

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

U.S. Policy Toward a Turbulent Middle East

Statement of

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me and my colleague, Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell, to testify. As you know, the Middle East is a critical region and in recent years we have witnessed many changes. From the Arab Spring in 2011, to the current civil wars in Syria and Yemen, the rise and fall of ISIS's so-called "Caliphate," no one would argue the many challenges we face in the region. However, in many places the United States has made positive strides. We have supported the growth of a nascent democracy in Tunisia.

As I mentioned, there are challenges in the region and there are critical underlying needs. We are pressing for effective and democratic governance, vibrant civil societies, respect for the rule of law, protection of religious minorities and human rights. All of these issues form the foundation for long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in this region, which will play a critical role in advancing U.S. national security interests.

Economically, the region continues to be a major destination for key U.S. exports, supporting American jobs. For example, we have supported arrangements for billions of dollars of sales to our partners in the Gulf; power generation solutions in Libya, Algeria, and Iraq; and locomotives in Egypt. And, as this Committee is well-aware, we have made significant progress against ISIS since 2014, when they first emerged, sweeping across Iraq and Syria, inflicting suffering on millions of civilians in the region and beyond. Now, they are barely holding on to only two percent of the territory once under their control.

However, we are not blind to the continuing issues in the region, and the United States is taking the necessary steps, politically, militarily and economically to find solutions, along with our allies, to the region's greatest challenges.

On April 7, after weeks of heavy Syrian regime bombardment on the people of Douma, the last opposition-held enclave in East Ghouta, the regime deployed chemical weapons, killing dozens and injuring hundreds of innocent men, women and children. Unsurprisingly, the Russian and Syrian disinformation campaign began, blaming the opposition, smearing the names of heroic first responders and doctors such as the White Helmets and the Syrian American Medical Society, and even going further by claiming no chemical attack happened.

On April 13, the militaries of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom executed strikes on three chemical weapons facilities involved in the research, production, and storage of chemical weapons in Syria. These strikes were focused on crippling Syria's chemical weapons capabilities and deterring the further use of chemical weapons, consistent with U.S. policy on Syria, and were taken after considerable deliberation and international consultations and coordination.

The United States has tried repeatedly to use diplomatic, economic, and political tools to stop the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons as Assad's supporters turn a blind eye. Russia has failed to live up to its guarantee in regard to the 2013 Framework Agreement that Syria would cease all use of chemical weapons and fully declare its entire stockpile for verifiable destruction. And, Iran acts malignly in Syria - pouring resources and militias to support Assad and advance its regional ambitions. Against this backdrop, the targeted military action by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom against military targets connected to the Syrian chemical weapons program was justified and legitimate as a measure to deter and prevent Syria's illegal and unacceptable use of chemical weapons. This targeted military action sends a powerful message to the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran, and

international community that chemical weapons will never be tolerated and there will be consequences for their use.

While preventing the use of chemical weapons in Syria is our immediate concern, the Administration's priority remains the defeat of ISIS. ISIS's so-called "Caliphate" is crumbling. It has lost nearly all – approximately 98 percent – of the territory, it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. Coalition-backed military operations have liberated over 107,000 square kilometers of territory and millions of people from ISIS's oppressive rule in Iraq and Syria. However, we recognize current challenges, such as in Manbij, Syria, where U.S. forces are located. We have made it very clear to the Turkish government that we will continue to operate there and are working hard with our NATO ally to find a roadmap to a resolution.

Our strategic partnership with Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, remains essential to ensuring the lasting defeat of ISIS and to countering Iran's malign influence in the region. The Iraqi government is stabilizing communities, including minority communities that suffered greatly from ISIS, and now are beginning private sector-led, investment-driven reconstruction. Divisions in Iraq remain, but are healing. With our encouragement, strong leadership and guidance, after only six months, following the unconstitutional referendum that caused tensions between the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government, the two Governments have re-opened airports and resumed salary payments. Sorting out disputed boundaries and revenue sharing will take longer, but the parties are on the right path and the United States will remain engaged. All Iraqis, including the Iraqi Kurds, will participate in parliamentary elections on May 12, the country's fourth since 2005.

Iran's malign influence in the region continues to threaten our allies like Jordan and Israel and exacerbates violent conflicts in Syria and Yemen with IRGC facilitation. The Houthis have repeatedly used Iranian ballistic missile and cruise missile technology and, as we saw as recently as April 11, have launched missiles toward Riyadh's international airport, Aramco facilities, and in the Red Sea shipping lanes. Moreover, the Houthis launch rockets along and into Saudi Arabia's southern border, threatening its population on an almost daily basis; this includes over 80,000 Saudi-based U.S. citizens. In this context, U.S. military support serves a clear purpose: to reinforce Saudi and Emirati action on behalf of the Yemeni government in the face of intensifying Houthi threats and to expand the capability of our Gulf partners to push back against Iran's regionally destabilizing actions.

Long-term stability in Yemen depends on a sustainable political settlement. The new UN Envoy briefed the UN Security Council yesterday on his approach to reviving talks between the parties and we are fully supporting his efforts to end the civil war. This conflict is into a fourth year. We are urging the Saudis and Emiratis to work closely with the UN Envoy as he advances negotiations and a cessation of hostilities.

We all agree the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is unacceptable, and last month, the Governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates provided \$1 billion to Yemen's humanitarian response. This complements the U.S. government pledge of \$87 million, more than \$854 million since the beginning of fiscal year 2017, and an additional \$1 billion in contributions from other donors. We also worked with the World Food Program (WFP), the Saudi-led Coalition's Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Cell, authorities in Dubai, and others to facilitate

delivery of the four U.S.-funded WFP mobile cranes, which arrived in Hudaydah port on January 15. Beyond humanitarian assistance, our economic and development assistance is helping to restore critical health services and access to education, repair community infrastructure, and provide help for the revival of production and commercial activities, the collapse of which is a major factor contributing to the wide-scale humanitarian disaster.

The Iranian regime has taken advantage of regional conflicts and instability to aggressively expand its influence and threaten its neighbors. Supreme Leader Khamenei's primary tool and weapon in remaking Iran into a rogue state has been the IRGC. The IRGC has armed and guided Bashar al Assad, who has butchered his own people in Syria, and has cynically condoned his use of chemical weapons. Their presence in Syria has perpetuated the bloodshed, increased the displacement of innocent people, and propped up the barbaric Assad regime. It's this attitude of reckless hostility and disregard for the laws and norms that underpin the international order that makes Iran so dangerous. Our partners in the international community agree with us that Iran's reckless behavior threatens international peace and security. They agree that Iran is fanning sectarianism and perpetuating regional conflict. They agree that Iran is engaged in corrupt economic practices that exploit the Iranian people and suppress both internal dissent, human rights and Iran's economic prosperity. For all these reasons, we want to work with our partners to constrain this dangerous organization, for the benefit of international peace and security, regional stability, and the Iranian people.

The Administration remains focused on neutralizing Iran's threatening influence, particularly its support for terrorism and militants, cyberwarfare, ballistic missiles, and use of proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Moreover, Iran's support for

the terrorist group Hizbollah allows it to further destabilize the region and threatens the stability and security of Lebanon.

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee, the Middle East is a complicated landscape, and the people of the Middle East deserve an end to violence, hunger, and uncertainty and we are working with allies inside and outside the region to find the solutions. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I welcome the opportunity answer your questions.