

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

U.S. Policy after Russia's Escalation in Syria

Statement of

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and discuss the Administration's policy in Syria, the impact that Russia's recent intervention has had, and our plan for defeating ISIL. Coming on the heels of the President's recent announcement of the Administration's new efforts to intensify the campaign against ISIL and Secretary Kerry's meetings last week in Vienna, where I joined him, chart a path towards a political transition, this hearing is particularly well-timed.

In the four years and a half since the start of the Syrian conflict, when the Asad regime met peaceful protests with violent suppression, over 225,000 Syrians have lost their lives and four million Syrians have become refugees. Approximately half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million people has been displaced. Many families have been displaced more than five times since the start of the conflict. They are scattered throughout the region and Europe, many losing their possessions, livelihoods, and any hope of returning home.

Since the beginning of Russian strikes in Syria, at least 120,000 Syrians have been displaced as a result of regime offensives aided by Russian airstrikes in the cities of Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib. The conflict in Syria has triggered the world's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II and has become a magnet for violent extremists from around the world. These extremists seek to change the map of the Middle East, to destroy economies and cultures, and to terrify entire populations into submissions to their totalitarian plans.

The security of Syria's neighbors – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey -- is being threatened, with major consequences for U.S. national interests in the region and beyond, including, most importantly, the homeland. Secretary Kerry described the tasks of those gathered in Vienna as "charting a course out of hell." That was not hyperbole.

What We are Doing, and Why

Our interests are undeniable. We have four goals: (1) defeat ISIL militarily in both Syria and Iraq; (2) develop a political transition that gives Syria a future without Bashar al-Asad; (3) ease the suffering of the Syrian people; and, (4) stabilize our regional allies and help European partners as they cope with a massive refugee crisis. Our strategy regarding the Syrian conflict remains fundamentally the same, to leverage military action and diplomacy to achieve a political transition in which Syrians ultimately have a government that respects the rights of its people and Syria retains its unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character.

This political transition is critical to permanently rooting ISIL out of Syria and ending ISIL's ability to threaten Iraq from Syria. As Secretary Kerry said last Friday where I joined him in Vienna, "there is absolutely nothing that could do more to fight ISIL than to achieve a political transition that strengthens the governance capacity of Syria, sidelines the person that we believe attracts so many foreign fighters and so much terror, and unites the country against terrorism." We cannot defeat ISIL in Iraq without also defeating ISIL in Syria.

Military Initiatives

Let me be clear, the coalition has made progress in our military campaign against ISIL. ISIL has lost significant territory in northern Syria and is now cut off from all but 68 miles of the nearly 600-mile border between Syria and Turkey. We also have reduced the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and are squeezing ISIL's resupply lines.

We are intensifying our campaign against ISIL, both through the airstrikes in Syria and Iraq and by working on the ground with partners in Iraq and Syria who have proven capable of reclaiming territory from ISIL. The United States and our coalition partners have conducted a total of over 7,700 airstrikes against ISIL targets, including 2,600 in Syria. Our coalition is over 65 partners and theirs is three.

As you know, the President has also authorized deployment of up to 50 U.S. Special Operations Forces to northern Syria, where they will help coordinate Arab and Kurdish ground forces. To complement that effort, the Administration has adjusted the Train and Equip program to train vetted groups that are already fighting ISIL on the battlefield, and will support them with additional airpower.

With Turkey's support, we are deploying A-10s and F-15s to Incirlik Airbase to enable the intensification of strikes, and we are increasing our counter-ISIL military assistance to neighboring Jordan and Lebanon. As Secretary of Defense Carter recently testified, U.S. and coalition aircraft will target ISIL with a higher and heavier rate of strikes, including those on ISIL's oil enterprise to weaken its financial resources.

Political Initiatives

To support areas liberated by the moderate opposition, the Administration just announced that the United States will provide nearly \$100 million in new assistance to the Syrian opposition, bringing the total to nearly \$500 million. This assistance will support local and provincial governance institutions, civil society activists, emergency first responders, and others to meet the increased needs of communities. This is essential as part of the fight against ISIL, but also to the future of Syria after the war; it is essential if Syrians are not forced to flee their towns or the country entirely.

Humanitarian Support

We continue to address the humanitarian consequences of this conflict even as we press to end it. The U.S. is the single largest global donor to the Syrian crisis and has provided over \$4.5 billion in critical humanitarian assistance since 2001. Nearly \$2.3 billion of this humanitarian assistance is provided inside Syria. An additional \$950 million has gone to UNHCR programs in Lebanon and over \$650 million to Jordan for refugees and host communities.

Stabilizing Allies

To address the destabilizing effect of the Syrian civil war, we remain committed to helping our close ally Jordan repulse any threats from ISIL or Nusra to Jordanian territory. With Congress' support we have increased our assistance to Jordan, including military equipment and training.

Also with the support of Congress, we also are building up the capabilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces to defend Lebanese territory and the Lebanese people from Daesh, Nusra and other terrorists, despite the risk to Lebanon created by Hizballah's intervention in the Syrian civil war.

Russia's Actions

Mr. Chairman, let me address head-on the issue of Russia's new military deployments and actions in Syria.

Russia intervened in Syria because its ally, the regime of Bashar al-Asad, was losing territory to the opposition. Even direct involvement in combat by Iran, its Hizballah proxies, and Shi'a militia elements from other countries was not enabling the regime to regain territory and protect the areas it considers essential. It's important to remember that Asad took the extraordinary move in June to admit to the public that Syrian forces could not fight throughout the country and the regime could not try to hold all its territory. That was one of the very few times the Asad regime has been truthful with its people.

Russia's military intervention has dangerously exacerbated an already complex environment. As you know, the Asad regime cynically has tried to paint all of those who fight against it as terrorists, so Moscow rationalized its intervention as a fight against ISIL, a rationale Moscow has employed in its intervention, falsely casting its efforts as primarily counter-ISIL. But so far, Russian airstrikes have targeted-predominantly- areas where ISIL is not present. Instead, Russian strikes have targeted the moderate Syria opposition; some of these attacks have killed civilians in strikes on Syrian Civil Defense crews, hospitals, IDP shelters, and ambulances. We have been direct with our Russian counterparts on this point.

So far, then, this has not been a Russian fight against terrorism so much as an effort to preserve the Asad regime. We would have no objection to genuine strikes against ISIL, but Russia can better contribute to the fight against ISIL in Syria by advancing a political transition from Asad. Secretary has engaged them on this and will continue to do this.

Neither we nor the Russians know exactly what effect the Russian action will have over the military balance on the ground – the results so far have been mixed, as the opposition puts up a very strong fight. The conflict and its impact on U.S. interests in the region dictate that we not wait to see that impact before undertaking a full court press to end the war and get to a political settlement. The Russian deployments cannot be used to stiffen the Asad regime's resistance to a political transition. The countries around the table in Vienna – despite their differences – agreed that there is no military solution to the conflict and that there must be a political solution.

Regardless of progress towards a political transition, it is our position that given its new involvement in the military situation, Russia has an even greater responsibility to stop immediately the regime's horrific practice of barrel bombing and use of chlorine gas against its population. The international community looks to Russia to take up that responsibility. The Russian leadership says it has taken up this issue with Asad, but barrel bombing continues almost daily.

Advancing a Political Transition

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, last Friday, I joined Secretary Kerry as he brought together in Vienna all those in the region and in Europe who can help end this ever-more-dangerous conflict. Iran was invited for the practical reason that it is an active participant in the Syrian conflict and must help end that conflict through a political settlement.

It will come as no surprise to this Committee that this disparate group did not agree on several subjects – most notably the fate of Asad.

But a group that included the regime's main backers committed to convene the regime and opposition representatives on the basis of the Geneva Communique of 2012 – including the transfer of powers to a transitional governing body.

Despite their differences, these countries did agree on a number of things that need to be done to shape a settlement and Syria's future: preserve Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and pluralistic character; ensure that state institutions will remain intact; protect the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination; assure humanitarian access throughout the territory of Syria; defeat Da'esh and other terrorist groups as designated by the U.N. Security Council, as well as others agreed by the participants; establish a political process among Syrians leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance; support the drafting and approval of a new constitution; and hold elections administered under U.N. supervision to international standards. We should not ignore this is an important step.

The participants also agreed to explore modalities for, and implementation of, a nationwide ceasefire to be initiated on a date certain and in parallel with this renewed political process. We are following up on these issues right now, in preparation for reconvening at the ministerial level in the next couple of weeks. Secretary Kerry is committed to pursuing this process as far as it can go.

No one has any illusions about the difficulty of both the diplomatic and the political process among Syrians; our differences with Russia, Iran, and the Asad regime itself are substantial. But one thing is crystal clear and must be accepted by the regime's backers: we cannot continue to make the lives of Syrian people and the security of the region hostage to the desire of one man to retain power. Asad cannot unite and govern Syria; Syrians deserve more. This political process is intended to give them a choice – free from the manipulation, intimidation, and control that the regime has exercised over them for decades.

Extremists have indeed taken advantage of the Syrian people's legitimate struggle against a brutal, power-hungry and corrupt regime. And the extremists must be defeated, because they pose a threat to all of us, including Russia and the West. But make no mistake – this is about ending the rule of regime that has brutalized its people and opened the door to extremism and terrorism throughout the region.

Our diplomatic initiative aims at starting a political process between representatives of Syrians seeking genuine change and the regime – one that the regime will take more seriously than it did the past talks in Geneva. The regime's international backers – Russia and Iran – need to encourage a serious approach to this process. The regime cannot insist, as it now continues to do, that terrorism must be defeated before political change. No one can accept that illogic and such preconditions.

Those of us who support the opposition are already encouraging its representatives to participate in this process seriously, and without preconditions. Deputy Secretary Blinken met a few days ago with Syrian Opposition Coalition President Khaled Khoja, and Special Envoy for Syria Michael Ratney has engaged members of both the external and internal political opposition, the leaders and political representatives of major armed factions, and local governance bodies in Syria to encourage their consolidation around a unified set of principles to guide negotiations and a political transition in Syria that preserves public institutions and the interests of all Syrians.

These groups are coming together around shared ideas and principals more than at any other time during the conflict. We can build on this greater unity to continue to press the regime and its backers to negotiate seriously.

Mr. Chairman, we are now entering a phase of intense diplomacy, even as we increase our strikes against ISIL, continue our support to the moderate opposition, and press the regime to agree to a genuine political transition. As Secretary Kerry reiterated last Friday in Vienna, the choice for Syrians -- and this must be a Syrian-led and Syrian owned process -- must not be between Asad and ISIL. There must be a third option in a transition that moves away from Asad and that can help Syrians -- and all of us -- overcome the extremist challenge.

Thank you and I look forward to responding to your questions.