



**Written Statement for
Committee on Oversight and Reform**

Subcommittee on National Security Hearing on
“The Trump Administration’s Syria Policy:
Perspectives from the Field”

By Ms. Emerita Torres
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Wednesday, 23 October, 2019

Testimony to be presented before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security Hearing on “The Trump Administration’s Syria Policy: Perspectives from the Field ” on Wednesday, October 23, 2019.



About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization

About Emerita Torres

Emerita Torres is the Director of Policy Research and Programs at The Soufan Center. She has over a decade of experience in the federal government as a national security expert, where she has developed and coordinated U.S. policy on human rights, counterterrorism, conflict prevention, and transnational organized crime.



The Trump Administration's Syria Policy: Perspectives from the Field

Testimony of Ms. Emerita Torres,
Director of Policy Research and Programs
The Soufan Center

Before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform,
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Wednesday, October 23, 2019

Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, distinguished members: Thank you for hearing my testimony today.

I will outline how The Soufan Center perceives the current situation in northern Syria and the implications of this Syria policy reversal as it relates to three critical areas: (1) the resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); (2) the geopolitical consequences of U.S. waning influence in Syria; and (3) the loss of U.S. credibility with allies and partners; I conclude with policy recommendations to consider moving forward.

Current Situation

The President's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria, which allowed for a Turkish military invasion along the Syrian-Turkish border, is a foreign policy disaster that has plunged Syria into further chaos. Turkey has conducted airstrikes in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, along with artillery bombardments and a ground invasion. The situation is fluid and accurate reporting has been inconsistent. Multiple civilian deaths have already been reported and will inevitably increase.

Today, Turkish troops, allied Syrian rebel groups, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and soldiers belonging to both Bashar al-Assad and Russia are now all present in the border area. Some 300,000 people have been displaced by Turkey's offensive and 120 civilians have been



killed, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.¹ Turkish-backed militias have summarily executed several civilians, including a female Kurdish politician.²

Ankara has long viewed Kurdish groups as a direct threat to Turkey and President Erdogan has repeatedly warned the United States that Turkey would not tolerate any Kurdish military presence on its southern border. Turkey views any Kurdish entity, including The People's Protection Units (YPG) – the main Kurdish armed group in Syria - as part of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group has been in conflict with the Turkish government for nearly three decades and is considered a terrorist group by Turkey and the United States. In 2015, the YPG formed an alliance with Arab and ethnic Turkmen militias in the region, creating the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), also known as the Kurdish forces.³ The Kurdish forces have been the United States' most trusted and reliable local ally in fighting ISIS over the last five years. The Kurds lost 11,000 fighters in battle and have taken up the immense responsibility of guarding nearly 12,000 ISIS fighters in prisons and over 100,000 individuals in displacement camps in Syria. ⁴The presence of U.S. troops on the border, even if small in number, was intended to both support the Kurds as they engaged in fighting ISIS and to deter Turkish attacks on the SDF. Once those U.S. troops were withdrawn, Turkey wasted little time in launching its long-desired offensive, which has catapulted Syria into chaos and created the conditions for irreparable damage, in three particular ways.

Resurgence of ISIS

ISIS remains a terrorist threat. An Inspector General Report from the U.S. Department of Defense on Operation Inherent Resolve released in August 2019 concluded that ISIS was resurging in Syria and solidifying its capabilities to wage a low-level but sustainable insurgency in Iraq.⁵ While the fall of Baghouz in March 2019 was considered the end of the physical caliphate,

¹ McKernan, Bethan. "Shifting frontlines intensify Syria's humanitarian crisis." The Guardian. October 17, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/17/shifting-frontlines-syria-leave-aid-agencies-struggling-respond>

² Chulov, Martin and Rasool, Mohammed. "Kurdish politician among nine civilians shot dead by pro-Turkey forces in Syria". The Guardian. October 13, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/female-kurdish-politician-among-nine-civilians-killed-by-pro-turkey-forces-in-syria-observers-say>

³ Maizland, Lindsay. "Who's who in Northern Syria." The Council on Foreign Relations. October 11, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whos-who-northern-syria>

⁴ Intelbrief: Turkey Attacks Kurdish Positions in Syria." The Soufan Center. October 10, 2019. <http://www.soufangroup.com/intelbrief-turkey-attacks-kurdish-positions-in-syria/>

⁵ Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress. April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019. https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/q3fy2019_leadig_oir_report.pdf



“residual” remnants of ISIS still exist throughout Iraq and Syria, including sleeper cells. The group also maintains a global footprint through a bevy of franchise and affiliate groups.

The decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, combined with the Turkish military invasion against the Kurds, is a gift to the already resurging ISIS. The group’s social media arm has repeatedly mocked the Syrian Democratic Forces over the last week, calling it an abandoned American ally. Leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, urged ISIS followers to start freeing jihadists and their families from detention camps in Syria and Iraq in an attempt to replay its infamous ‘Breaking the Walls’ campaign. ISIS websites reported 27 attempted attacks against the SDF in the week following the invasion, compared with an average of 10 attacks over each of the previous three weeks, according to a tally by SITE.⁶

We should be gravely concerned about the security and conditions of ISIS prisons and camps where ISIS-affiliated families, women, and children are being held. Over 10,000 ISIS fighters, at least 2,000 of them foreign nationals, are being held in several SDF-secured prisons.⁷ The SDF has made it clear to their U.S. counterparts and Western allies repeatedly and long before the withdrawal of U.S. troops that it did not have the capacity to detain these fighters indefinitely. Following the Turkish invasion, the SDF have been departing their positions to engage in battle with Turkish soldiers and their proxies - leaving the prisons with minimal to no security. Last week, Iraq’s defense minister acknowledged that a number of ISIS militants have been able to escape detention in Syria and cross into Iraq. The U.S.-Turkey agreement outsourced the issues of guarding ISIS prisons and camps to Turkey, but it included no plan for how the Turks would take over guarding the prisons the SDF will likely need to vacate if they will soon be Turkish-controlled territories. And now that the United States has abandoned the Kurds, why would we expect the Kurds to do us any more favors? It would be foolish to assume local partners would want to work with United States after this betrayal. The Kurds have now found a new ally in Damascus.

On October 22, Russia agreed to assist Turkey in driving out Kurdish militias from the “safe zone” in northeastern Syria, and Turkey President Erdogan agreed to suspend military action against the Kurds to allow them to evacuate the area. While much of this agreement is still being studied and assessed, it does not appear to address the situation of the prisons and camps.

⁶Mekhennet, Souad and Warrick, Joby. ISIS eyes breakout opportunity as Turkish forces batter Kurds.” Washington Post. October, 17, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/isis-eyes-breakout-opportunity-as-turkish-forces-batter-us-allied-kurds/2019/10/17/b68c6358-f048-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732_story.html

⁷ Townsend, Mark. Kurdish Forces in Syria will no longer prioritise guarding prisons.” The Guardian. October 12, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/12/kurdish-forces-syria-isis-prisons-turkish-offensive>



According to Belgian authorities, five of their citizens, three women and two men, have escaped from the SDF-controlled camps and prisons.⁸ Over 800 people affiliated with ISIS, largely women and children, have escaped the Ain Issa camp in northern Syria, about 32 kilometers from the Turkish border.⁹

In al Hol camp, close to 70,000 people affiliated with ISIS, largely women and children, are living in deplorable conditions, with hundreds of children dying from malnutrition and disease. Moreover, the camps are proving to be a breeding ground for ISIS, as pro-ISIS sympathizers, including women, are radicalizing others and organizing in the camp. While the majority of the individuals in the camp are Iraqi and Syrian, a significant number of the individuals are foreigners. The international community bears responsibility for failing to resolve the situation in al Hol, as there remains no long-term strategy for reintegrating and repatriating the thousands of individuals housed there.¹⁰ There is little to no political will or public support to repatriate foreign fighters, but leaving them in the camps, especially amid the ongoing fighting, potential for ISIS radicalization, and uncertain future of the security of these locations, is a risk not worth taking and one that can easily backfire.

Taken together, the overcrowding, lack of security, and squalid conditions of these camps, are a recipe for disaster. This is a movie we have seen before, and we already know how it ends. During the surge in Iraq, tens of thousands of Iraqis were held in U.S. detention centers, including in Camp Bucca.¹¹ In these overcrowded camps the next iteration of terror emerged. Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, these prisoners became the future foot soldiers of ISIS. The group's nascent leadership engineered the aforementioned 'Breaking the Walls' campaign that freed thousands of fighters. As with nearly every aspect of the cyclical ebb and flow of terrorism and counterterrorism, the issue of overcrowded detention centers spawning another wave of terror is relevant once again: this time in Syria.

⁸ Blenkinsop, Philip. "Two Belgian Islamic State Militants Escape Camp in North Syria: Belgium." U.S. News and World Report. October 16, 2019. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2019-10-16/two-belgian-islamic-state-militants-escape-camp-in-north-syria-belgium>.

⁹ "Hundreds of ISIL prisoners escape Syrian camp, Kurds say." AlJazeera. October 13, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/hundreds-isil-prisoners-escape-syrian-camp-kurds-191013141044768.html>

¹⁰ Clarke, Colin. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Neglect and Indifference. Foreign Policy Research Institute. September 19, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/09/the-terrorist-threat-posed-by-neglect-and-indifference/>

¹¹ Intelbrief: Avoiding the Next Camp Bucca. The Soufan Center. March 21, 2019. <http://www.soufangroup.com/intelbrief-avoiding-the-next-camp-bucca/>



In an open letter to Western Governments co-signed by several prominent leaders in the American national security community, including by our organization's Founder, Ali Soufan, experts called on Western nations to take back their fighters and bring them to justice, while also repatriating the women and children exposed to horrid conditions in these camps who remain increasingly susceptible to radicalization. Today, we find ourselves facing a crisis in these camps and prisons that could have been avoided.

ISIS maintains so-called *wilayats* (provinces) from Nigeria to Afghanistan to Indonesia, and across the Middle East.¹² Their attacks have killed thousands of people. ISIS has planned or inspired heinous terrorist attacks around the world, including in the United States, from Orlando, Florida to San Bernardino, California. ISIS' reach and ability to organize should not be underestimated, and the risk of prison and camp escapes must be taken seriously.¹³

U.S. Waning Influence and Geopolitical Consequences

The last two weeks of fighting and inchoate policymaking has manifested into an open invitation for Russia's leadership in Syria. Russia has carefully inserted itself overtime into the Syria conflict and is now in the position to serve as the powerbroker among Syria, Turkey, the Kurds and Iran.

As the United States continues its hasty withdrawal from Syria, Russia has consolidated immense leverage in the country. Since 2015, Russia has provided critical military support for the Assad regime, including most notably Russian air assets. At various points throughout the conflict, Russia's airpower has shifted the balance of power in favor of the regime, helping Assad regain critical territory. While doing so, Russia has committed numerous war crimes by deliberately bombing civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. By assisting the Assad regime, Russia ensures its access to the Mediterranean Sea via its naval base at Tartus; it also operates a sizable air base in Latakia. These are important locations from which Russia can continue to project its power in Syria and the broader Middle East.

Russia has solidified its position as one of the most significant international actors in the Middle East in recent years, both a result of President Vladimir Putin's push to increase his country's role there and the simultaneous decline in U.S. influence. In recent weeks, President Putin has

¹²Clarke, Colin. *Beyond the Caliphate: The Islamic State and the Future of the Terrorist Diaspora*. Medford, MA. Polity Press. 2019.

¹³ Clarke, Colin. "What Does the Islamic State's Organisational Restructuring Tell Us?" International Center for Counter-Terrorism, the Hague. June 3, 2019. <https://icct.nl/publication/what-does-the-islamic-states-organisational-restructuring-tell-us/>



traveled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has met with Turkish President Erdogan, and has spoken with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Unlike the United States, Russia maintains working relationships with nearly every actor involved in Syria, affording Moscow a level of influence that no other country has been able to achieve throughout the eight-year long civil war.

Besides Russia, Iran's position in Syria and the Middle East is strengthened as a result of the U.S. withdrawal of troops. The vacuum created by the withdrawal leaves space for Iran to promote its interests in Syria and the broader region, including supporting Assad's leadership, crushing any remnants of Kurdish autonomy, and building stronger ties with Russia.¹⁴

One would have valid reason to question the trustworthiness of Turkey as a U.S. partner and a NATO ally following its military invasion in northern Syria. Turkey seeks to look more to the east and the Arab world, less to the west, to build alliances. Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 systems and President Erdogan's desire to have a nuclear bomb are other concerning reasons, among many, to question Turkey's commitment to NATO ideals and values.

U.S. Credibility

By withdrawing troops and allowing for the Turkish invasion, the United States has empowered our adversaries and betrayed our allies, most notably the Kurds. The move is self-defeating as it severely damages American credibility and reliability and walks back much of the hard-earned gains made by the SDF and the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS.

The question remains - what leverage or influence does the United States have in the future of Syria, including to ensure any deal made with Turkey is honored? Which local partners can the U.S. lean on should ISIS reconstitute itself? The answers to these questions – once seemingly obvious and assured – are now unknown.

¹⁴ Clarke, Colin and Tabatabai, Ariane. "Withdrawing From Syria Leaves a Vacuum That Iran Will Fill. Foreign Affairs. January, 8, 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-01-08/withdrawing-syria-leaves-vacuum-iran-will-fill>



Recommendations

- Military options should never be the only solution to conflict. We need diplomacy. The United States should encourage Turkey to pursue dialogue with the Kurds to mitigate the threats it has identified along its border.
- The threat of ISIS remains in Syria and Iraq. We cannot simply watch and wait for its resurgence – we need a plan. We must mitigate the risk of escaping ISIS fighters to ensure that they cannot cross borders into neighboring countries. In order to do this, we need to work with countries in the region and open communication channels with the powerbrokers in the country and region – including Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan.
- For the West – it should seriously concern them that their citizens who travelled to the region to join ISIS could escape ISIS prisons and camps, potentially to participate in terrorist activities, either in Syria or perhaps back in their home countries. We cannot ignore this risk. Western governments must take responsibility for their citizens by bringing them back to their home countries, where they can undergo risk assessments, face prosecution, and engage in rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Ignoring this problem will only fuel the cycle of marginalization and grievances that attract individuals to join terrorist groups in the first place.