

Hearing on Syria Strategy
HASC Oversight and Investigations Sub-
Committee

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Chairman Hartzler, Ranking Member Moulton, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing. Because this hearing is open, I will not be able to discuss many details of our military operations in Syria, as doing so could undermine these operations, and put forces at risk. I will be happy to address such issues in closed session, but must err on the side of caution in open session to avoid disclosing classified information about our sensitive activities.

The U.S. Government's objectives in Syria remain unchanged. In Syria, the United States seeks to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qa'ida, and its affiliates; deter the use of chemical weapons; and counter Iran's malign, destabilizing influence. The United States also seeks a peaceful resolution of the multifaceted conflict in Syria in a manner that protects U.S. interests, preserves a favorable regional balance of power, protects our allies and partners, and alleviates human suffering.

The Defense Department's role in Syria is limited. We are pursuing the enduring defeat of ISIS with a relatively small U.S. military footprint and a "by, with and through" strategy that relies on local partners. While we are not intervening in the Syrian civil war because our combat operations target ISIS, this underlying conflict inevitably affects our efforts. The Assad regime – with Russian and Iranian backing – has retaken significant swaths of territory from the moderate Syrian opposition, which it subjects to violent repression. This behavior imperils international efforts to facilitate an enduring, peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Although our military efforts and those of our vetted local partners have hastened the territorial defeat of ISIS and advanced U.S. national security interests, we believe broader U.S. objectives are most effectively pursued through negotiated political resolution of the Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis, consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. As we have previously emphasized, we look to our colleagues at the State Department to work in parallel with the United Nations and our international partners to forge a lasting settlement of the Syrian

conflict that includes full representation for all Syrians, including the people of northeast Syria now recovering from the ISIS occupation.

The U.S. government remains committed to the critical diplomatic efforts underway to end the war on terms that protect the rights of Syria's people, and enable the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of IDPs and refugees to their homes. The recent appointments of Ambassador Jim Jeffrey as the State Department's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Joel Rayburn as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant highlight the renewed U.S. focus on diplomatic engagement. The Defense Department is eager to support their efforts.

In close coordination with and under the authorities granted by the Congress, the Defense Department has made significant progress since 2014, when ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria and terrorized hundreds of thousands of civilians. My staff briefs HASC committee staff on our activities on a regular basis, and we appreciate these opportunities to solicit input and feedback from the committee as we work through difficult and complex challenges.

As you know, Coalition-backed efforts have contributed to the liberation of more than 99 percent of the territory and more than seven and one-half million people from ISIS control in Iraq and Syria. Despite this progress, we assess that even after the defeat of its physical caliphate, ISIS remains stronger now than its predecessor – al-Qaeda in Iraq – was when the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011. Tough fighting remains in the lower reaches of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and our hard-won gains in Iraq and Syria remain vulnerable.

The enemy is adaptive. Even though offensive operations against the last pocket of ISIS-held territory in Syria are underway, ISIS has begun its transition into an underground insurgency. A sustained, conditions-based U.S. presence will enable us to pressure the terrorist insurgency and prevent an ISIS resurgence, while simultaneously facilitating diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. We seek to avoid telling the enemy when we will withdraw, or leaving before the job is done. We do not want to repeat mistakes that created conditions for ISIS's emergence in the first place.

We are not alone. We are working by, with, and through a range of partners to defeat ISIS. In Syria, we are vetting, training, and equipping local Syrian forces,

such as the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces, who are leading combat operations against remaining ISIS holdouts. We are also supporting vetted Internal Security Forces drawn from local populations to hold and secure ISIS-liberated territory.

The 79-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS remains committed to the challenges in Syria and Iraq, and is adaptive to ISIS's evolving ambitions and tactics. Our allies and partners are increasingly sharing the burden for ongoing defeat-ISIS operations, stabilization, and humanitarian assistance.

Since April, the U.S. Government has secured approximately \$785 million in contributions committed from Coalition partners to UNDP's funding facility for stabilization efforts in areas liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria – including €70M from France; \$18.6M from the UK and €10M from Germany toward explosive remnants clearance plus €35M in humanitarian support from Germany. We applaud these contributions and encourage our partners to seek additional ways to step up their support for stabilization and diplomatic efforts to ensure a safe and stable Syria.

In eastern Syria, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are leading early recovery and stabilization efforts designed to consolidate military gains and stabilize liberated areas. With support from the Department of Defense, the State Department and USAID are addressing humanitarian needs, removing ISIS-placed mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), supporting local early recovery efforts, and helping establish the security, economic and political conditions that will help allow for the safe and, voluntary, and dignified return of displaced Syrians to their homes. The ability to co-deploy State and USAID civilians next to our military forces to plan and monitor these activities with local partners remains a key aspect of our success.

In Northern Syria, the United States is working with our NATO ally and Coalition partner, Turkey, to ensure stability and security in the region. We remain committed to a sustainable arrangement in Manbij that ensures continued stability and addresses Turkish concerns. The United States is working with Turkey to promote local governance and security elements acceptable to all parties, including the people of Manbij. We respect Turkey's legitimate security concerns, and are aligned in seeking an end to the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254 that respects the rights of all of Syria's citizens and addresses the

humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict.

We welcome recent reports of a Turkish-Russian agreement to form a demilitarized zone in Idlib, but nevertheless remain gravely concerned over the potential for a major military offensive by the Syrian regime – backed by Russia and Iran – that could increase the prospect for use of chemical weapons and put civilians at grave risk. Turkey shares these concerns. It remains to be seen whether Turkey's efforts to dissuade Russia from supporting a major regime offensive will hold, and we note that previous ceasefire agreements have been used as an opportunity for Russia, Iran, and the Syrian Regime to rest, refit, and resume an offensive whenever it suits them. Putin's continued support for the regime and willingness to partner with Iran in Syria reveals the stark divergences between Turkish and Russian objectives in Syria. A regime offensive in Idlib would represent a dangerous escalation of the conflict and will threaten, not facilitate, diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Our position on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons remains unchanged. As we have demonstrated, we will respond swiftly and appropriately to further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime to defend the international prohibition against the use of such weapons and deter future use. We urge the regime and its Russian sponsors to refrain from using chemical weapons or risk the international consequences of doing so.

Our resolve is shared by the United Kingdom and France, and we encourage others to join our diplomatic and political efforts to deter Assad from using chemical weapons. We continue to support international efforts to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use – namely the decision taken by the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention to establish a new arrangement to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria. This important decision counters Russia's repeated use of its veto power at the UN Security Council to dismantle the impartial UN-and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Joint Investigative Mechanism, which found the Assad regime responsible for chemical weapons attacks four times – including the April, 2017 chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun that killed and injured hundreds of civilians.

We remain concerned by Iran's significant military, paramilitary, and proxy involvement in Syria. Iran's introduction of sophisticated military equipment into Syria, along with the entrenched Iranian and Hizballah presence there, directly threatens important partners like Israel and Jordan, and risks dangerously escalating tensions in the region. Iran is no friend of the Syrian people and if its behavior in Iraq is any indication, its militia proxies and aggressive agenda will only further marginalize Syria's Sunnis, enflaming tensions and sowing the seeds of radicalism.

Despite these challenges, the United States is taking steps to strengthen our partners and create opportunities to counter Iran's destabilizing actions. We are working closely with the Department of State to expose Iran's regional destabilizing influence through our Iranian Materiel Display where representatives from over 66 nations have viewed Iran's proliferation of advanced conventional weapons. We continue to shore up the defenses of our Israeli and Gulf Arab partners while working to improve their military defense capabilities against a range of Iranian threats. We also continue to take steps to reinforce vulnerable and fragile regional states. We maintain a regional force posture and military plans designed to deter and, if necessary, respond to aggression. We are not seeking war with Iran. That said, we will take steps to defend ourselves and work with regional and global partners and allies to address the full range of Iran's destabilizing and malign activities.

DoD's engagement with Russia in Syria remains focused on military de-confliction efforts – conducted via military channels – to prevent miscalculations and accidents involving our respective forces which operate in close proximity on the ground and in the air. Although this tactical de-confliction has been a success, unfortunately, Russia's overall behavior has been at odds with our core objectives. Russia has enabled Assad's use of chemical weapons and continues to hamper efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement to the conflict.

Russia has recently launched a concerted disinformation campaign to discredit the United States and international partners, flooding the media with fake stories to sow doubt and confusion about realities in Syria and hide Russia's role in the Assad regime's campaign of murder and brutality. The United States is working with its partners across the world to expose and counter Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

Finally, I want to thank the Congress for the advice, funding, and authorities provided to the Department in this endeavor. Though the scope of our mandate is narrow, we have together dealt with the scourge of ISIS and will together do right by our troops in ensuring its lasting defeat.