategic decisionmaking.

With that in mind, Ambassador Jeffrey, in your opening remarks in your testimony you shared our strategy, our foreign policy, toward Syria.

Do you believe that what you shared in your testimony is congruent with the actions of President Trump in recent weeks?

Mr. JEFFREY. Considering the fact that President Trump, a few minutes ago, announced that we would be keeping some troops on in northeast Syria it is a bit more congruent now than it was a few minutes ago.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. So it was incongruent until a few minutes ago?

Mr. JEFFREY. I actually did not say that. I said it is even more congruent now.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Oh, even more congruent now.

Mr. Palmer, how do you feel? Congruent or incongruent?

Mr. PALMER. I am going to go with congruent, Congressman.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Interesting. Do you believe by—this is a question back to both of you—do you believe our country, the United States of America, is better off now than we were 3 weeks ago?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, I do not want to leave the impression here, as a representative of the Administration—others of the Administration—that we did not think that Turkey's coming across the border on the 8th, 9th, of October was anything other than a tragic disaster for the situation in northeast Syria.

That is why this Administration, beginning with the President, immediately wrote a letter to President Erdogan passing on our leader of the SDF, General Mazloum's, request for a cease-fire and political talks.

That is why the President then had a conversation with or he passed on a message to President Erdogan that I delivered a couple of days later and then dispatched the vice president, the national security advisor, and the Secretary of State all out to—I will not

say impose but to demand a cease-fire along with very strong sanctions that we immediately rolled out right after the incursion began.

So yes, this was a bad thing and we took very energetic efforts to try to contain it and, to the extent we can, roll it back.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Sir with all due respect, I concur it was a disaster. But it is hard to say it was an unanticipated disaster. Would you say so?

Mr. JEFFREY. It was always, as the President said, long-planned Turkish incursion. The Turks always had that option. We did not have a military option. We took the decision not to have a military option and I think that was—I absolutely think that was the correct decision.

But we did have a policy decision to use every means short of the military to deter the Turks, to convince the Turks not to come in and we thought that we had succeeded. We had done a deal with them where we were doing joint patrols, joint aviation missions over the northeast. We believe that that and we know that that met their security concerns.

Mr. PHILLIPS. So you are—

Mr. JEFFREY. They then took a decision to come in on their own.

Mr. PHILLIPS. So you are testifying that we used every tool in our toolbox to the best of our abilities to prevent what we are seeing happen right now?

Mr. JEFFREY. Every one but military and also we did not succeed.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. Let me—and my last question is relative to Turkey's end game under Erdogan. I would love both of your perspectives on what you believe their long-term strategy is in the region, especially absent our participation.

Mr. JEFFREY. In Syria, it is to ensure—and it is relatively congruent, to use that word, with ours, other than the problem with the northeast—it is basically to put pressure on the Assad regime because they—Turkey sees the Assad regime as a threat to them, to limit to the extent they can Russia's influence and to deter Iran operating to the south of Turkey.

So these are all, as I said, congruent with our interests.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Mr. Palmer.

Mr. PALMER. More broadly, Congressman, Turkey's goals are to play a leadership role in the region and to ensure Turkish security including, in particular, through the comprehensive defeat of the PKK.

Mr. PHILLIPS. All right. My time is up and I yield back.

Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. I thank the gentleman for yielding back.

I now recognize the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Allred, for 5 minutes.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank Chairman Engel and Mr. McCaul, our ranking member, for holding this hearing.

Ambassador Jeffrey, I want to thank you for your distinguished service in both Democratic and Republican administrations, and also to—the same thing to you, Mr. Palmer.

I do not envy you, though, for having to be here today defending what I consider to be the indefensible. This Administration has

brought this committee and this House together on a bipartisan way in a fashion that few issues have.

Last week, we, of course, voted overwhelmingly to disapprove of these actions and my colleagues have been ably laying out how disastrous this decision has been.

But I want to talk about the U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests that you talk about in your joint statement.

In your written testimony you note that the U.S.'s strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain, one, the enduring the defeat of ISIS and al-Qaida and their affiliates in Syria; two, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence; and three, resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms that are favorable to the United States and our allies.

I want to ask you through each of these, one, two, and three, beginning with the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaida whether or not this action has furthered that strategic national security interests for us.

Mr. JEFFREY. Congressman, first of all, it is not a difficult task. It is an honor to be here. It is an honor to serve my country. It is an honor to serve this Administration which I think, overall, is doing its very best to secure America throughout the world.

We are talking about a situation that has not turned out well for us in the past few weeks in how we are working our way through it. But I am delighted to be here sharing my views and the Administration's views with you and getting your views back.

In terms of all three, the one that is hit the hardest by what has happened, of course, is the defeat of ISIS because that was the purpose of our forces in the northeast. But again, the President's decision to keep forces on and he talked to General Mazloum this morning.

General Mazloum has just tweeted that he thanks the President for his tireless efforts that stopped the brutal Turkish attack and expressed willingness to continue working with us.

So, boy, do we have a complex situation. It was pretty easy before. We had us, the SDF, and ISIS on the run in the northeast. Now we have still all three of those and about six more actors.

How are we going to sort our way through this? I will get to work as soon as I leave here.

Mr. ALLRED. Yes. Well, I want to comment on that. I saw the statement from the general. I think that when someone relies on us for their existence and we allow them to be attacked by an ally, and then we stop the attack, them thanking us for that action probably does not ring as true.

I think we saw with the throwing of objects at our troops when they were trying to pull out by some of the Kurds how they feel about it.

But let me ask another followup question on that because according to multiple U.S. Defense and military officials counter ISIS operations have essentially stopped because SDF forces have reoriented to confront the Turkish invasion.

Do you think that is going to—are they going to reengage now with this cease-fire? What is our approach there to work with them and what are the prospects of that work?

Mr. JEFFREY. Much of the SDF forces remained along the Euphrates where the remaining ISIS threat is along with most of our front line advisory teams and that is still continuing.

New operations and such—whenever you get some—a dramatic shift in a military situation and an area of operations, believe me, nobody's got the time to do new operations.

But, typically, people have standing orders to continue doing what they are doing and that is what happened. The fighting with the Turks was over so quickly—it stopped now 6 days ago—that a lot of the forces that were not—were not basically pulled to the north, and right now we are seeing what will happen to the forces that are in the areas in the northeast.

In the northeast, there was very little action against ISIS because there were no ISIS forces to speak of there.

Mr. ALLRED. OK. So is it your assessment—

Mr. JEFFREY. In that strip along the northeast. Of course, they were further south.

Mr. ALLRED. All right. So is it your assessment that this will—what is your assessment, I should say, about how this will impact ISIS's ability to reconstitute?

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, 99 percent of the ISIS detainees are still detained as I speak. Some hundred-plus were able to escape and we are watching that closely.

Second, based upon how we work with the SDF, I just gave you the statement that was encouraging from General Mazloum. I reiterated the President's commitment to keep some forces on.

If we do that and if we maintain air, I believe very strongly that we can continue an effective de-ISIS campaign and we can continue to pursue the other two goals that you asked whether they were impacted as well.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CICILLINE. I thank the gentleman for yielding back.

I now recognize the gentleman from Michigan, Mr. Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks, both of you, for coming in and, Ambassador Jeffrey, it is good to see you again. I am going to ask you some questions.

I want to know if it is correct that—in your estimation that Turkey's President Erdogan wants to expand Turkish control over a section of northern Syria.

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely not. As I said yesterday in the Senate, I differentiate between Turkey and Iran. Turkey is not an expansionist country. Turkey is—

Mr. LEVIN. So they are not trying to go into the section of—that is been delineated and we all see it and all the—where they want to control and move people out of it?

Mr. JEFFREY. Turkey is trying to ensure that it does not face a long-term threat from the PKK in northeastern Syria analogous to what it faces—

Mr. LEVIN. Northeastern Syria—that is in another country than Turkey?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, just like the threat it faces out of northern Iraq, just like the threat that Israel faces from Hezbollah in south-

ern Lebanon. That is the Turkish motivation. It is not to take territory.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, so is it fair to say that the goal of Turkey's invasion into Syria is to remove Kurdish people—not just fighters, but Kurdish civilians from that section of Syria that he is invading and he is using violence to force them out of that geographic area? Military force, arms, violence.

Mr. JEFFREY. One, we have written commitments from the Turks that they would not do that. Two, given that there's somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of the Turkish population is Kurdish and many of them serve and fight in the Turkish army, I would not assume automatically that they are out to do ethnic cleansing. What they are out to do is to get what they believe are elements linked to the PKK out of that area.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Well, let me—reclaiming my time.

I just want to talk about the meaning of this. I know you wanted to have, like, a maximalist definition of ethnic cleansing as if it is sort of genocide on a national scale.

But in the 1990's we started using this term to talk about the conflict in Yugoslavia at that—what was then Yugoslavia and the United Nations explained ethnic cleansing as, quote, “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent or terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas,” and this description sounds a lot like what reporters and human rights organizations tell us has happened to the Kurdish people since the Turkish invasion.

Just last week, Amnesty International reported, quote, “The Turkish military offensive into northeast Syria has wreaked havoc on the lives of Syrian civilians who once again have been forced to flee their homes and are living in constant fear of indiscriminate bombardment, abductions, and summary killings.”

Based on what has been reported and what you have said, it seems like it would be accurate to call the Turkish assault on Kurdish people in that area of northern Syria an act of ethnic cleansing as far as I am concerned.

And here is how President Trump described the Turkish invasion on Thursday: “So you have a 22-mile strip and for many, many years, Turkey, in all fairness, they have had a legitimate problem with it. They had terrorists. They had a lot of people in there they could not have. They have suffered a lot of loss of lives also and they had to have it cleaned out.”

Does the President support the ethnic cleansing of Kurdish people from that part of Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely not. He sent us out to negotiate a document I have in my hands, which has three of the 13 paragraphs deal directly with this.

Mr. LEVIN. OK. So if the President literally used the words “cleaned out” to describe what Turkey is doing to the Kurds, Mr. Ambassador, and suggests that it was justifiable and said “in all fairness,” quote/unquote, Turkey had a legitimate problem with this area of Syria and he called their gripe legitimate, has he not approved of Turkey's actions de facto, sir?

Mr. JEFFREY. He is trying to explain to the American people why a NATO ally took that action. Not approving that action, not green lighting that action, but explaining the reasons why. It was not to clear out the area of the population, most of which where the Turks are, by the way, are Arab, not Kurd.

Mr. LEVIN. Sir—

Mr. JEFFREY. But, rather, to clear out the people who were associated with the PKK. We thought that was not a wise decision. We thought there were other ways to do it. But he did have—Turkey has legitimate security concerns and we have said that publicly a thousand times.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, sir.

I really appreciate the job you are doing. You are doing a good job. But I have to say that last week the President of the United States gave a thumbs up to an act of ethnic cleansing.

And he can try to tell us otherwise and his representatives can, but his words are clear and history will be clear about the reality of what is happening there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Virginia, Ms. Spanberger, for 5 minutes.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here. To the witnesses, Mr. Ambassador, I would like to begin with you.

Three weeks ago, I went on a bipartisan congressional delegation trip to Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Syrian-Jordanian border, during which time I met with representatives of foreign governments, U.S. military intelligence, and diplomatic leadership.

And over the course of those conversations I was repeatedly told of the danger posed to the United States and our allies if Turkish forces moved into northeast Syria, which was an area protected by our Kurdish partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces—SDF.

When we arrived home, we realized through news alerts that in fact we had—the United States—through the President's tweet had green lighted Turkish entry into that same area.

For years now, the SDF has been our staunch allies in the fight against ISIS, losing by estimates—and I heard you quote the number as well—more than 10,000 of their own soldiers in this process, and more recently they have been the first line of defense in maintaining the gains that we have made.

At the beginning of your testimony I heard you say that we had three goals in Syria: first, enduring defeat of ISIS; second, political solution in Syria; and third, the removal of Iranian forces.

Did the effort—our green lighting or in any way however we want to term it—the United States' stance to green light Turkish forces to go into Syria, does that in fact impact in a positive way the ending defeat of ISIS?

Mr. JEFFREY. One, the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria has not been positive for the fight against ISIS, obviously, in a dozen different ways.

However, we never green lighted this, and I have to keep coming back to this point because it keeps on coming up. Nobody told—A, the Turks were not waiting to get permission from us.

Ms. SPANBERGER. So then let me ask this. The removal and the announcement that we would remove U.S. forces from this area of Syria, does that help with—toward the goal of enduring defeat of ISIS?

Mr. JEFFREY. If we are talking about the removal of all forces from northeast Syria, it was the considered opinion of most people in the Administration that that is not going to contribute to the defeat of ISIS—enduring defeat of ISIS—and that is one reason why the President this morning essentially made an adjustment—I am using my words carefully here—adjust to his decision to withdraw our forces. He is going to leave some forces on.

Ms. SPANBERGER. So then the second goal, which would be the political solution in Syria, we have now created a circumstance in which our allies in the fight against ISIS, the SDF, has now turned its attention toward Assad, entered into an agreement with Assad, thereby de facto entering into positive relations with Russia.

Has this—has this been helpful toward the American goals of what would be a political outcome in Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is a good question. We are looking into that.

The SDF has long had relations with Russia and the Assad government. We also did not tell them they could not because we do not control the political future of that group or any other group inside Syria other than what we are allowed to do under the relevant U.N. resolution.

So they were talking for a long time with them. We have to see what this agreement will actually—between the Russians and the Turks—will actually turn out on the ground.

Ms. SPANBERGER. But departing and leaving our previous allies to their own defenses and, as my colleague from Michigan said, potentially—as the potential victims of genocide in northeast Syria, does that lay the groundwork for a political solution in Syria that would be in keeping with American national security interests?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, we gave political guarantees to the Kurds that we would use all necessary means, all political means, other than military force to try to keep the Turks out and try to keep their situation stable against Turkey, and we—the Turks decided not to heed us, not to, essentially, accept our sticks and go in.

Ms. SPANBERGER. So and have our efforts in any way been helpful toward the removal of Iranian forces from Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I think our overall effort in Syria has been placing pressure on Iran in many ways, some of which I cannot discuss here, but they are fairly significant. How this will have an impact on it I do not know. But, again, importantly, we are keeping our forces on in al-Tanf in the south.

Ms. SPANBERGER. So and my concern—I am a former case officer with the CIA so my perspective is one of human intelligence. I think it is notable that as a consumer of intelligence that might be driving some of our policy I think it should be deeply concerning to you and your colleagues that we have now lost access to human intelligence through the relationships that we did have with the Kurds.

My final question is we have now—we were withdrawing all of our troops. Then we were withdrawing some of our troops. the

President has now said we are going to leave some of the troops in Syria in order to keep the peace.

The frenetic nature of this foreign policy objectives or strategy, I suppose one would call it, is it in any way going to serve the goals—those one, two, three goals that we stated to remove troops, then not remove troops, and go back and forth, betray our allies in the process?

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentlelady's time has expired but if the witness would please answer the question.

Mr. JEFFREY. I would not use the word frenetic. But a rapidly changing set of circumstances, obviously, poses challenges to us. We will be able to handle them.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Certainly rapidly changing, I understand. But when we buoy back and forth that seems a little bit more frenetic than rapidly changing.

Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentlelady yields back.

The gentlelady from Pennsylvania, Ms. Houlahan, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, sir, and thank you to both of you guys for coming. I am going to kind of follow on piggyback on some of Ms. Spanberger's questions because I also was on the bipartisan trip that went over to Jordan, to Afghanistan, as well as to Turkey.

To a person, when we met with people, either State or military or the allies that we had—when we did ask that question of what keeps you up at night, kind of what scenario most concerns you, many people responded with the incursion of Turks—Turkey into Syria and we, literally, landed on the ground at about 6 a.m. on Monday to the news that we had made that decision—that our president had made that decision.

I guess my questions have to do with the decision processes because, sir, in your testimony you talked a little bit about the fact that you have daily conversations with Mr. Pompeo. You said that, in quote—I am trying to make sure that I get this right—you have “obsessive” reviews and discussions about this situation.

Do those reviews and obsessive discussions also include some of the State Department people whom we might have met with in the region?

Do they also include some of the military people whom we might have met within the region who had as many as four stars on their—and could not possibly have been that good of actors that they would not have belied this that this was coming?

Mr. JEFFREY. I personally review up to 300 emails and telegrams and telephone conversations a day with those people, and what they say goes into everything I pass on to both Secretary Pompeo and my White House counterparts.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So are you saying that those folks, when we left the ground on Sunday—that, I believe, would be the 7th—did know that this was happening?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. What I am saying is that their concerns about the potentially disastrous effects of a Turkish incursion were definitely passed on to the top and that is one reason why this Administration and this Congress acted in the extremely vigorous way it did, first of all, unsuccessfully to stop the incursion, and then sec-

ond with sanctions, with diplomacy, and ultimately a cease-fire negotiation did stop it.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So I would like to go back and just get some clarification, because when you say that there was no green light, I really do want to emphasize that it feels as though it was certainly an implicit green light since you did mention in your testimony today that had we kept those couple dozen—few dozen troops there that this would not necessarily have happened.

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, I am sorry. I either misspoke or I was misunderstood.

No. Those forces had no bearing on any Turkish decision to the best of my knowledge from any source of information that I have access to, and that is a lot. The Turks would have simply driven around them.

Ms. HOULAHAN. My next question has to do with what you mentioned in terms of some of the prisons and camps that are still being manned and managed by SDF.

What role do we feel as though that those folks have their—the real focus to be able to continue to man those when they have effectively been betrayed by us?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, remember, they are not doing that as a favor to us, Congresswoman. They are doing that to secure their own populations and to secure their own safety. They consider these people terrorists and criminals, and, as I said, they have done a really good job under fairly chaotic circumstances and keeping 99 percent of them under guard.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And do you believe that they will be able to continue to stay there?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am more confident today than I was 6 hours ago.

Ms. HOULAHAN. My last question has to do with your conversation about war crimes. It just really struck me that when Syria was conducting what amounted to war crimes using chemical weapons that there was a hue and outcry from our country and from our Administration about that.

I have not heard anything about that other than here, and I am just wondering what do we need to know other than what we already know for the American people to understand that the Turks are possibly committing war crimes as well?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, there was considerable—both administration public commentary and a great deal of media focus on the two incidents—the killing of a civilian Kurdish organization woman, Hevrin Khalaf, along the main east-west road, and then in either the same or a similar incident by the same opposition group supported by the Turks the killing of several people who were defenseless with their hands tied.

We are looking into that now. We immediately reached out to Ankara and asked for the highest level expiation of this and we are not going to give up on that.

But that is the incident that we are all focusing on right now. There have not been a lot of them. In Idlib, in contrast, when the Syrian government and its allies go in, we see dozens of these a day as a deliberate policy, not as a possible offshoot of an ill-disciplined element. We see it as deliberate policy approved from the top.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So I have run out of time. But I would definitely like to have us followup if we could get more detail on the crimes that you believe have been committed and what it is that we are doing to respond to them, and I appreciate your time, sir.

Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentlelady yields back.

I now recognize the gentleman from New Jersey, Mr. Malinowski, for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador, you have heard a lot from a number of my colleagues about our decision to, as many of us have argued to betray our Kurdish allies, and I fully agree with those concerns. I am not really going to add much because I think they have covered it.

I want to stress something that I think is perhaps even more important and that is that this decision by the President not only cleared the way for Turkey to attack the Kurds; it has effectively cleared the way for the Assad regime and the Russians to move back into an even larger area of northeastern Syria because, of course, the Kurds, feeling as if they could no longer depend on us for protection, turned immediately, understandably, to the Devil and made a deal to assure their long-term protection with the Russians and Assad.

There are about 3 million people living in this part of northeastern Syria. About 70 percent are Syrian Arab. Only about 25 percent are Kurdish, and let's be fair here. Turkey does have some scruples.

The Assad regime and the Russians do not. And so my question to you, and this has not gotten enough attention, is what is happening to civilians in areas that are being reoccupied by the regime?

What is likely to happen in the large population centers of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, which are full of people who oppose the Assad regime and who will be pursued and killed if the Russians following—and the regime following this deal are able to go back in there?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes. I seldom am complimentary to the Russians, but the Russian military police units that are involved in this and throughout Syria tend to treat the population fairly well.

But you are absolutely right. The Assad forces have a terrible reputation and we will watch that as closely as possible. Again, they are doing this in coordination with the SDF.

The SDF, of course, have a vested interest and a very sincere one in making sure that their people are not harmed by the regime. So we have to see how this works out.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Yes, but the SDF is largely a Kurdish militia. Their people are not necessarily the 70 percent who are not Kurdish, and let me just ask you—this is real-world stuff.

If the—the YPG is now dependent on the Russians and the regime for protection and if the Russians and the regime say to the YPG, we will only keep you secure from the Turks if you allow the regime to basically reconstitute itself as the dominant power in northeast Syria, what on earth is the YPG going to say? They are not going to fight the regime under those circumstances.

Mr. JEFFREY. We are looking into exactly what the circumstances are and what the relationship will be between the Russians, the regime, and the SDF after this agreement that was made.

So you are absolutely correct that that could be a danger.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, I am glad to hear you are looking into it. But I just saw the Statement the President made or I read the points. There was absolutely no reference to any of this.

The only thing he is saying in an effort, somehow, to reassure us is we have secured the oil. We secure the oil. We secure the oil.

I have not heard him say a darn thing about securing the people who live in these cities that we helped to liberate, who struggled against the Assad regime.

All he talks about is we secure the oil. The rest—and here, again, I am quoting him—is sand. Sand. Sand.

So can you assure me that we are going to use whatever tiny bit of influence we have left in this part of the Middle East that we have ceded to Russia to protect almost 3 million people who may now be subject to the yoke of the Assad regime?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, we will do everything we can both to achieve our objectives in Syria and to maintain the well-being to the extent we can of these people. But there are limits to what we will do with military force.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, of course. I mean, with 200 people or however many people we cannot do very much. We were able to do something because we are aligned with the SDF, which, until now, had no reason to be cutting deals with the Devil.

Now they have cut a deal with the Devil and it is hard for me to see how 200 or 100 or 300 troops can even secure these oil fields, as if that were our primary national interest, much less secure a population that is—well, they are not only human beings but this is the population from which ISIS recruits. Is that not correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. To some degree, yes. But whether it is 200 or 20,000, Congressman, the key thing is what is the legal mission they have been given.

If they have been given a legal mission to secure an area from everybody that is one thing. If they have been given a legal mission as they have been given, ultimately, from this body to pursue an al-Qaida offshoot in northeast Syria, that is a different set of authorities and they cannot use that authority serendipitously to go after anybody and everybody.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. OK. My time is up. But with permission of the chair, I also just want to ask you about the stabilization funding. I asked you about this the last time you were here. Hundreds of millions of dollars have not been obligated and it speaks to the—

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentleman's time has expired. If you want to give a brief response.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. the President just approved \$50 million for stabilization from that—most of it from that bucket of money, and \$4.5 million of additional stabilization funding for the white helmets.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize the gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Trone, for 5 minutes.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your service, Assistant Secretary Palmer and Ambassador Jeffrey, for being here today and all you have done for a long, long successful career. Thank you.

My complaint, really, is with—today is with the Administration, not you, Mr. Jeffrey. But it is clear that today's talking point that came out is there's no commitment to protect the Kurds.

I heard that a number of times today, and I would like to point out that I believe that we have a moral commitment. We had a moral commitment. We still do. We fought together with the Kurds. Congressman Watkins himself was over there. They helped fight our war. Eleven thousand of the Kurds died for us.

We are, clearly, on the same team and the fact that there was quote/unquote, "no written commitment" to protect the Kurds, I do not think anybody should care.

The other talking point that bothered me today was there is—and it came up again repeatedly—there is no green light. I thought my Republican colleague, Mr. Kinzinger, pointed out quite correctly there was a green light by the Administration. I would call it a very bright green light that came from the President. He gave the green light and now with today's announcement the dictator in Turkey has been given everything he ever wanted. It is all his.

So I am very disappointed. The rest of the world is disappointed, and God bless you in an impossible job you have been given to justify that.

Moving to a second subject—6.2 million people have been displaced in Syria, the largest internally displaced population in the world—some 160,000 just the last 2 weeks.

Turkey, NATO ally, once welcomed Syrian refugees. Now it's invading the neighboring country. Turkey, NATO ally, purchased Russian defensive equipment. Struck a deal with the Russians on the buffer zone.

Turkey, NATO ally, cooperating with Russia. As the Washington Post pointed out this morning, Russia's succeeding in accomplishing their end game.

The Assad regime is regaining control of more territory. He's propping up their authority—legitimacy. Russia has taken our military bases. Hundreds of ISIS detainees have escaped.

Ambassador, how is it possible that any of these developments serve the interest of the United States?

Mr. JEFFREY. The Turkish incursion and all of the things that have flown from it, and you summed them up pretty well, are really a disaster. They are tragic, and we have said this. We have said this in our Executive Order that we immediately rolled out. You have said it here in the Congress.

Just for the record, once again—and I will not even use green light—I will say this Administration did not encourage or in any way indicate to the Turks that it was OK for them to come in. We told them this is a bad idea.

Second, we did—

Mr. TRONE. I do not think we told them we are not going to stand for it. Mr. Putin told the Turks that he is not going to be comfortable with them coming into northeastern Syria. But we were not clear. We did not man up.

We did not stand up and say, no, you cannot come in there. Our advisors are there. Congressman Watkins was once there, and you cannot come in. He did not say that and that is why they came over. That was weakness.

Mr. JEFFREY. We did not say we would use military force to stop them. That is true. We said we would use every other tool in our quiver to do so or at least to try to do so from sanctions to things like a visit to the United States.

Mr. TRONE. And they did not care, and now they have their territory. The sanctions are gone and I am sure he will be over to hold hands with Mr. Trump at some point.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Palmer, we have not imposed sanctions for the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system. Now they are pushing the boundaries even more. Is this really acceptable for a NATO ally?

Mr. PALMER. Absolutely not, Congressman, and I would underscore at the very beginning of this that Turkey paid a significant price for the decision to acquire the S-400 system. They have been removed from the F-35 program.

We are talking both in terms of the delivery of physical aircraft and the unwinding of Turkish participation in the industrial part of F-35 production. That is a significant price that Turkey paid immediately upon acquiring the S-400 system.

We opposed Turkey's acquisition of this system. We made that very clear to the Turkish authorities at the very highest levels, up to and including President Erdogan. Turkey moved forward anyway against our advice, against our admonitions, and there were costs and consequences that were imposed immediately on Turkey and on the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Looking ahead to the issue of CAATSA, that is under review. There is a deliberative process in place. It is a complex question, particularly with respect to the implementation of sanctions against a NATO ally.

Secretary Pompeo has made clear that we will follow the law. We will implement CAATSA as necessary and appropriate. I cannot give you a time line on that but I can tell you that that issue is under deliberative review.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you both for your service.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize the gentlelady from Nevada, Ms. Titus, for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Ambassador, your valiant attempt to describe what this Administration has done through a very deliberative diplomatic efforts is in total contradiction to what the President himself said after this occurred.

He said even while Pence was on his way over there to do something—give away the store, I think—that there is just a lot of sand over there—that sometimes you got to let them fight like little kids before you step in and separate them.

The Kurds were no angels. They did not help us in World War II. Now is this not very contradictory to the image that you are trying to present today?

I think you are here because you are such a respected knowledgeable experienced Ambassador to clean up their mess, try to do damage control for what the President said and did with this whole atrocious situation.

Mr. JEFFREY. First of all, the President's public comments are his attempt to explain his decisions to the American people. That's a political decision. I do not have any real comment on how he goes about doing that. That is something that is in the political realm that every president, every political leaders, everyone who runs for office has to decide how you reach out.

I will say that having been around other presidents the comments that they make privately are often pretty blunt and very, very sharp toward certain issues. So I am not too surprised by the President making these comments.

Ms. TITUS. But if anybody heard those comments would they think that protecting the Kurds would be a priority for this person?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, it is what we do. As you said, the President made those comments. He also sent his vice president, his Secretary of State, and his national security advisor.

I think that is unique in our diplomatic history, out not to give away the store but to essentially tell Turkey by the end of the day we were there in Ankara. We needed a cease-fire or we would take further action. That was not giving away anything.

That was taking a very strong diplomatic position and that set the stage for the cease-fire that we got then and for the additional Russian ability to persuade the Turks not to go in in the other areas. The result is we have quiet along that entire front today and we are proud of that.

Ms. TITUS. Well, but you have said that Turkey reneged on previous deals and you do not think Turkey is a real trusted ally and it is not a good deal that they have gotten with the Russians.

So what makes you think they are going to live up to this deal? And it is not permanent. You also made that point.

Mr. JEFFREY. Right. It is pretty permanent. It is semi-permanent. It is as permanent as anything is in this diplomatic world.

I would say that, and this gets into Turkish through processes and decisionmaking—and Mr. Palmer follows this more closely than I—Turkey now knows in a way it did not know when it went in, even though we told them a thousand times—that it would suffer very strong non-military consequences if it took that action because it—we did take those very strong non-military actions including actions that are underway in this party.

That is a different situation and, thus, Turkey is well aware that if it violates the agreement with us or, for that matter, violates other agreements we have that we will lower the boom on them with sanctions.

These sanctions—the sanctions Executive Order is still in effect that we passed or that we issued on the 14th of October, and we are ready to do this again if necessary. So I think that that is a process of us learning what the Turks are capable of—going ahead despite our warnings—and then learning what we are capable of doing—that is, living up to our warnings to hit them really hard if they take that action.

Ms. TITUS. I think we should have known what the Turks are capable of. You can ask Armenia. Ask Greece. Ask Cyprus now. They are drilling in their territory. I am surprised we did not know what the Turks were capable of.

One brief thing, too, though. Erdogan has said that if Europe describes his current military operation as occupation, he is going to release 3.6 million refugees into Europe. That does not sound like he is going to be providing some good space for them to live if he is going to send them into Europe.

Is the U.S. ready to help with this refugee problem that they partially created? I know that we are lowering our cap on the number of refugees to some ridiculous number even from last year—I think from 30,000 to 18,000. Where is our responsibility there? Anybody?

Mr. PALMER. Congresswoman, we have seen the statements from President Erdogan and others regarding the threat to open the floodgate for refugees, either encourage or somehow push people in the direction of Europe, but have not seen any followup to that of any kind.

At this point, I would describe that position as rhetorical rather than an expression of Turkish policy.

Mr. JEFFREY. We have provided \$10 billion for Syrian refugees in Turkey and elsewhere, and that is the single largest contribution of any country and we have every intention of continuing. We just took a decision for another \$100 million-plus.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentlelady's time has expired.

The chair now recognizes the distinguished gentleman from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Mr. Keating, for 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you.

Thank you, Ambassador and Mr. Palmer.

Ambassador, you said earlier that we did not consult with our closest allies when the President made that phone call with President Erdogan. That is correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. I said we did not tell them in advance of the decision. We consulted with our allies and further on down—

Mr. KEATING. Oh, I am just saying they did not know that phone call was going to happen?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is correct.

Mr. KEATING. Now, fair to say that was a mistake?

Mr. JEFFREY. We often do not let our allies know in advance.

Mr. KEATING. Fair to say it was a mistake, Ambassador?

Mr. JEFFREY. No, it was—

Mr. KEATING. It was not a mistake?

Mr. JEFFREY. It was a mistake not to tell them before they learned about it from the media. That is always with diplomacy—

Mr. KEATING. Were their European—were there allies that had troops on the ground at that time?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is exactly the point. They should not learn about that from the media but from us.

Mr. KEATING. Well, I could not agree more. So you think that was a mistake?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am trying to get around enumerating the mistakes of my—

Mr. KEATING. Why—why—why are you trying to get around that it is a mistake when it is? Why? We have heard this from so many witnesses. The best thing to do when you make a mistake is recognize it and own up. Now—

Mr. JEFFREY. I have recognized it in one or another way five times today. I will recognize it a sixth time. It was not—

Mr. KEATING. OK. Let me—let me—it is a mistake. Fair to say it is a mistake? Can we do that at the end of the day?

Mr. JEFFREY. Can I say it is a mistake? It was a mistake.

Mr. KEATING. All right. Thank you.

Here is the—here is another concern I had. Even after that, did the President realize that was a mistake not consulting?

Mr. JEFFREY. You would have to ask him, Congressman. Now, the Administration is committed—

Mr. KEATING. You are his envoy. I just thought you might know. Here is—here is my other question. I mean he said later on—and I have been to Europe.

I have checked the path of foreign terrorist fighters, 5,000 or 6,000 that came from Europe, and what he said to Europe was you will have to figure the situation out and what you want to do with the captured ISIS fighters in their neighborhood. We are 7,000 miles away. We will crush ISIS if they come anywhere near us.

Now, do you think that if they are in Europe they are no threat to the U.S.?

Mr. JEFFREY. The President thinks they are a threat to the United States. Two, he has done an extraordinary job defeating the ISIS Caliphate. Three, he is justifiably extremely frustrated by European reactions.

Mr. KEATING. Is it a mistake—I am sorry, Ambassador. So little time. Is it mistake that he said that? Is that the way to treat our allies—they will have to figure it out?

Mr. JEFFREY. Our allies should start taking back their own citizens who have committed atrocious crimes as terrorists. That is the point he is trying to get across.

Mr. KEATING. Now, we have been told, took that—through reports that—we have been told by another ally, Iraq, that they do not want us to keep our troops there permanently. They want us out of there. Is that—are you informed of that? They want us out. Iraq even wants us out.

Mr. JEFFREY. We have a large number of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq working with Iraqis against ISIS. I have every certainty that we will be able to continue our forces there, is the guy who was the Ambassador the last time—

Mr. KEATING. So that—you do not agree with that statement that was reported that Iraqi officials have said, we do not want your troops here?

Mr. JEFFREY. Some Iraqi officials say that every day. What they were referring to specifically was the additional troops that we were putting into Iraq we had not yet explained to the government of Iraq as it is our job to do because of the urgency of the situation which troops would stay, what missions they were doing. Once we have finished with that, I am more confident that we will get a good answer.

Mr. KEATING. You were not consulted with the President's phone call. You were not on it. What did Secretary Pompeo say to you in terms of next steps after that phone call? You are the envoy. He is the secretary. What did he say after in relation to that phone call afterwards? What did he tell you going forward?

Mr. JEFFREY. Sure. Well, maintaining the confidentiality of internal government deliberations, our going forward was get this offensive halted.

Look at every means possible. Working with Congress on sanctions, our own sanctions with Treasury, diplomatic initiatives, Presidential initiatives. the President took two separate initiatives, three, counting sending Vice President Pence out.

Mr. KEATING. Last question that I had is this. I am sorry.

Can you sit there today and say that as a result of the President's phone call with President Erdogan that that did not affect in any way Erdogan's decisionmaking? Can you say that?

Mr. JEFFREY. I believe that Erdogan was—had taken the decision—in fact, I pretty much know he had taken the decision before the call. What the President tried to do was to put on the table all other elements—

Mr. KEATING. So the President—this is very enlightening because, evidently, people were aware that even some of the comments of the President himself would indicate that that phone call had a significant—the President took credit for the fact he is bringing the troops back. So he thought that phone call had an effect on Erdogan's decision.

Mr. JEFFREY. No—

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentleman's time has expired but the Ambassador may answer the question.

Mr. JEFFREY. No. The purpose of the President's conversation with Erdogan was to try to dissuade him from something that in the days before we had suddenly decided was not a possibility but a probability and then imminent.

the President then deployed various diplomatic tools—incentives, sticks and carrots, if you will—in an effort to get Erdogan not to do that.

He also made clear when Erdogan said he would do it anyway we would not support it in any way. We did not believe in this. We were against it and we would not act militarily—

Mr. KEATING. Pretty ineffective result.

I yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. The gentleman yields back.

I recognize the gentlelady from Minnesota, Ms. Omar, for 5 minutes.

Ms. OMAR. Thank you, Chairman. It is very clear that we are here for one reason and one reason only today. Three weeks ago, President Trump held a phone call with the Turkish president, Recep Erdogan, during which by his own admission he gave Turkey the green light to invade Syria and endanger the Kurdish people. This one action set of a cascade of the destabilising events that have endangered U.S. national security, the stability of the Middle East and the world.

Turkish troops have invaded northern Syria. More than 100,000 people are displaced and hundreds of ISIS supporters have es-

aped. And Turkey and Turkish-backed militias have been accused of atrocities against the Kurds including the alleged use of chemical weapons.

The Trump Administration bragged about a cease-fire, though Turkey has said their operation is likely to continue. These actions are indefensible.

I believe that, as in any conflict in the world, our response as a committee charged with overseeing this Administration's foreign policy must be guided by our values—respect for human rights, self-determination, and human dignity for all involved.

What is missing here in all the conversations about great power competition and about diplomatic norms and about sanctions is that the most important and fundamental fact of what is happening.

This is a question in the end of human rights and democracy. It is a question of whether Kurds have the right to exist as Kurds. We need to center the rights and dignity of human beings. We need to center the rights and dignity of the Kurdish people as Kurdish people.

We have allowed this and we need to talk about accountability. Accountability does not mean canceling and freezing bank account. It does not mean crippling the Turkish economy, enacting mass punishment on populations that did not choose this.

It means thinking seriously about justice for these atrocities. It means thinking seriously about how we stop arming and supporting brutal regimes in the name of our national interest.

It means looking with clear eyes at foreign policy that threatens entire groups of people as expendable tools to be used and then discarded if we believe it serves our narrowly defined interests.

It means not using the lives and suffering of human beings half-way around the world, suffering that we have permitted, that we have encouraged as a card we play in our domestic political arguments.

So, Ambassador, if it turns out that the Turkey or Turkish-backed forces have used chemical weapons on civilians, what responsibilities does that trigger for the United States?

Mr. JEFFREY. Again, we have taken a position with the Assad regime on using chemical weapons. We are opposed to it. We made an announcement—Secretary Pompeo, at the U.N. General Assembly—now about a month ago on the latest use of it—chlorine by the Assad forces near Idlib.

We are looking into the one accusation that was made—the use of white phosphorus which, under some circumstances, is a legitimate military ordnance. Under other circumstances it is not. You have to look at the circumstances and that is what we are doing now.

Ms. OMAR. When we had the hearing on Syria I talked about how I felt Turkey and Russia were guiding our policy in Syria and how that was alarming to me.

I just wanted to know whether you had input on the letter the President sent to President Erdogan on October 9th.

Mr. JEFFREY. I was involved in receiving the letter from General Mazloum, the commander of the SDF, that the President then

passed on to President Erdogan, and I was involved in the general—this is the problem of consultations.

We consult with the secretary, the secretary with the President all of the time on a variety of issues. This president and other presidents then take decisions based upon the sum of all of that—instincts, gut feelings, and everything else—that is how it works. And that produced that letter.

Ms. OMAR. Yes. I wish that more of you had direct input onto that letter because I think it is fair to say that the letter is humiliating to the United States. I know you will not be able to agree with that publicly but it is. Both of you know there is diplomacy—there is art to diplomacy and, quote, “Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool,” is not art. It is a national embarrassment and it is a disgrace.

Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. CICILLINE. The gentlelady yields back.

I now recognize the distinguished gentleman from the Commonwealth of Virginia, Mr. Connolly, for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome, Mr. Ambassador, Mr. Palmer.

Mr. Ambassador, you have agreed that the Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria is a disaster and has further compromised U.S. national security interests.

Is that correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. It was heading that way, that is—sure.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So we have 176,000 civilians so far displaced, hundreds killed, potential war crimes committed. U.S. and allied efforts to secure an enduring defeat of ISIS perhaps put in jeopardy and prompted the SDF to align with ISIS and Assad—not ISIS, excuse me—Assad and Russia to protect themselves from Turkey, and U.S. credibility damaged worldwide with our allies.

Would that be a fair summary of the consequences?

Mr. JEFFREY. Possibly a bit harsher than I would put it.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, let me ask you this. Was the President advised, therefore, not to withdraw U.S. troops, thus avoiding both the Turkish invasion from Turkey and the move from the south by SDF and Assad?

Mr. JEFFREY. I will try again on this one, Congressman.

the President received a whole variety of advice on troop presence in Syria, troop presence in Afghanistan, and troop presence in certain other areas where internal conflicts make our presence less than obvious, such as in Europe and in South Korea. That is the job of any president. This one takes that particular issue very seriously, as they should.

But that is separate from—a decision on withdrawing troops or not withdrawing troops is separate from Erdogan’s decision to go in. The Turkish incursion was a decision taken by the President of Turkey.

It was not a decision he took because we told him he could or that we would not oppose him. He knew we would not oppose him because we had never told him we would oppose nor this Administration nor the last one.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Ambassador—Mr. Ambassador, there is, however a sequence. Mr. Erdogan, despite many, many threats, has

not undertaken this kind of incursion until the President of the United States informed him that we were going to withdraw our troops and stop providing protection to the Kurdish fighters and Kurdish villages. Is that not correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is totally incorrect.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Incorrect?

Mr. JEFFREY. Incorrect, and I have done this for 2 days. I will do it again. Those troops were not there to protect the Kurds from the Turks. It is that simple.

Mr. CONNOLLY. No, that is not what I am asking. I am asking is there a connection—the rest of the world sees it—between our decision to withdraw and the Turkish decision to cross the border and begin engaging in what is euphemistically called kinetic activity—combat—with our Kurdish allies?

Mr. JEFFREY. Congressman, in looking at thousands of pieces of information and intelligence, I have seen no indication that that was a factor in the Turkish decision to come across.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Really?

Mr. JEFFREY. Really.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So your contention, given your portfolio, is that the Turks were prepared to cross the border and engage in combat even if it required going through U.S. troops?

Mr. CICILLINE. Please put your microphone on.

Mr. JEFFREY. There were two outposts up there that did not have the mission of stopping the Turks or anything else other than observing fire on both sides.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Did they have—did they de facto have deterrent value?

Mr. JEFFREY. Absolutely not. In fact—

Mr. CONNOLLY. So why did not the Turks go in sooner? How is it just coincidentally the Turks decided to go in only after the conversation between our president and President Erdogan of Turkey?

Mr. JEFFREY. Right, but the President—this is—the conversation that the President had with Erdogan, again, I was briefed on how it went down but not the specifics. But my understanding is, and it is—I think it is accurate—the President only said after he could not persuade Erdogan not to come in that, obviously, our troops would be out of the way because like any other president in a situation like that, correctly and importantly he does have to think about the safety of our troops.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So is it your contention that where we have troops in other hot spots—for example, troops in Korea—South Korea—the President ought to be prepared to withdraw those in the event Kim Jong-un threatens an invasion of the south or, for that matter, Putin decides he wants to risk triggering Article 5 of NATO and he wants to incur—he wants to introduce troops where we have troops in NATO-allied countries?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, I—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Your position is they are not there for that value and they could and should be withdrawn to avoid harm's way?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. I have been—I am feeling emotional in answering what is a very understandable question. But however curious it may appear, there's a fundamental difference that we do not make clear as a country, let alone an administration, between put-

ting troops under treaty obligations to defend territory and people against somebody else and the troops that we had in northeast Syria fighting ISIS.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Ambassador, there is—I agree—a difference between a treaty and not having a treaty. But there's also a matter of national honor and the word of a great country.

We have fought side by side with our Kurdish allies who were successful—in fact, the only ally group in Syria that were successful in destroying ISIS and its Caliphate, and the abandonment of the Kurds is one of the most shameful things I have seen in over 40 years of association with American foreign policy.

And you are an honorable man, but you are defending something that lacks honor and I feel bad for you. I feel bad for your career because that is no way to end an honorable career—defending the indefensible.

Mr. JEFFREY. I insist on a response to this.

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes. The gentleman's time has expired but the Ambassador may respond.

Mr. CONNOLLY. It is only fair to allow the Ambassador to respond.

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes, of course.

Mr. JEFFREY. All right. First of all, I know of no responsible American official who has the authority to make such commitments including Ash Carter, who went on the record on Sunday, as did Tony Thomas, whoever told our SDF allies that we would use military force to protect them against Turkey—in fact, knowing that the Turks had a major and understandable problem with the PKK links of the SDF, we, again, very often made the point that there had to be a political reconciliation of one sort or another and we committed to try to do that, which we did to.

In fact, they did that. Members of the SDF or the parent organization of the SDF had been in Turkey up to 2015. We also commit—where we committed was that we would do everything short of military force to try to hold off a Turkish incursion or Turkish military action against them. That includes the sanctions that we warned the Turks about. That includes diplomatic action.

That includes the cease-fire we negotiated. But nobody in a position of authority that I know of, and whoever it is this committee should call forth and have him or her explain on what basis he or she did that, ever told the Kurds that we would protect them militarily against Turkey.

And it is not just by assumption that they made that because we were very explicit, at least I was, for the last 14 months saying we would not do that.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I know my time has expired and I am the last questioner, apparently, besides yourself.

Mr. CICILLINE. No, I am.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Besides yourself. May I just ask one followup to that?

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes, certainly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And is it your testimony that it is your understanding the President of the United States told President

Erdogan, therefore, do not do it even though we are not going to fight?

Mr. JEFFREY. It is my understanding that he told Erdogan not to do it and, certainly, all the rest of us did and it is my understanding that the President made that clear as well.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Connolly.

I now recognize myself. Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I share the sentiment of all of my colleagues on this committee that this decision was—by the President was immoral, reckless, and undermined the American leadership in the world and, most significantly, made us less safe.

So I want to start, Ambassador Jeffrey. You are the special representative for Syria engagement and the special envoy to the global coalition to defeat ISIS.

The reason we create special envoys is because we want someone who has special expertise, a lot of knowledge about a particularly complicated issue, and that would be a resource in informing policy in that region, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Exactly.

Mr. CICILLINE. And you are telling us that you were not—you were not aware of the decision of the President prior to his making it to withdraw American troops from Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. I was aware that the President—

Mr. CICILLINE. Let me rephrase it. You were not consulted by the President to get your best thinking on this?

Mr. JEFFREY. I was consulted by the President through Secretary Pompeo, literally, dozens of times in the weeks and months before.

Mr. CICILLINE. By the decision that was made by the President after speaking with President Erdogan, before that decision was executed were you consulted?

Mr. JEFFREY. Very, very frequently by, again—

Mr. CICILLINE. About American troop withdrawals from Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. All of the time by Secretary Pompeo and people in the White House. Sure.

Mr. CICILLINE. And I presume you argued against it?

Mr. JEFFREY. I cannot indicate internal U.S. Government deliberations. But I am generally in favor of our keeping troops on the ground when it makes sense.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. And you said—and in this case it made sense, I take it?

Mr. JEFFREY. That would be getting into private—

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. You say in your written testimony that President Erdogan had a conversation with President Trump on the phone and you say that in that call he indicated that the—Turkey intended to move forward with this long-planned operation into Syria.

Now, we have had American troops in this place for 5 years and the only thing that changed in those 5 years that caused Turkey to actually execute this was the withdrawal of American troops?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is wrong.

Mr. CICILLINE. But what else changed?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. No. The—

Mr. CICILLINE. So for 5 years President Erdogan has clamored that he wanted to do this but he did not do it, and he did not do it in part, you would agree, because of the presence of American troops. Is that fair to say?

Mr. JEFFREY. No. No, absolutely not.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. Well, let me ask you specifically about the phone call then. In that phone call, he was told clearly by the President—this is your testimony, Ambassador—that U.S. armed forces would not support or be involved—well, good thing—I mean, that is a really strong statement—we actually will not help you kill our allies who helped us defeat ISIS—that is a strong statement from the President. And then he said, ah, and the U.S. will not endorse those actions.

I should hope not. But you never say he—that the United States would oppose it and would, in fact, do everything we can to prevent it from happening and you said just now, our troops would be out of the way.

So you are saying that when President Erdogan said we are going forward, President Trump said, well, I cannot endorse it. We are not going to help you. But we will get our troops out of the way.

Is that your testimony?

Mr. JEFFREY. the President said all of that. But the—I think the context is incorrect. He was not saying our troops who are protecting the Kurds from you will get out of the way. the President said, we have got too little—I think you meant the two little detachments up there—they will be out of the way so do not do anything bad to them.

Mr. CICILLINE. So in that conversation where the President said, we will not endorse it, we will not support your actions, and our troops will get out of the way—it was after that phone call and those representations were made that Turkey began its invasion and the slaughter of the Kurds.

Mr. JEFFREY. Turkey had taken its decision before the phone call.

Mr. CICILLINE. It is after that conversation that they executed it. I know you said they made a decision. But they executed it, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is true.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. And it is been reported that yesterday Russia and Turkey agreed to a plan to push Kurdish fighters from a wide swathe of territory just south of Turkey's border, cementing Vladimir Putin's preeminent role in Syria as U.S. troops depart and American influence wanes.

Do you agree with that assessment? Fair assessment?

Mr. JEFFREY. Not completely.

Mr. CICILLINE. Well, it, clearly, leaves Turkey and Russia in control of territory formerly held by Kurdish fighters?

Mr. JEFFREY. That is true.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. And it certainly cements Vladimir Putin's very significant role in Syria now, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Putin has long played a very prominent role in Syria and he thinks—he sees this as playing an even more prominent role.

Mr. CICILLINE. Well, you do—you do as well, as an expert in the region, do not you?

Mr. JEFFREY. I am very troubled by this agreement.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. Because it increases the role of Turkey—I am sorry, the role of Turkey and Russia both in this region, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Oh, there are many reasons to be troubled. I disagree.

Mr. CICILLINE. But that is two of them at least, right?

Mr. JEFFREY. Probably.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. You also said that you thought we could continue our relationship with SDF. I hope that is true, although it is hard to imagine that they would have much confidence that they can rely on the United States in light of our conduct and the notion that because there was not an explicit promise—you know, sometimes in international affairs, as you know better than anyone in this room, when you have people who have acted on your behalf in your interest at considerable sacrifice—more than 10,000 fighters—really, really skilled fighters from the Kurdish people that have helped us defeat ISIS, that does not require a written contract—that there would be an expectation that we would acknowledge that if we expect people to act in American interests in the future.

So I hope that they will continue to work with us, although I can certainly understand if they decided not to.

Ambassador Jeffrey, you are familiar with the Syria Study Group report and recommendations, correct?

Mr. JEFFREY. Yes, I am.

Mr. CICILLINE. We had a hearing last week with to co-chairs of that group and they gave us detailed readouts of how the President's decision will impact our ability to succeed in Syria and they painted a picture that was not very bright.

So I want to talk about some of the assessments that were contained in that report and get your feedback.

One of their assessments was that the liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States, and do you believe that the decision to withdraw has made it easier or harder to contain ISIS inside of Syria?

Mr. JEFFREY. Well, again, the President this morning has said that he is not withdrawing all of the troops. Generally speaking, withdrawing troops from a situation, be it Iraq in 2011, be it Syria in 2019, does not enhance our ability to deal with internal threats.

Mr. CICILLINE. But it is complicated by the fact that the President also said it is Russia and Turkey's problem to contain ISIS, did not he?

Mr. JEFFREY. I believe at one point he may have said that.

Mr. CICILLINE. That is not—is that—is that the policy of the Administration?

Mr. JEFFREY. We have an agreement with the Turks as part of the cease-fire agreements to work with us in containing ISIS and the Turks actually, in the area around al-Bab and Jarabulus, did that quite successfully in 2016.

The Russians at times have been successful against ISIS in Palmyra, for example. So it is at least theoretically possible.

Mr. CICILLINE. Ambassador Jeffrey, you said you were not on the telephone call with—between the President—President Erdogan

and President Trump. You have testified a lot about the call. Have you seen a readout of the call?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have been briefed extensively on the call.

Mr. CICILLINE. By whom?

Mr. JEFFREY. By members of the Administration who were on the call.

Mr. CICILLINE. Have you seen a transcript of the call?

Mr. JEFFREY. I have not.

Mr. CICILLINE. You were—then made reference to a letter that was subsequently sent 3 days later—or Presidential message. Did you deliver that message?

Mr. JEFFREY. I delivered a message that the President had cleared to the Turkish leadership to President Erdogan that if they did not accept a cease-fire that we were trying to negotiate very quickly we had good information that the SDF would turn to the Russians and the Syrians so that, therefore, they could get a cease-fire with us and minimize the damage or they would wind up being faced with more Russian and Syrian government involvement in their area, which is exactly what happened. They did not listen to us and they now have a more difficult situation from the Turkish standpoint.

Mr. CICILLINE. And, Ambassador, did you participate in the preparation of that—I do not even know how to describe it—the letter the President wrote that—the only thing that was missing it maybe it shouldn't have been written in crayon—did you participate in the drafting of that letter to President Erdogan from President Trump—do not be a tough guy—do not be a fool?

Mr. JEFFREY. We provided input to that informed, as we would put it diplomatically, the President's decision. I would just note that in the wake of that letter, while President Erdogan referred to it publicly in a rather dismissive way—I will throw it in the wastebasket—he then spent 5 hours with President Trump's emissary, negotiated an agreement, and had a very positive call with President Trump the next day, which I was on.

So whatever we say about the letter, the letter turned out to be a pretty effective tool of diplomacy.

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes. Ambassador Jeffrey, I will just end with this.

I hope that you hear from this committee a bipartisan sense of disgust at the policy of the President—that it has harmed our standing in the world and has betrayed an important ally to the United States, which undermines our ability and our leadership around the world.

It has created a greater opportunity for ISIS to reconstitute and impose a real threat to the United States. And although all of this can be attributed to the Turkish invasion, you will not convince me and many members of this committee that that was precipitated by the President's conversation with Erdogan and not being forceful enough about keeping U.S. troops in that region, and as a consequence of that, that is what changed. Five years had passed. Erdogan had threatened that but had never done it.

But when the President said, we will get out of your way—I cannot condone it—it was an invitation to do it and that undermined national security interests of this country. It was a dumb idea for the President to do it.

It has wrought chaos to the region and undermined the interests of our country and I hope you will take that back in as clearly terms as you can as the Administration and Congress tries to figure out how do we mitigate the damage that this horrific decision has wrought upon us and the world.

And with that, the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:26 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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

Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), Chairman

October 23, 2019

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 in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Wednesday, October 23, 2019

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: The Betrayal of our Syrian Kurdish Partners: How Will American Foreign Policy and Leadership Recover?

WITNESSES: The Honorable James F. Jeffrey
Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS
U.S. Department of State

Mr. Matthew Palmer
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U.S. Department of State

By Direction of the Chairman

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FULL COMMITTEE ATTENDANCE

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	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
X	Albio Sires, NJ
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X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
X	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
	Joaquin Castro, TX
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X	Dean Phillips, MN
X	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	David Trone, MD
X	Jim Costa, CA
	Juan Vargas, CA
X	Vicente Gonzalez, TX
X	Sheila Jackson Lee, TX

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X	Steve Chabot, OH
X	Joe Wilson, SC
	Scott Perry, PA
X	Ted Yoho, FL
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X	Lee Zeldin, NY
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X	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
	Francis Rooney, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
X	John Curtis, UT
X	Ken Buck, CO
	Ron Wright, TX
X	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Greg Pence, IN
X	Steve Watkins, KS
X	Michael Guest, MS

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Chairman Eliot L. Engel
House Foreign Affairs Committee
October 23, 2019**

Question:

There have been multiple reports of Turkish military use of white phosphorous against Syrian civilians by media organizations as well as NGOs. You stated that the State Department is "looking into" such reports. Please provide an update in writing (with classified annex if necessary) on such efforts including a determination as to if white phosphorous was used by Turkish personnel, an assessment of the consequences on Syrians (including Syrian civilians), and related follow-on actions with the Turkish government.

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

Please provide a thorough assessment of violence committed by Turkish military units in Northeast Syria against Syrian civilians including Syrian Kurds following October 6th.

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

(In classified form if necessary) How many U.S. government personnel are currently in Syria? Are there any plans for the State Department START Forward team to re-engage?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

(In classified form if necessary) What is the State Department's best estimate on the number of ISIS detainees that have escaped SDF custody? Where have they fled to and where are they currently operating, to the best of our knowledge? What efforts exist to track and monitor such individuals?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Steve Chabot
House Foreign Affairs Committee
October 23, 2019**

Question:

While everyone is focused on the conflict in Syria's northeast, Idlib province—one of the last areas still outside Assad's control—is a slow-motion massacre. Since April, the Assad regime and Russia have targeted schools, markets, and hospitals, killing at least 1,000 civilians. 3 million people, most of them internally displaced from other parts of the country, would be forced to flee should Assad invade. What steps can the United States take to ensure that these civilians are protected from Assad and the Russians?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Dina Titus
House Foreign Affairs Committee
October 23, 2019**

Question:

You said throughout the hearing today that if we had left our troops in northeastern Syria, Turkey would not have contemplated killing them, they just would have bypassed our forces. If this is the case and our troops were not in danger by a Turkish incursion, why did the President remove them? Why would we put the detainment of ISIS fighters in jeopardy, allow Russia to take over abandoned U.S. military bases, and allow adversaries to fill a power vacuum if our troops were not in danger if they had stayed?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Representative Michael Guest
House Foreign Affairs Committee
October 23, 2019**

Question:

President Erdogan has made his intentions to clear the “safe zone” and use it as a region to host more than 3 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey. With your knowledge of the region:

With the potential of Turkey moving a portion of their current Syrian refugee population in the “safe zone” how do we see countries like Jordan and Lebanon reacting?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

With refugee numbers as a much larger percentage of Jordan and Lebanon’s population, have they seemed to be attracted to the idea of also moving their refugee populations into the same “safe zone” that Turkey is establishing?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

SDF forces have been controlling the ISIS detention centers in the region but have reportedly left them unguarded to move North in wake of the Turkish invasion. There has also been reports of Turkish airstrikes near the detention centers in order to promote or facilitate escapes. Therefore:

How much visibility does we have on the SDF-controlled detention centers holding suspected ISIS fighters?

Answer:

Ambassador Jeffrey did not submit a response in time for printing.