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“Syria: Which Way Forward?”

Madam Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Sub-Committee: I am honored by this invitation to speak to you about the way forward for US policy in Syria. I submit this statement for your consideration.

My statement focuses on the mismatch between the Trump administration’s stated goals in Syria, and the means by which it intends to pursue them. My recommendation is that, unless the United States commits to military escalation against regime and Iranian forces in Syria, it should modify its goals to focus on fighting the Islamic State, defending US-held territory, supporting local governance, and mending relations with Turkey.

### **US Policy in Syria under the Trump Administration**

On January 18, 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined the Trump administration’s five goals in Syria in the wake of the Islamic State’s defeat as a territorial entity:

1. The lasting defeat of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda
2. Creating conditions for the return of Syrian refugees
3. Eliminating the Assad regime’s weapons of mass destruction
4. Weakening Iran in Syria
5. Ending the Syrian civil war through “a UN-led political process [resulting in] a stable, unified, independent Syria, under post-Assad leadership.”

Secretary Tillerson identified the administration’s three tools for achieving these five goals:

1. A limited US military deployment in Kurdish-controlled parts of Syria - essentially the northeast - partnered with tens of thousands of local fighters.
2. Aggressive diplomacy to advance a political solution through the so-called Geneva process and remove Assad through UN-supervised elections.
3. Stabilization operations in US-controlled areas, including meeting humanitarian needs and restoring basic services.

## **Assessing the Goals**

The Trump administration's five goals in Syria align with US national interests:

The United States has an interest in the lasting defeat of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Both pose terrorist and potential strategic threats in and beyond the region. A US withdrawal today would likely lead to the Islamic State's resurgence, facilitated by the sectarian repression of Sunnis by Iran and the Assad regime.

Creating conditions that allow Syrian refugees to go home is both humane and necessary. Partners like Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon cannot host millions of Syrian refugees indefinitely. Refugees that reach our European allies, while far fewer in number, have contributed to their social and political polarization.

Depriving the Assad regime of weapons of mass destruction is clearly a US interest, although ensuring he does not use them takes priority. Assad has an established record of gassing Syrian civilians; he continues to use chemicals against opposition-controlled areas.

The remaining two goals are diminishing Iranian influence in Syria and ending the Syrian civil war through a political settlement. Although policymakers often disagree over the goals' respective urgency and how to pursue them, they generally and rightly recognize Iran as a US adversary, and a threat to US regional interests and partners. Iran's dramatically expanded influence in Syria presents a direct security threat to Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Assad enables this Iranian influence and refuses a political compromise that might end a conflict that fuels extremism, terrorism, and mass refugee flows. Ending the war in a manner that weakens both Assad and Iran is therefore a valid US interest.

## **A Mismatch between Means and Ends**

All five goals are valid, but only a few can be achieved through the administration's strategy.

The United States defeated the Islamic State by equipping, advising, and supporting local Kurdish-led forces, deploying only a few hundred US troops. Progress was slow and the strategy was complicated by heavy reliance on the YPG. The YPG is linked to the US-designated terrorist group the PKK, which is an enemy of our NATO ally Turkey. This strategy did succeed however, and the Islamic State is unlikely to re-emerge as a serious threat amid a US military presence. That is an achievable goal. Al Qaeda however, is not present in or near US-controlled territory, but located further west in areas contested by Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. It is not clear how a US presence in eastern Syria can affect that.

The prospects of resettling refugees in Syria are mixed. Some refugees will seek safety under a US security umbrella if they can reach it. This can be encouraged by US-led reconstruction efforts in these areas, even if Secretary Tillerson has insisted the United States would limit its efforts to less extensive 'stabilization'. In all cases, refugees will weigh these benefits against expectations of how the current Kurdish-dominated, autocratic authorities in northeast Syria would treat them.

The regime has not used Sarin gas against its people since April 2017, likely due to the punitive US cruise missile strikes that the attack provoked. However it has not shown any intention of giving up these weapons. Indeed, the regime has dodged and subverted international efforts to seize them for years. A US military deployment in parts of Syria will not change that pattern. The regime continues to use chlorine as a weapon in opposition-held parts of Syria despite the robust US presence in the northeast.

The remaining two goals - weakening Iran and ending the civil war through a political settlement - are the most ambitious. They cannot be achieved through the administration's specified tools: a US deployment in the northeast, stabilization operations, and diplomacy.

For one, Iran has fought long and hard for its unprecedentedly strong position in Syria. It must secure the Assad regime to ensure a foothold and ally in the Arab world and supply its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. A US presence in the northeast may keep Iran out of that specific geography, but it would not diminish Iranian influence. Nor would it slow Iran's further entrenchment in 'useful Syria'—the country's economic and demographic core in the Assad-controlled West, or stop the continuing fall of opposition territory to regime and Iranian forces. A US presence adjacent to regime territory may trouble Iran, but that is a nuisance not a danger. Iranian equities in Syria and its nearly-perfected art of asymmetric warfare can manage it. Iran and the tens of thousands of militia fighters it controls in Syria cannot be seriously weakened without military action.

Finally, ending the civil war and removing Assad through a UN-led political process and free elections is not achievable through the stated means. Assad will not negotiate his political monopoly away after killing hundreds of thousands to preserve it. Russia has little incentive and no means to compel him to do so. A combination of Russian air power, Iranian-backed auxiliary forces, and international neglect has allowed Assad to reverse years of losses and all but defeat the insurgency. He is winning the war, and the opposition - which the administration has chosen not to support - is weaker than ever. Assad will not concede while strong what he refused to when he was far weaker. Changing the military balance could alter his calculus, but the administration does not seek to confront him or his Iranian backers, directly or by proxy. Any hypothetical political settlement would simply reflect the opposition's catastrophic military situation and favor Assad.

Elections will not oust Assad either. Even if free and fair elections were possible in Syria - which is doubtful - if Assad wins that would not change the repressive way he governs, or reconcile his adversaries to it. An Assad victory would also undermine the stated goal of weakening Iran. If Assad loses on the other hand, he would not simply concede power and the US administration would not force him to. Nor can the United States use quarrels over constitutions and electoral laws to bog down the regime, Iran, and their Russian supporters in processes and negotiations. Assad and Iran cannot be hampered by something they do not care about. Even if Russia were genuinely interested in legitimizing Assad's military victory through elections, it will always be more interested in preserving his political monopoly by ensuring he wins the war. Pursuing elections in the context of Assad's overwhelming military superiority is a distraction and waste of US credibility and resources.

A US military deployment in northeast Syria will deprive Assad of important strategic assets including water, arable land, oil, and border crossings, even as Iran is forced to subsidize his regime for billions of dollars a year. However, Assad would probably rather see Syria starve than share it with his enemies. Iran will not defund its Syrian client and destroy its regional position. Syria is the linchpin of its regional empire, and despotic regimes are resourceful when fighting wars at their peoples' expense. Economic pressure is a useful tool, but cannot achieve meaningful political change or weaken Iran in Syria without military force.

Of the administration's five identified US goals in Syria, one is very plausible, and two others might be achievable. The remaining two - pertaining to the Assad regime and Iran - are not achievable through the means specified without military escalation. The United States should not commit to policy goals it will not or cannot realize.

### **Obstacles to a Military Escalation**

Transforming the strategic situation in Syria - weakening Iran and removing Assad - is not possible without direct or proxy military action. Years of US mistakes in Syria however have made the military option exceedingly costly and risky. These mistakes have allowed Assad and Iran to accumulate advantages, including Russia's crucial entry into the war, the creation of Iran's vast militia infrastructure, and the deterioration of US-Turkish relations. The United States should not have allowed Assad to commit mass murder for seven years, or use weapons of mass destruction. It should have intervened forcefully to end the war, rather than let it continue long enough for Syria to become a full Iranian client state. Failing to support the moderate Syrian opposition against both Assad and extremists was also a serious error, as was undermining the US alliance with Turkey through neglect and over-reliance on the YPG. These mistakes have narrowed US options and raised the cost and risks of military action in Syria.

With the moderate opposition's defeat and our Arab and Turkish allies' giving up on fighting Assad, the United States has no ready anti-Assad equivalent to Iran and its militia proxies to turn to, and no regional partners ready to fight in Syria either. Saudi Arabia is no longer engaged in Syria. Egypt is more a friend of Assad's than an enemy. The US alliance with Turkey is in shambles. Indeed, every major state actor in Syria - Iran, Russia, and Turkey - is now hostile or distrustful toward the United States. There is no pro-US equivalent to Iran's local militias either: the YPG was effective against the Islamic State with heavy US support, but is not an appropriate tool for confronting Iran or the Syrian regime. The YPG's enemy is Turkey, its priority is regional autonomy, and it has repeatedly cooperated with regime and Iranian forces to further those interests.

Additionally, the latest US National Defense Strategy document identifies great power competition with China and Russia as the principle priorities of the United States. The nuclear threat from North Korea presumably looms large in US strategic thinking as well. Confronting Iran in Syria would require resources, personnel, bandwidth, and domestic political capital, and compete with stated US global priorities. These tensions would need to be reconciled.

Considering these obstacles, it is understandable that the Trump administration has rejected a military solution to the problem of Assad and Iran in Syria. Iran cannot be weakened without military escalation however, a political transition from Assad to democracy is impossible. Unless the administration decides to change its stance on military action, Congress should insist that it revise US goals and means in Syria accordingly.

## **A Targeted Policy**

Since the administration has rejected military escalation against Assad and Iran, its policy should include narrower goals and the appropriate means:

1. **Train and support local forces to ensure the Islamic State remains weak in US-controlled Syria.** These forces should be expanded or reorganized to ensure sufficient Arab influence and military command as opposed to the current YPG dominance. This will give local security forces legitimacy, deprive the Islamic State of ethnic fault lines to exploit, and allay Turkish concerns about perceived US sponsorship of a hostile YPG-ruled entity in Syria.
2. **Defend US-held territory against regime, Iranian, or Russian aggression.** Any indefinite US deployment adjacent to enemies will trigger eventual military escalation by deeply-committed adversaries such as Assad and Iran. The administration should plan for this and consult with Congress in advance on how to handle it. Under no circumstances should the United States commit to a mission in Syria, only to retreat in the face of foreseeable military or political costs imposed by our enemies.
3. **Strengthen governance and pursue reconstruction in US-controlled areas.** Creating effective, inclusive governance structures incorporating Kurdish-Arab power-sharing can form the basis of an alternative, pro-US, non-Assad regime in Syria. Additionally, although Secretary Tillerson ruled out 'reconstruction' in favor of less ambitious 'stabilization', refugees will not return to a place that is not being rebuilt, while extremism will thrive. Partner governments can share the costs but the United States must lead on this. Governance and reconstruction are potent counter-terrorism tools. The United States should not help rebuild Assad-held Syria, though denying it such help does not provide political leverage against the regime.
4. **De-escalate the Turkey-YPG conflict.** Continued Turkish-YPG conflict threatens the stability of a US-controlled entity and US relations with a NATO ally. The United States should push hard for a Turkish-Kurdish de-escalation by exercising diplomatic pressure on Turkey, leverage over US-trained and equipped Kurdish forces, and increased US support for Arab forces. Official US communication - civilian and military - should refrain from fulsome praise for Turkey's adversary, or accuse it of supporting terrorist groups. The US-YPG partnership is valuable but should be kept in perspective: Turkey is a regional power, a NATO ally, and simply more important.

Achieving these goals would serve the US national interest in Syria at a reasonable level of risk and cost.

## **Conclusion**

The United States has found itself with few good options or partners in Syria. This does not mean it should simply abandon all its equities in northeastern Syria to Assad, Iran, and the YPG. Fighting the Islamic State is reason enough to maintain a US presence and support partners in Syria, provided this does not destroy US relations with Turkey. Refugee resettlement and reconstruction serve US security interests. Ending the Syrian war and weakening Iran's rising and robust regional empire however will take more commitment and appetite for risk than the administration has understandably demonstrated.

Only military escalation against Assad can accomplish real political change or meaningfully weaken Iran in Syria. Otherwise, Iranian interests in Syria will be secure, and the country's population zones and critical infrastructure will remain under regime control, including the capital Damascus. The administration should not expect otherwise. Nor should Congress or the American public. The United States should tie its military deployment in Syria to goals it is willing and able to realize: supporting local partners against the Islamic State; defending US-held territory; establishing effective governance; and fixing the alliance with Turkey. These goals are worthwhile and achievable.