

U.S. Department of State

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Assessing the Impact of Turkey's Offensive in Northeast Syria

October 23, 2019

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on this important issue. As you know, I have just returned from Ankara and I look forward to discussing the October 17 Joint Turkish-U.S. Statement (October 17 Joint Statement) on northeast Syria, which established a five day pause in Turkish military operations in the northeast running to October 22, a withdrawal of Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) forces from those areas controlled by the Turkish military, and if all goes well a more permanent halt to the Turkish operation, as well as joint Turkish-U.S. efforts towards the population in the affected ‘safe zone’ area to ensure security, decent treatment of religious and ethnic minorities and restoration of the security smashed by the Turkish offensive beginning October 8.

The conflict in Syria has raged for over eight years, fueled by Bashar al-Assad’s regime and his despotic and barbaric treatment of Syrian citizens, Russia’s continued enabling of Assad’s brutality, and Iran’s malign influence in the region.

U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS, al-Qa’ida, and their affiliates in Syria, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence; and resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms favorable to the United States and our allies and in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. A sound strategy for use of our assistance resources is key to achieving these goals.

The United States has worked closely with our local partners, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria, in the campaign to defeat ISIS since 2014. Our cooperation led to the territorial defeat of the so-called “caliphate” earlier this year. During this time, the United States and our Coalition

partners provided assistance to restore essential services, support local security and governance, to alleviate humanitarian needs, and to help restore the local economy in areas liberated from ISIS. These efforts helped meet basic needs and create an area of relative stability in Syria, and enable the enduring defeat of ISIS elements there.

One longstanding issue in this campaign has been Turkey's belief that there is no distinction between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both the United States and Turkey have designated as a terrorist organization, and the YPG and our partner the SDF. Turkey thus views the YPG – a key component of the SDF – as an existential threat which receives support from the United States. To Turkey, our cooperation with and support to any of these bodies is akin to supporting a statelet on its southern border run by a terrorist group it believes has declared war on Turkey. The State Department has led efforts over the past year and a half to reduce that friction and achieve better coordination of U.S. and Turkish efforts regarding Syria.

When President Trump announced a strong, deliberate and coordinated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria in December 2018, the Administration said we were transitioning primary responsibility for the defeat of the few remaining ISIS remnants in Syria to our allies and partners on the ground inside Syria.

Beginning in January 2019, the Administration worked with Turkey on implementing a safe zone in northeast Syria that would prevent the resurgence of ISIS, protect Turkish security interests vis-a-vis the SDF/YPG, facilitate stabilization, and create conditions to enable the safe, voluntary, dignified return of

refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This effort culminated in U.S.-Turkish military-to-military arrangement in August for a security mechanism; the SDF was informed and supported the elements of that arrangement. The United States, Turkey, and the SDF all began executing the arrangement in late August. We believe we very quickly implemented the initial steps of the arrangement to create an area along approximately 140 km of the border region in the northeast. This included YPG voluntary withdrawal to approximately 5-14 km from the Turkish border of armed personnel generally, displacement of heavy weapons to 20 km from the Turkish border, U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Turkish air activity over northeast Syria, and joint U.S.-Turkish patrols in the relevant area.

Turkey from President Erdogan on down disputed the conduct and implementation of security mechanism activities, but, more importantly, pressed beginning in early September for an entirely different concept – one Turkey had tried and failed to foist on the United States and, through us, the SDF since January: a 32 kilometer zone to the key east-west highway, M4/10, along the entire northeast from the Euphrates to the Iraqi border, and sole Turkish military, as opposed to joint U.S.-Turkish engagement on area security. Turkey also began stressing its desire to move up to four million Syrian refugees now in Turkey into cities to be constructed in the area, an initiative that went far beyond the scope of the military-to-military arrangement. The United States at every level has underlined our resolute opposition to this plan as a threat to our SDF partners, the fight against ISIS elements, and overall security in Syria.

Indications grew in September 2019 that Turkey was planning for a large-scale unilateral operation. Again, all levels of the U.S. government warned Turkey not to act.

Erdogan, however, said that Turkey would soon move forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria. He was told clearly, including by the President, that U.S. Armed Forces would not support or be involved, and that the United States does not endorse such actions, but that we would not put U.S. forces in harm's way. President Trump also publicly warned Turkey that the United States would take measures sanctioning the Turkish economy if Turkey were to take steps that the United States considers "off limits."

Turkey launched this operation despite our objections, undermining the D-ISIS campaign, risking endangering and displacing civilians, destroying critical civilian infrastructure, and threatening the security of the area. Turkey's military actions have precipitated a humanitarian crisis and set conditions for possible war crimes. As the President warned Erdogan, we have used diplomatic and economic tools available to us to press Turkey to halt its military actions.

On October 14, President Trump signed an Executive Order designed to encourage Turkey to halt its offensive military action in northeast Syria and adopt a ceasefire. It provides the United States with the authorities to deliver severe economic consequences and apply additional pressure if Turkey continues with this offensive. The United States has imposed sanctions on three senior Turkish Government officials: Hulusi Akar, the Minister of National Defense; Suleyman Soylu, the Minister of the Interior; and Fatih Donmez, Minister of Energy, and on two ministries, Defense and Energy. Turkey must follow through on its

commitments from the October 17 Joint Statement with the United States to avoid further sanctions under this new E.O.

The United States undertook various diplomatic initiatives to reinforce our sanctions, including a Presidential letter to President Erdogan on October 9 and a Presidential message to him three days later. In the latter we warned the Turks that the SDF was likely to turn to Russia and the Assad regime if Turkey continued its offensive, which then occurred. The President then dispatched the Vice President, Secretary Pompeo, and National Security Advisor O'Brien to Ankara to negotiate with Turkey the terms of a ceasefire and the YPG's evacuation from affected areas. As I indicated already, on October 17 those talks, including five hours with President Erdogan, produced a Joint Statement outlining a pause that will lead to a ceasefire -- that Turkey and the YPG are adhering to -- for 120 hours to allow the withdrawal of the YPG from the Turkish-controlled safe zone. In return, the United States committed not to impose new sanctions under the October 14th E.O., "Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria." Turkey has committed to a permanent ceasefire upon completion of the YPG withdrawal; in return, the United States would lift the sanctions now imposed under the E.O. This solution will save lives and contribute to long-term stability in the region.

Assuming the pause moves to such a longer-term halt, we will work with Turkey and local residents on the humanitarian and social commitments of the October 17 Joint Statement, cooperate with our local partners against ISIS even as the U.S. military continues the withdrawal directed by the President, and press for full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the only hope for a long-term resolution of the underlying Syrian conflict.

To these ends, we are looking to organize a number of senior level meetings with our international partners involved in the Defeat-ISIS Coalition as well as our Syria-focused group. Our intent is to re-affirm with our Coalition partners the shared goals of ensuring that ISIS does not re-emerge.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. DAS Palmer and I look forward to taking your questions.