

U.S. Department of State

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

December 9, 2020

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on this important issue of the Syrian conflict, one of the most dangerous crises in the world in both geostrategic and humanitarian terms. I have just returned from a trip to the Middle East during which I discussed the importance of advancing an enduring political settlement to the Syrian conflict with our allies and partners in Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf countries, while also spending time with our local partners in northeast Syria.

The Syrian conflict poses serious threats to the vital national security interests of the United States. It is an extraordinary crisis involving terrorism, the risk of interstate war, chemical weapons, war crimes and atrocities, and a humanitarian and refugee crisis of historic proportions.

For several years now, these vital national security concerns have led the United States to pursue the interconnected goals of an enduring defeat of ISIS and Al-Qa'ida; the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria; and a lasting political solution to the underlying Syrian conflict consistent with UNSCR 2254. In the complex problem that Syria poses, it has proven impossible to achieve any one of these goals by addressing it in isolation from the other two. Progress has required coordinated efforts on all three together, and as a result progress has been fragile and sometimes slow.

Nevertheless, based on what I have heard and seen from our allies and partners, and based on the situation on the ground in Syria, my assessment is that each of our major goals in Syria is within reach, and our leverage concerning each is growing over time. In other words, after many years of frustration and sometimes setbacks, we and our partners and allies are finally on a path that offers success, as long as we remain committed to it. Our adversaries in Syria, conversely, have failed to achieve their goals and their ability to dictate the terms of Syria's future is waning. The path to our goals is still filled with serious challenges, but the current state of affairs is encouraging, and it attests to what can be done when diplomatic efforts are strongly backed by both this Congress and responsible members of the international community.

For over nine years, Bashar al-Assad's brutal campaign against his own people has displaced half of Syria's pre-war population, and few Syrians wish to return without meaningful political change in the country. The Assad regime, meanwhile, is weak and flagging. Much of Syria's airspace, and more than 30 percent of Syria's territory, are controlled by others, including the majority of the country's energy and agricultural areas; and the regime faces serious instability and threats from ISIS in the areas it nominally controls. The Assad regime's massive corruption

and economic mismanagement has fueled an unprecedented collapse of the regime's economy, including a significant drop in the value of the Syrian pound, a vast energy shortage, and an almost complete cessation of international investment.

As a result of their actions, Bashar al-Assad and his regime are international pariahs under comprehensive and coordinated U.S. and E.U. sanctions. The international community broadly agrees there should be no reconstruction assistance as long as the Syrian government's brutal behavior continues. The regime is diplomatically isolated, including through its continued exclusion from the Arab League. A failed Russian-sponsored conference on refugee returns in Damascus last month was an embarrassment for the regime and its backers, and a manifestation of the broad-based, U.S.-led international consensus that Damascus should not be rewarded for its behavior.

Assad, his allies, and the vast majority of the international community that share the U.S. approach to Syria, all recognize the strong bipartisan support from you that led to the passage of the Caesar Act legislation. The Caesar Act has been a powerful tool reinforcing the regime's exclusion from the international community and denying Assad the resources he and his regime use to commit mass atrocities, some of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, against the Syrian people.

U.S. Policy Priorities and Conditions for a Political Solution

As I have noted, U.S. policy priorities in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qa'ida; the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces; and a lasting political resolution to the conflict consistent with UNSCR 2254.

In addition, as Secretary Pompeo previously stated, we will continue to work for the return of Austin Tice, Majd Kamalmaz, and every other American who is held hostage or wrongfully detained in Syria.

In pursuing our objectives, the United States believes that any lasting resolution of the conflict requires that the following six conditions must be met before establishing normal diplomatic or economic relations with a government in Damascus, whether it is the current government or any future one.

First, the Syrian government should not pose a threat to the United States or to Syria's neighbors;

Second, it must cease to be a state sponsor of terrorism, and not allow Syria to be a safe haven for terrorism.

Third, the government in Damascus must sever its relationships with the Iranian regime's forces and Iranian-backed groups. The Iranian regime and the militias it supports must not be allowed to use Syrian territory to threaten the United States, our citizens, or our interests, or to threaten our allies and partners such as Israel and Jordan.

Fourth, the Syrian government must cease its use of chemical weapons and adhere to its obligations under UNSCR 2118 and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Fifth, the Syrian government must create the conditions for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes.

And finally, the Syrian government must hold accountable those who have committed serious human rights violations and abuses, including war crimes or crimes against humanity, or assist the international community in holding them accountable.

As for the means of securing our national goals, we believe U.S. strategic objectives are best achieved by undertaking a road map that includes: carrying out the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254; implementing the nationwide ceasefire called for in UNSCR 2254; continuing our counter-terrorism campaign and preserving the global coalition; and pressing ultimately for the withdrawal of foreign forces not present in Syria before 2011.

The United States has developed a broad coalition of likeminded partners to accomplish these steps. The United States has worked with Russia on such an approach, including at a May 2019 meeting in Sochi between Secretary Pompeo and President Putin, in addition to regular gatherings of our likeminded Syria Small Group consisting of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. We have also coordinated closely with Israel and with Turkey.

The greatest obstacle to a stable and secure outcome in Syria has been the Assad regime's unwillingness, even in the face of disaster, to deviate from its goal of military victory. The regime's recalcitrance has been exacerbated by Russia's unwillingness thus far to sufficiently press the Assad regime to recognize that there is no alternative to a negotiated political settlement to the conflict.

Four Elements of our Pressure Campaign

Economic Pressure:

Our position and approach are firmly supported by our international partners. Along with the EU, we are applying economic pressure via our respective sanctions programs against the Syrian regime and its supporters; we maintain a shared political commitment to oppose reconstruction or stabilization in regime-held areas; and we continue to work to ensure economic isolation of the regime. Since the adoption of the Caesar Act, the Administration has designated over 90 individuals and entities who use their wealth or positions to continue Assad's war against his own people.

We are also expanding the frequency and the types of international engagement with bilateral partners and the private sector to reduce sanctions evasion, develop new targeted sanctions, and coordinate other economic measures against the regime and its supporters, all while ensuring our sanctions do not impede necessary assistance to the Syrian people.

Political Pressure:

U.S. political pressure takes the form of public engagement, in partnership with Syrian civil society, to remind the world of the regime's atrocities and blatant disregard for the well-being of the Syrian people, as well as outreach to the Syrian opposition and approximately 50 percent of the Syrian population – including inhabitants of areas not under Assad's control – and in supporting implementation of UNSCR 2254, including support for constitutional reform and elections.

Diplomatic Pressure:

Our diplomatic pressure discourages closer diplomatic ties with the Assad regime, maintains Syria's exclusion from international fora, and promotes accountability for perpetrators of human rights abuses. We are leading efforts to avoid diplomatic concessions to and normalization with the Syrian government absent irreversible progress on the conditions I have already outlined. We lend diplomatic and political support to an inclusive political process centered in Geneva, and our diplomats in the field have built key relationships to support dialogue and reconciliation among the communities of northern Syria in particular.

Military Pressure:

We have applied pressure to push the conflict towards a resolution in the form of U.S. and allied military actions in response to regime chemical weapons use and through U.S. leadership of the 83 member D-ISIS Coalition, which shouldered the burden of fighting ISIS in Syria while the Syrian regime was focused on killing its own people. Additionally, Israeli military operations in Syria and Turkey's deployments in Idlib deny the Syria regime and Iran and its the groups it backs the ability to further their aims. Armed opposition groups also put military pressure on the Assad regime.

Continuing the D-ISIS Mission

We continue to support Coalition efforts against ISIS through our presence in northeast Syria and in Iraq. Concurrently, we continue to support the defeat-ISIS operations of our local SDF partners in the northeast and will continue to target ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates across Syria.

We also continue to press countries to repatriate their ISIS foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and associated family members and dependents from northeast Syria, and to subject them to the appropriate disposition upon return -- whether prosecution, or rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Proactive repatriation to countries of origin is the best way to ensure ISIS remains unable to reconstitute itself both in the region and overseas.

Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Syrian People

Moving forward, we will continue to ensure the international community supports those suffering at the hands of Assad. To date the United States has provided over \$12 billion in assistance to the Syrian people. We expect our allies and partners to continue generous funding of humanitarian and stabilization efforts, while taking steps to ensure that the Assad regime cannot divert humanitarian aid for its own purposes.

We are also enhancing stability in areas liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria through stabilization and other assistance, including in areas where Coalition members have withdrawn forces, but the Syrian Democratic Forces continue to secure.

As part of any resolution of the Syrian conflict, we support the release of all Syrians held in arbitrary detention by the regime, including the elderly, women, and children.

We also support the work of Syrian documentation groups and international mechanisms that report on and promote accountability for human rights abuses in Syria. These include the UN Commission of Inquiry and the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism, which support potential future prosecution of Syrian regime crimes well as other initiatives like the UN Board of Inquiry on Syria. We will also continue efforts, including at the OPCW, to ensure that the regime faces consequences for its proven chemical weapons attacks against the Syrian people.

Conclusion

There will be no stability in Syria until violence ends, accountability measures are put in place, and the internationally supported political process truly takes hold. As I have noted, the road ahead remains full of challenges, but we can take heart in the fundamental fact that almost a decade after the Syrian conflict began, our adversaries have failed to accomplish their goals and have no viable path to ending the conflict on their terms. Meanwhile, as I have laid out for you, each day, we marshal all the tools of the U.S. government and those provided to us by Congress to bring this nearly 10-year conflict to a peaceful close.

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