

Testimony for Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing on “U.S. Policy Toward a Turbulent Middle East”
April 18, 2018

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. It is an honor to represent the State Department’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs in this hearing. In my comments today, I will focus on the strategic dimension of the conflict in Syria as it relates to the work of our Bureau, and specifically, to the part played by the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation.

America’s goals in Syria have been: to defeat ISIS; to see a Syria that is unified and stable emerge from the conflict; and above all to prevent Iran, that aids and abets Hezbollah and that seeks the destruction of the state of Israel, from extending its malign influence in the region.

Let us assess Turkey and Russia as they relate to these goals.

Turkey is a 66-year member of the NATO Alliance and member of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition. It has suffered more casualties from terrorism in the past several years than any other Ally and graciously hosts 3.5 million Syrian refugees. It performs a crucial role in support of the Coalition through use of Incirlik Air Base and other military facilities, through its commitment of Turkish military forces in 2016 to take the fight to ISIS on the ground in Dabiq and Al-Bab, and through close intelligence cooperation with the United States and other allies. Turkey is publicly committed to a political resolution in Syria that accords with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Turkey holds influence with key Syrian opposition groups, has invested in stabilization efforts in areas under its control, and can promote cross-border economic linkages that will be critical to any sustainable solution for liberated territory in northern territory. Turkey has a vested strategic interest in checking the spread of Russian and especially Iranian influence and in having a safe and stable border with Syria.

Despite these shared interests, Turkey lately has increased its engagement with Russia and Iran. Ankara has sought to assure us that it sees this cooperation as a necessary stepping-stone towards progress in the Geneva process and as a means of de-escalating the conflict. But the ease with which Turkey brokered arrangements with the Russian military to facilitate the launch of its Operation Olive Branch in Afrin District – arrangements to which America was not privy – is

gravely concerning. Ankara should be mindful of the risks in making strategic concessions to Moscow in order to achieve its tactical objectives in Syria. Ankara claims to have agreed to purchase the Russian S-400 missile system, which could potentially lead to sanctions under section 231 of CAATSA and adversely impact Turkey's participation in the F-35 program.

It is in the American national interest to see Turkey remain strategically and politically aligned with the West, and we believe it is also in Turkey's interests. Our policy has been to combine close engagement with clear messaging that the United States will actively defend its interests. In the context of Syria, we have engaged in high-level interagency discussions, both to address legitimate Turkish security concerns and to avoid inadvertent collisions between our forces.

These conversations are ongoing. Moving forward, our aim is to enlist Turkey as a more active ally in supporting the Geneva process, the defeat of ISIS and lasting stabilization in Syria, as well as a long-term factor in thwarting expansion by Russia and Iran, as outlined in the National Security and National Defense Strategies.

Let us turn to Russia.

It is hard to see how Russia shares any of America's strategic goals in Syria. Moscow professes a wish to defeat ISIS but directs its bombs at fighters and even civilians who oppose the regime. It professes to want a stable Syria but subverts the Geneva process with separate tracks like the Astana process, where it dictates the agenda. And it actively facilitates the spread of Iranian influence in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

Moscow's primary aims in Syria are not really about the Syrian people or the stability of the region. Moscow wants to retain its presence in Syria as an entry point through which to influence future events in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. It also wants to inflict a globally visible defeat on the United States: to create a negative "demonstration effect" of thwarting our aims here to dishearten our friends abroad and to drive wedges between us and our allies.

Moscow is willing to accept and impose catastrophic human costs to achieve these goals. Russia has supported the Assad regime's indiscriminate attacks and siege tactics on civilian neighborhoods, which have killed, wounded, and starved thousands of innocent civilians. As we have seen in Aleppo and now in east Ghouta, the Russian government not only supports, but goes great lengths to protect an Assad regime that uses *weaponized chemicals* – horrid killers like sarin

and chlorine – to slaughter innocent men, women and children, including even toddlers and infants. Let us remember that.

It has been clear for years now that the only viable path to a safe and secure Syria is through a political transition. This solution can only be achieved through a UN-led Geneva process to fully implement UNSCR 2254. We are pushing Russia to be a constructive participant in this process and to bring Assad to the negotiating table. So far, Russia has ignored these calls and instead been a spoiler to Geneva. Worse, its reckless intervention in Syria and support for the Assad regime has raised the risk of confrontation with the West. The failed attack on U.S. forces by Russian mercenaries recently in Syria was one sobering example of this behavior; Moscow's aggressive rhetoric in the period leading up to and after the recent U.S.-led strikes is another.

America has done its part to avoid these escalatory spirals. We have brokered and maintain de-confliction channels to avoid collisions in an increasingly congested and complex battlespace. Communication between the Coalition and the Russians ensures the safety of our collective aircrews and assets. These efforts help minimize the risk of miscalculation, misunderstanding, or accidental engagement.

We do not seek a confrontation. But our forces will not hesitate to use necessary and proportionate force to defend themselves as they are engaged in operations to defeat ISIS and degrade al-Qa'ida.

Moscow's support for the Syrian regime is intolerable for America and all civilized nations.

In the days and weeks ahead, the United States and our allies will degrade and defeat ISIS, support a stable Syria, and limit the spread of Iranian malign influence. We will work with NATO Ally Turkey to cooperate with us more fully in these endeavors – and push the Russian government to desist in supporting a hateful regime that kills innocent civilians, and to bring a speedy, political resolution to this horrible conflict.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.