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Hearing on – “Syria: Which Way Forward?”

Mrs. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

First, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today, and to address the situation in Syria and how U.S. policy can best approach Syria’s complex but strategically important challenges.

Nearly three weeks ago, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out in some detail what he termed “the way forward for the United States in Syria.” What then followed was a five-part strategic vision, in which U.S. national security interests would be best secured by achieving five grand – and I should say, laudable – objectives: (1) the lasting defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda and any other terrorist threat to the U.S. at home or overseas; (2) the resolution of Syria’s broader conflict through a UN-led political process that secures the departure of President Bashar al-Assad; (3) the diminishment of Iranian influence in Syria; (4) the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced peoples; and (5) a Syria free of weapons of mass destruction.

Broadly speaking, this closely mirrors how the Obama administration publicly framed its own policy on Syria, and in that sense, not much has changed. However, the Obama administration’s handling of Syria was a tale of tragedy and frustration – a story of opportunities missed, deals not done, disasters not averted, and of influence and credibility lost. So, will this, apparently new U.S. strategy be any different in its implementation? Much attention was rightfully given to Secretary Tillerson’s declaration that the U.S. “will maintain a military presence in Syria” and that “it is vital for the U.S. to remain engaged in Syria... a total withdrawal of American personnel at this time would restore Assad and continue his brutal treatment against his own people.”

While the Trump administration should be praised for bringing some policy clarity to an issue of significant strategic concern, Secretary Tillerson’s speech raised many more questions than it provided answers. As things stand today, there is simply no foreseeable path available to the U.S. to achieve the five stated objectives. Moreover, the Trump administration has provided no evidence that it has developed a meaningful strategy to match its grand goals, and has revealed no plans to deploy the resources that would be necessary to pursue them. Continuing to declare

such grand goals without deploying even close to the necessary means to achieve them will only continue to erode American influence and credibility in the region.

SITREP: The Syrian Crisis

Nearly seven years of war has ravaged Syria and produced countless secondary threats to U.S. national security interests. In addition to leaving half a million dead, conflict in Syria has also forced nearly 12 million from their homes, with more than 13 million people now assessed to be in need of humanitarian assistance. Syria's collapse into chaos has produced multiple wars within a single country's boundaries and militarized hundreds of thousands on all sides. Weapons proliferation into and out of Syria will be a concern for decades to come and the array of terrorist groups borne out of and hardened by Syrian battle should be well known by now: from the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda to Hezbollah and the dozens of Shia militant groups commanded by Iran. Taken together today, those terroristic groups likely total at least 75,000-100,000 in Syria alone, but taken one-by-one, they pose differing but equally dangerous threats.

The crisis in Syria has also witnessed a shockingly regular use of chemical weapons, with monitors now accounting for between 198 and 326 suspected chemical attacks in Syria since 2012 – at least 95% of which were directly linked to regime attacks. Moreover, the UN, the OPCW, French intelligence and several other governments have now determined conclusively that the regime has used Sarin gas on multiple occasions, both before and since the Russian-mediated deal to remove Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles.

Syria's crisis has also had damaging geopolitical effects, as unprecedented refugee flows have crippled America's strategic partners in the region and sparked a wave of debilitating domestic challenges to our European allies. Our laser-like focus on combating ISIS while largely ignoring the conflict's other dynamics has now opened up the unfortunate reality of a fellow NATO ally fighting our own counter-ISIS partners, the Kurdish YPG. Russia meanwhile, has exploited the vacuum left behind by American indecision and emerged as an increasingly influential player in the Middle East and beyond. Iran on the other hand, is more powerful than ever, with its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps now operating a professional, transnational network of potentially capable militias across the region, operating in direct competition to U.S. interests and influence. Hezbollah may now be more powerful than many Eastern European militaries and together, Iran's array of proxies may now pose a more serious threat to Israel than the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon.

All of this has happened because of Syria. It is a deeply concerning reality. And yet at no time throughout the entire Syrian conflict has America devoted sufficient attention or resources to

dealing with the root causes that drive the fighting that produces these dangerous effects. The Trump administration looks set to replicate its predecessor's tendency for strong rhetoric and only minimal action – in effect, a meek policy of containment that repeatedly sees us react to events slower than they occur. Three more years of that will only produce more threats to American security and more damage to our interests, influence, and credibility abroad.

Conventional wisdom now tells us that the war, or wars, in Syria are winding down. But this is wrong. Syria today remains a country mired by countless conflict fault-lines, none of which are close to resolution. The intensity of fighting may have receded over the past year, but this was not because any root causes or conflict drivers were resolved – rather, those root causes were aggressively pushed aside while the world focused on dealing with a symptom of the conflict: ISIS. The mechanism used for doing so, known as de-escalation zones, was by Russian design intended to allow for continued, lower-level violence within a context in which external states had already agreed to cease military support to the mainstream opposition. The Trump administration's total cessation of support to over 70 vetted opposition groups with whom we had worked since early-2013 was a crucially important cog in this Russian design. The result of these de-escalation zones has become increasingly clear over time, as the Assad regime has continued to indiscriminately bomb and methodically recapture small amounts of strategically important territory, slowly strangling the opposition and strengthening its hand further.

It is important here to place this in some policy context. By lending its public and private support to a Russian-led initiative designed specifically to strengthen Assad's position yet further, the Trump administration has directly abetted Assad's survival, Iran's expansion and threat to Israel, and continued civilian displacement. We are therefore no closer to a political settlement. In fact, Western support for Russia's de-escalation design along with its bloody consequences, has been understood on the ground to represent Western support, or at minimum acceptance, of Assad's long-term legitimacy. Whatever Secretaries of State or other officials might say in front of podiums about justice, human rights and removing Assad, the facts on the ground are what determine the viability of negotiations and those facts stand starkly in opposition to our rhetoric.

With ISIS's territorial Caliphate now effectively a thing of the past, all major actors in Syria are shifting their attention to determining future dynamics. The result is the re-eruption of Syria's various root sources of conflict that had until now been swept aside by the prioritization of the anti-ISIS fight. From north to south and east to west, fighting is intensifying and battlefronts are re-opening – all of which underlines further the importance of dealing with the Syrian issue more holistically and with a prioritization where possible given to root causes, rather than symptoms.

Syria: [Realistic] Policy Options

When it comes to determining U.S. policy options, one must first acknowledge four fundamental truths:

1. Syria will remain at least partially unstable for years to come and as such, policy focus should be placed on stabilizing where possible and leveraging legitimate and acceptable actors to represent local sources of credible authority within an extended interim period.
2. U.S. policy since 2011 has been too limited in scope and scale to have acquired the necessary leverage to definitively achieve all five objectives set out by Secretary Tillerson on January 18. The U.S. must work within the realistic boundaries of what is possible.
3. U.S. influence over certain dynamics and actors in Syria could be enhanced, were U.S. policy to focus more intensively on securing discernible improvements in issues like civilian protection, humanitarian aid access, prisoner releases etc.
4. Terrorism will continue to spawn and emanate from Syria until the root causes of instability, political and social disenfranchisement and intra-communal violence are dealt with; principally the issue of political leadership in Damascus and the fate of the Assad regime.

With these fundamental truths in mind, the U.S. has four principal avenues for possible policy action:

1. Northeastern Syria:

- The U.S.'s greatest source of influence in Syria is in the country's northeast, where our principal partner in the war on ISIS – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – now rules supreme. Having removed ISIS from almost all of its territory by early-2018, attention has rightly turned to stabilizing populated areas of northeast Syria in order to (1) prevent conditions for a return of extremism and to (2) establish a credible alternative form of governance to compete with the regime. However, the task ahead here is huge. In Raqqa city alone, the demining effort is likely to take at least another six months and 80% of the city is damaged or destroyed. Water and electricity services remain all but nonexistent and no major international funds have emerged to sustain large-scale stabilization let alone reconstruction in areas liberated from ISIS.
 - o The U.S. needs to urgently raise more funds from within the international community – centered within the Global Coalition Against ISIS – to accelerate these stabilization initiatives. Northern Syria remains deeply unstable and the U.S. must ensure that sufficient work is done to provide the space for refugee and IDP return within a territorial region under U.S. guardianship.

- Pursuing a strategy of remaining in the northeast by-with-and-through our SDF partners brings with it a number of significant risks, which must be acknowledged and dealt with. The greatest risk pertains to the SDF and Turkey:
 - The SDF is dominated in number and command by the Kurdish militant group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that has fought a decades-long war with NATO ally Turkey. Turkey has consistently considered U.S. support to the YPG as an existential national security threat and has twice invaded northern Syria to pre-empt or block a consolidation of that threat along its border – as recently as January 2018, shortly after the U.S. announcement that the SDF would become a “Border Security Force.”
 - The Department of Defense is fighting an unwinnable battle in trying to convince Turkey that the YPG is not the PKK. After all, the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) labelled it as such until we started working with the YPG in 2014, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) resumed its labelling of the YPG as a component of the PKK in 2018. Instead, the U.S. government should acknowledge the nature of our ally in northeastern Syria and seek to ameliorate its most problematic aspects. While it may not be possible to definitively sever the YPG's links to the PKK, it ought to be possible to limit the group's use of PKK symbols and strategic rhetoric and expel non-Syrian fighters from its ranks. The greatest and most challenging objective would be for the U.S. to engage intensively with Ankara and the YPG to negotiate a mutually-acceptable détente, potentially within the broader grounds of a Turkey-PKK ceasefire. Should the U.S. demonstrate a clear and consistent ability to control the YPG's provocative behaviors and to limit its ideological indoctrination of northeastern Syria's communities, and to make it concretely clear to Turkey that it does not plan to abandon the YPG/SDF, we may at least stand a chance of avoiding an all-out Turkish-Kurdish conflict across all of northern Syria.
 - The U.S. should also continue its efforts to “Arabize” the SDF, particularly in the many Arab majority areas in which the SDF now operates. Much progress has been made in this regard in recent months, but the YPG still retains a substantial majority of the SDF's key leadership and local command functions. Until that changes, the SDF risks continuing to appear as an organization driven by YPG interests and backed by malleable minority groups and Arab tribes.
- In pursuing a strategy of doubling down in the northeast, the U.S. also risks an eventual coming to blows with pro-regime forces, who will perceive a consolidated U.S. partner force and a continued U.S. troop presence as a threat. This confrontation is most likely to come in the form of repeated, small-scale incursions by pro-regime forces, who will seek

to test U.S. defensive lines and our willingness to respond in force. The U.S. must acknowledge this likelihood up front and prepare to implement necessary responses. Within such a scenario, the U.S. should determinedly protect its assets – perceived weakness or risk aversion will in all likelihood eventually result in slow but systematic pro-regime gains. The negative fate of the U.S. military facility in al-Tanf in southeastern Syria should serve as a lesson in this respect.

2. Terrorism: ISIS & Al-Qaeda:

- The U.S. has dealt a hammer blow to ISIS's Caliphate, having recaptured 98% of the terrorist group's territory in Iraq and Syria. However, ISIS remains active in several pockets of Syria and American aircraft continue to strike ISIS targets in the country's east. In western Syria meanwhile, the Assad regime appears to have repeatedly allowed – or potentially even facilitated – the movement of ISIS militants through regime-held territory and onto new frontlines on which it can fight the opposition. ISIS also remains active in a small pocket of territory in southwestern Syria and there are indications that it has infiltrated opposition territory in the northwest. ISIS has also gone underground, following orders by its senior leadership several months ago to prepare the ground for a new phase of guerrilla war that would eventually catalyze another recovery alike what was seen between 2010-2014.
 - o The U.S. must therefore continue to monitor ISIS activities across Syria and be prepared to attack its terrorist forces using pre-deployed ground and air assets wherever possible. The U.S. must also be clear to accuse the Assad regime of its shortcomings in confronting ISIS, and where provable, highlight its role in providing ISIS with the space to operate anew. Assad has nearly two decades of documented history engaging in such activity, so its continuation should surprise nobody.
 - o The Department of Defense must also further enhance its train and equip efforts with the SDF and significantly expand – with international assistance – stabilization and interim reconstruction efforts in liberated areas of northeastern Syria (as laid out earlier). Having staked out a claim in such a valuable area of Syria, the U.S. must now meet its critically important responsibilities of establishing a sense of normalcy, stability and recovery so as to prevent any possible return of extremists and extremism.
 - o The U.S. must maintain intensive intelligence collection efforts in Syria and its neighboring region, while continuing to enhance levels of intelligence sharing with coalition partners and allies, so as to ensure ISIS cannot maintain effective external attack planning. The destruction of ISIS's territorial Caliphate has been an important victory, but the establishment of a discernible Caliphate by itself

established a reality in ISIS supporters' minds that may prove irreversible. The threat of external attacks – planned or inspired – will likely remain critical for years to come.

- The U.S. must also recognize the intrinsic connection between Iraq and Syria for the counter-ISIS mission. Shortcomings in Iraq will benefit ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and vice-versa.
- While the U.S. has successfully degraded ISIS in Syria, Al-Qaeda and likeminded groups have been largely left alone and provided the space to thrive. Today, the former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commands approximately 15,000 jihadist fighters, mostly in Syria's northwest. HTS remains the militarily dominant actor in Idlib province, though its social influence is sorely lacking, having assumed that dominance by violently suppressing the mainstream opposition. Gone are the days of HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, being a widely popular and accepted movement - but that does not yet take away from HTS's brute power. HTS remains overwhelmingly focused on Syria specific dynamics – the global jihad and attacking the West is not on its agenda for now. Therefore, the threat it poses is different: it represents a dangerous spoiler that will continue to feed off of continued anti-regime sentiments within the broader opposition, and its continued jihadist nature and focus on territorial control and governance means its existence presents a viable safe-haven in which jihadists immediately concerned with external operations can operate more freely.
- Following HTS's very public falling out with Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda loyalists have coalesced into a much smaller circle numbering approximately 200-300 militants. This loyalist clique consists primarily of veteran Al-Qaeda members, senior Al-Qaeda leaders and committed, foreign jihadists from across the Middle East and further afield – likely including Western passport holders. Although these Al-Qaeda loyalists have held HTS in particularly low regard since their breakup, a delicate détente exists between them, which allows for Al-Qaeda's continued, but more covert operation in northwestern Syria. This arrangement is akin to the complex and often uncomfortable relationship between the Taliban (like HTS) and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan prior to 9/11.
 - The U.S. has minimal on-the-ground influence in northwestern Syria, particularly since the Trump administration's severing of all assistance to vetted opposition groups in the region. However, dealing effectively and sustainably with the HTS problem does not mean using kinetic, counter-terrorism means. Instead, the U.S. must recognize that confronting HTS means outcompeting its ability to exert influence on the ground. Like its predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS is heavily dependent on continued conflict with the Assad regime – a total and genuine ceasefire in northwestern Syria would represent a serious challenge to its long-term influence, especially when combined with continued external support to civil

bodies that administer services and governance activities in rivalry to HTS. Providing a semblance of stability and giving anti-HTS civilian councils the ability to provide for their communities would remove HTS's reason for being grudgingly accepted on the ground. It would also make further HTS attacks on mainstream opposition groups, civilian councils and other linked bodies a risk likely not worth considering. HTS still remains a primarily local movement, whose real vulnerabilities lie in its lack of popularity and credibility. There are things the U.S. can do to better equip locals to sweep the rug from under HTS's feet and create the conditions in which military opportunities to counter its most extremist wings could become available.

- Meanwhile, the U.S. must also maintain an active intelligence effort (both on the ground and in the air) over northwestern Syria in order to strike veteran Al-Qaeda figures and individuals known or suspected to be involved in external operations planning. The emerging presence of a small, covert Al-Qaeda loyalist clique in Idlib is a deeply dangerous development – particularly given its lack of transparency.

3. Iran:

- The conflict in Syria has been an invaluable boon to Iran's expansionist vision for the Middle East region, with gains made there and in Iraq having sealed a de facto land-bridge spanning between Tehran in the east and the Mediterranean in the west. In Syria alone, Iran has direct and indirect control over an estimated 150,000-man fighting force, encompassing Syrian nationals, as well as tens of thousands of Iraqis, Lebanese, Pakistanis, Afghans and Yemenis. Using the model perfected in Lebanon, Iran is now putting steps into place to ensure that it maintains control of a sizeable, battle-hardened paramilitary structure in Syria that runs parallel to the central state. Iran and its IRGC have also invested heavily in regime areas of Syria and played a role in shifting the demographic nature of some strategically important regions of the country. This is also the case in Iraq. Iran has also constructed and taken partial-charge of several ballistic missile factories in western Syria and rumor persists that Hezbollah may be receiving training in Syria in the use of chemical weapons. Iranian and Hezbollah officials have made it patently clear what this means for Israel – the next war, whenever it happens, will be fought on two fronts (from southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria) and encompass a fighting force many times larger than ever before. Whenever that next conflict occurs, Israel will face a very significant military challenge and may even temporarily lose control of territory – risking a domestic political crisis.
- The U.S. may have the means to roll back Iran's influence and power in Syria, but it clearly does not have the will – either in government or within the population. After all, accomplishing such an objective would require a very serious military effort necessitating

a military deployment tens of times larger than is currently in Syria. However, the U.S. does have opportunities to constrain Iran's ability to gain further from its role in Syria and to contain the extent to which it can exploit its newfound influence.

- The U.S. has significant strategic interests in protecting its allies Israel and Jordan from Iranian expanding influence in southwestern Syria. One potent mechanism for doing so would be to exploit our five-year-old relationships with several dozen vetted Free Syrian Army opposition groups in the southwest in order to establish a network of local self-defense forces which would protect their villages and towns from attempts by pro-regime forces to advance. These units' responsibility would be strictly defensive as the U.S. objective would be to create a defensive buffer and deterrent that better guaranteed that Iran-backed forces could not approach Israeli or Jordanian territory any further. The existing de-escalation zone agreement in the area is far from sufficient and has been repeatedly tested and violated by pro-regime militiamen. A small level of U.S. and allied SOF presence in southwestern Syria would be a necessary component of this anti-Iran strategy, though training could take place in Jordan if deemed necessary.
- The U.S. should also continue its escalatory sanctioning of Iran and Iran-linked bodies and figures involved in illegal and terroristic activities in Syria. This effort should more clearly encompass an effort to designate those Iran-backed militant groups in Syria that are clearly linked to the IRGC's Quds Force, to sanction their leaders and to ensure that any negotiated arrangements on the ground (ceasefires, de-escalation zones etc.) specifically exclude those groups just like Al-Qaeda, HTS or ISIS are excluded. Until now, even Hezbollah – a designated terrorist organization – has been included as an acknowledged, and thus legitimate actor within arrangements negotiated and blessed in part by the U.S. government. Such inconsistent application of terrorism designations only serves to strengthen the very groups our government is meant to be constraining.
- Another path of potential U.S. action would be to join Israel in conducting targeted air strikes on especially flagrant threats or strategic weapons transfers by Iran to illegal militant groups like Hezbollah. An overt U.S. role in such actions would serve to enhance the deterrent effect considerably, while offering only minimal additional justification for an Iranian response.

4. Chemical Weapons:

- Despite the U.S.-Russian deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, the Assad regime has continued to use Sarin gas in attacks on opposition areas of Syria, most recently in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017. The regime has also continued to use chlorine gas for use in improvised chemical attacks on civilian areas. Such criminal acts

demonstrate not only that the Assad regime has repeatedly violated internationally-negotiated agreements and laws of war, but that his external patrons, Russia and Iran, are turning a blind eye and often covering for his use of chemical weapons. Iranian artillery rockets, for example, are being used by pro-regime forces to launch chlorine gas at besieged civilian communities in a Damascus suburb – five of those attacks have taken place in 2018, alone. Given the scale and international nature of pro-regime militia presence in Syria, the U.S. should also be concerned about the potential proliferation of chemical weapons use and experience beyond Syria's borders.

- The U.S. has a responsibility to continue to uphold and enforce international norms with regards to the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons. Having first stepped in and signed a deal with Russia in September 2013 that we now know to have been violated, and then having utilized military means to punish another use of chemical weapons in April 2017, the U.S. has established itself as an arbiter and enforcer. Continued chemical weapons use by pro-regime forces must be met with measured, but escalatory consequences – particularly the targeting of Syria's air force and military and scientific research facilities known to be linked to chemical weapons activities. Individuals linked to chemical weapons use and research should similarly be identified publicly and targeted by sanctions.
- Beyond immediate kinetic and economic responses, the U.S. should also continue its efforts to exploit the regime's continued use of chemicals and chemical weapons as leverage against Russia within the broader Syrian political dynamic.

These four areas present specific and necessary policy opportunities for the U.S. to secure important national security interests in Syria using realistic and available means at our disposal. The U.S. government must urgently accept that allowing the status quo to continue will not mean a stabilization of Syria and that by extension means the U.S. will continue to face the dangerous secondary effects of the conflict: terrorism; refugee flows and civilian displacement; chemical weapons use and proliferation; weapons proliferation; Iranian expansionism and aggression; Russian geopolitical competition etc.

The Trump administration's increasing investment in the likelihood of a political process in Geneva demonstrating significant results is based on false assumptions. There is still no indication that any aspect of the UN-led process in Geneva is shaped in such a way as to (1) succeed or (2) to lead to a representative settlement that ceases fighting, interim or otherwise. Rather than choosing to invest heavily in a process designed to secure long-term fixes to a currently unsolvable problem, the U.S. would be better positioned to focus on interim solutions and arrangements that protect our interests. In so doing, the U.S. government should acknowledge

that Syria is likely to remain at least partially unstable and divided for many years to come and the best chance of protecting U.S. interests lies in protecting those interests that we have secured thus far and confronting where possible the threats that challenge our most vital interests. The U.S. may not have the will to force the removal of the Assad regime, but it should also acknowledge our interests in ensuring that it does not wrestle back control of the rest of Syria – that scenario guarantees a continuation of the worst-case reality faced since 2011.