

# U.S. POLICY TOWARD SYRIA (PART D)

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS  
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## U.S. POLICY TOWARD SYRIA (PART I)

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2018

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:30 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [presiding]. The subcommittee will come to order.

Thank you so much for your patience. As a person who lost her native homeland, Cuba, to communism, where we don't have elections, I always say that it is wonderful to get interrupted by elections and by votes. So, I never complain. But that is why we are so late in getting started.

Thank you to the witnesses for your patience and to the audience members as well.

Ranking Member Ted Deutch was going to be here to at least give his opening remarks. He has a conflicting committee scheduled at the same time. But, because of the timing with the earlier votes at 1:30, he is now going to not be able to come. But, I don't know, I think that we have glammed it up by having Mr. Boyle sit in for Mr. Deutch. Don't tell him that, okay?

So, we will give our opening statements, and then, we will recognize other members seeking recognition for 1 minute. We will then hear from our witnesses.

Thanks for your patience.

Without objection, your prepared statements will be made a part of the record.

Members may have 5 days to insert statements and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

The chair now recognizes herself for 5 minutes.

It has now been over 8 months since former Secretary of State Tillerson outlined the administration's strategy in Syria, and over 4 months since Secretary Pompeo outlined the administration's strategy for Iran; a big piece of which included the complete withdrawal from Syria of all forces under Iranian command. Yet, despite some recent and welcomed changes in the administration's approach to Syria, there are still more questions than answers about exactly what we hope to achieve and how we plan on achieving those goals.

So, this hearing is part one of two. And it is designed to allow our members to hear from three expert witnesses, all of whom will provide their perspectives on recent events as well as their recommendations going forward.

The second part, which we hope to reschedule with the State Department and USAID soon, will allow members to hear directly from the administration and perform our necessary oversight role. As you know, we did have the State Department witness scheduled, but, then, votes were cancelled. So, we had to scrap that hearing.

Two weeks ago, we were on the precipice of a large-scale humanitarian disaster in Idlib Province, a disaster potentially worse, as hard as it is to imagine, than anything Syria had seen before. And while that disaster has been averted for now, through a Russian-Turkish agreement for a demilitarized zone, there is no telling exactly how long that will hold.

I look forward to our witnesses' perspective on this agreement: What they see holding it together, what factors may cause it to fall apart. More broadly, I am hoping to hear what you believe the U.S. role should be, not just in Idlib, but Syria as a whole. The State Department's new Special Representative for Syria Engagement, former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Jim Jeffrey, has said that the United States is going to take a more active approach and that we are potentially entering a new phase, as he called it, with forces from the United States, Israel, Russia, Iran, and Turkey facing each other.

Many people have been describing Syria as the new great game after British and Russian competition over Central Asia in the 19th century. While today's great power rivalry in Syria has many of the same players, it is no less tragic with at least ½ million killed, likely many more millions of refugees, untold crimes, hardships against the people of Syria. And when you add China to the equation, which has reportedly offered the Assad regime both military cooperation and reconstruction assistance, well, you have every great power as well as the lesser ones trying to carve out a role in Syria.

Yesterday, in a hearing of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Assistant Secretary for Defense, Robert Kareem, described U.S. strategy in Syria this way:

“The United States also seeks a peaceful resolution to the multifaceted conflict in Syria in a manner that protects U.S. interests, preserves a favorable regional balance of power, protects our allies and partners, and alleviates suffering.”

No doubt, these objectives are noble and they are correct, but what they are not: Is a strategy. How does the United States plan to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict? What is a favorable regional balance of power with respect to Syria? And how do we protect our allies and partners and alleviate suffering?

The administration owes the American people clear answers to these questions, especially when we still have U.S. men and women in Syria, and in harm's way. The road ahead will not get any easier.

As National Security Advisor John Bolton said this week, “Russia’s planned sale of S-300 air defense systems to the Assad regime represents,” what he called, “a significant escalation.” And any hope that Russia would pressure Assad into requesting Iran’s withdrawal, always a long shot, appears abandoned. These countries are digging into Syria, preparing for the long haul, and the implications for U.S. interests and those of our partners are still coming into focus.

I am looking forward to hearing from you: Exactly how you see Syria playing out in the months and years ahead, as well as hearing any recommendations you have for giving the United States the best chance of these noble goals that we seek.

And with that, I am very pleased to yield to the ranking member for today’s hearing, Mr. Boyle of Pennsylvania.

Mr. BOYLE. Thank you.

And, Madam Chair, regarding your earlier comments about Mr. Deutch, I can’t say I necessarily agree, but you are known to be very wise. So, I will just leave it at that. [Laughter.]

Thank you, and I am very glad to have this hearing.

U.S. policy toward Syria is difficult for everyone to address. It was for the Obama administration, and it is now for the Trump administration. More than 7 years into this conflict, clarity is needed now more than ever, not more fog. The Trump administration must present to Congress, finally, a comprehensive strategy for Syria. So, far it has not, and the President continues to undercut his administration with conflicting statements.

What started as peaceful protests in March 2011, is now an international conflict. I was recently on television, and I actually called it “a mini-world war,” when you consider just how many of the world’s major actors are participating in this conflict. One of those, Vladimir Putin, continues to prop up the Assad regime, with also the support of Iran.

As a result of the war, more than 500,000 civilians have been killed. That number, by the way, is badly out of date. We still don’t know really what the actual number is. And we do know that more than 11 million people have been displaced: 6½ million Syrians internally and more than 5 million have been forced to flee the country, destabilizing not just to Syria, but also to many European countries.

Yet, despite this, Assad continues to slaughter his people and destroy their cities. Idlib is currently the last stronghold for the Syrian opposition. Idlib hosts an estimated 3 million civilians, most of whom are displaced from other regions of Syria.

While an immediate offensive by the regime appears for the moment to be on hold, the question of Assad’s future use of chemical weapons, and his other atrocious tactics, hangs heavy on the international community. The administration has threatened to respond “swiftly and appropriately” if Assad again uses chemical weapons. The threat, once again, makes us scratch our heads. Isn’t this where we were in April 2017 and again in April of this year? What has changed? What kind of response is the administration considering?

In September, the U.N. stated that a mass assault on Idlib could result in, and I quote, “the biggest humanitarian catastrophe we’ve

seen for decades,” certainly the biggest in the 21st century. The U.N. has described conditions for civilians in Idlib as “dire” and stated, “Conflicting parties must cease and refrain from future use of indiscriminate weapons or tactics to target thousands of fighters interspersed among the 3 million civilians, including 1 million children.”

Compounding the situation in Idlib is the administration’s decision to reprogram more than \$200 million for stabilization assistance for Syria. This funding includes services for water and electricity, independent media, and governance projects. These programs reach millions of people and helped bolster civilian efforts to build freedom, democracy, and resiliency against violent ideology.

I strongly oppose this decision. This funding is essential to the long-term security of the United States and our regional allies. As we enter the final stage in our fight against ISIS, it is imperative that we counter radicalization.

The humanitarian crisis also poses significant questions for the U.S. and our regional allies. As the UNHCR High Commissioner Grandi said, “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time.” It is a continuing case of suffering for millions, which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world. But the U.N.’s humanitarian pleas hit deaf ears; particularly from this administration, which slashed refugee admission levels to the United States.

Seizing on this fatigue, the Assad regime seeks the prompt return of refugees. Humanitarian advocates argue the situation on the ground is far from being safe enough for refugees to return. The international community must take into account these prevailing difficult conditions and potential political persecutions.

So, with the weight of these issues to be addressed, enormous, the question is: What can we do? In Congress yesterday, I am pleased the Senate Foreign Relations Committee marked up H.R. 1677, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2017; which is critical for investigating war crimes and holding the Assad regime accountable. I encourage my Senate colleagues to pass this legislation as soon as possible.

But this bill really is only a drop in the bucket. There are no easy answers in Syria, but that doesn’t mean we can throw up our hands and think America first and go home. Our decisions now will impact Americans in the future. U.S. leadership and engagement in Syria is needed now more than ever.

So, I look forward to today’s panel that is here with us to discuss this critical issue.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. KINZINGER [presiding]. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes himself for an opening statement. I will just keep it very brief.

We all know the terrible situation in Syria, and I feel like for the whole time I have been in Congress I have been repeating myself on the tragedy; and the numbers have gotten bigger, the tragedy has gotten worse, and inaction has continued. I give this administration a lot of credit for making a very strong stand in Idlib and talking about the consequences in no uncertain terms. I give this administration a lot of credit for finally enforcing red lines against



the use of chemical weapons, which has never been accepted on the battlefield since World War I, until 2013 without consequence; which I think was a massive mistake. And that is not to point fingers in the past, but to learn from it, and to learn what the United States can do that both hurts and helps.

I would love to see over Syria a no-fly zone. I would love to see a negotiated solution that does not include Russia, a Russian presence, and definitely not an Iranian presence in Syria. But we know that we find ourselves in a very tough situation.

So, I look more forward to hearing from the witnesses than anything today.

With that, I will yield back my time and recognize the gentleman from Illinois, Mr. Schneider, for 1 minute.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, and I want to thank the subcommittee for having this hearing today, this critical hearing.

This crisis is in its seventh year, and it becomes evermore devastating, evermore concerning. And as the witnesses, having read your submitted testimony, will touch on, that the hard parts still may lie ahead of us, not behind us.

But I think the United States interest in Syria can be put into three buckets: Humanitarian, security, and strategic. And as, Mr. Heras, you are going to elucidate, I assume from your submitted testimony, there is an incoherence in the U.S. approach that has sent mixed signals that has left the situation increasingly problematic.

We need from the United States a coherent vision for the future of Syria. We need, as the United States, to articulate specific goals we are seeking to achieve. And we need to develop a very concrete and specific strategy for achieving those goals. I think it is imperative that Congress be engaged in this discussion and that Congress take action, as we continue to look forward.

This hearing is an important chance for the Members of Congress to hear your perspective. I look forward to what you are going to share with us today, and I, again, thank you for taking the time to be here.

Mr. KINZINGER. The gentleman yields back.

I want to, again, welcome our witnesses for being here today.

I will introduce each of you, and then, I will turn to each to give your 5-minute opening remarks and, then, questions.

First, we are delighted to welcome Ms. Hanin Ghaddar, the Inaugural Friedmann visiting fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Ms. Ghaddar was a managing editor of NOW, the Lebanese-based news organization, and is a regular contributor to magazines and newspapers like The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post. Previously, she was a non-resident fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center at the Atlantic Council and a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Thank you so much for being here today, and we look forward to your testimony.

Next, we are also delighted to welcome Mr. Nicholas Heras, a fellow at the Center for New American Security and senior analyst at the Jamestown Foundation. Prior to joining CNAS, he joined as research associate at the National Defense University. Mr. Heras

is a former national security education program David L. Boren fellow.

Thank you for being here today, and we look forward to your testimony.

And lastly, we are delighted to welcome back Ms. Mona Yacoubian, senior advisor for Syria, Middle East, and North Africa for the United States Institute of Peace. Previously, she served as Deputy Assistant Administrator in the Middle East Bureau at USAID and as North African Analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department.

Thank you so much for being here as well, and we look forward to your testimony.

And for all your names I messed up, I apologize.

But, first, for 5 minutes, Ms. Ghaddar, if you would like to give your opening testimony?

**STATEMENT OF MS. HANIN GHADDAR, FRIEDMANN VISITING FELLOW, THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY**

Ms. GHADDAR. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you very much for inviting me to testify today.

In the past 8 years, Iran and its proxies have been threatening U.S. interests in Syria and paving the way for the resurgence of Sunni Jihadism. In my written testimony, I have gone into details of how Iran has entrenched in southern Syria and what the U.S. can do to counter its hegemony. But, for the sake of brevity, I will be summarizing my written statement.

Iran has five main goals in Syria: Protect the Assad regime, increase its presence and influence in Syria, maintain Syria as the vital bridge between Iraq and Lebanon, get closer to the Golan Heights to create another potential front against Israel. And Iran used four tactical objectives to achieve these goals: One, secure the Lebanese-Syrian border to ensure the flow of weapons from Syria to Lebanon; two, create the paramilitary structure independent from the state's army, using the successful model of Hezbollah in Lebanon; three, protect Damascus as the regime's capital via systematic demographic changes. Sunni communities were pushed out to Idlib, for example, and were also replaced with pro-regime groups. The Assad regime issued a new Law No. 10 to legalize these changes; four, create religious centers and schools and buy up Syrian lands.

However, these achievements are still fragile, and the United States could use Iran's weaknesses to push back. Many of these challenges are reflected in the evolution of its most prestigious proxy, Hezbollah. Hezbollah is training and leading all Iran-backed Shia militias. Its weapons arsenal grew and developed, and their fighting forces have swelled, but this growth came with many challenges.

Hezbollah has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters. Hezbollah's extensive military operations have forced the group to make budget shifts; thereby, limiting the group's ability to provide social services to its constituents. Hezbollah's involvement in a sectarian conflict has prompted a loss

in broad Arabic backing. Hezbollah's fighting force has actually changed; the new fighter is mostly there for the financial rewards and, therefore, is less disciplined, less trained, less ideological, and less religious. He is, however, much more sectarian.

These challenges provide a number of opportunities. Based on my long-term research, I believe creating economic alternatives for young Shia men and women could be very effective, while simultaneously limiting Hezbollah's military role in Syria and the region.

In south Syria, the current presence of Syrian forces close to the Golan Heights would serve as a conduit for Hezbollah and other militias to quietly redeploy anytime they like. Israel is currently capable of protecting its border, but when Iran decides to launch a full-fledged war, the situation will become complicated. It is better to avoid such a war and find an alternative to prohibit Iran from infiltrating the south.

As for the land bridge that connects Tehran to Beirut, it establishes an uninterrupted Iranian presence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, which would add fire to the radical anti-Shia narrative espoused by the Islamic State. The bridge is very vulnerable in places where Sunni tribes are present. So, working with these tribes can help counter Iran.

In addition, the U.S. can do the following to contain Iran: One, expose the Assad regime. In addition to killing more than 400,000 Syrians and using chemical weapons against his own people, Assad is only helping Iran and Russia grow their influence in the region. Therefore, maintaining the line that Assad has to go is important, but also focusing the narrative on Assad's war crimes and his dependence on Iran is vital.

Two, counter demographic changes. The United States can work with Europeans and other refugee host countries to ensure that refugees are allowed to return to their hometowns, maintain their land and properties, and guarantee safety along the way, and are not forced into mandatory conscription into Assad's army.

Three, deepen work with local allies. If the United States maintained its presence, boosted coordination with local and regional partners, and increased its military footprint where Iran is mostly invested, this would fill a critical vacuum and deny Iran opportunities to expand. From the perspective of regional actors, American consistency and predictability are crucial. This means defining, communicating, and sticking to specific commitments.

Finally, go after Hezbollah's Lebanese allies. Hezbollah's economy is cash-based, and sanctions will not significantly affect it. However, it could be effective to sanction Hezbollah's Lebanese allies who assist the organization in leading its regional wars from Lebanon.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ghaddar follows:]




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## Iran and Hezbollah in Syria: U.S. Policy Options

Hanin Ghaddar

Friedmann Visiting Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa

September 27, 2018

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished committee members, thank you very much for inviting me to testify at today's hearing. It is an honor to speak to you today about U.S. policy toward Syria, focusing on Iran and Hezbollah's roles in that war-torn state.

Through a Russian-Turkish agreement, the Syrian regime's offensive on Idlib has been avoided for now. The demilitarized zone has to be set up by mid-October, in addition to the removal of radical groups and all rebel heavy weapons. If any of this fails, Russia and Iran might use it as an excuse to push for the offensive, which will lead to a humanitarian, diplomatic, and military crisis, potentially prompting a U.S. response.

Iran has no direct strategic interest in Idlib, mainly because the evacuation process in the two Shia towns of al-Fua and Kefraya was completed this past July. However, Iran wants to eliminate the armed opposition. Moscow, like Damascus and Tehran, also wants Idlib resolved, but prefers to have the opposition surrender and integrate into the Syrian military divisions under its control (such as the 5th Division) rather than continue the costly fight.

Even if the agreement lasts, both Iran and Russia have managed to consolidate their power in Syria—through coercion—making it difficult to establish peace and stability. In this testimony, I will examine the role of Iran and its main proxy, Hezbollah, their primary goals in Syria, the means they are using to achieve these goals, and offer some recommendations on how Washington can best counter Iran and its terrorist proxies in Syria.

### SYRIAN DYNAMICS

In the past seven years, Iran has been directly involved in the war in Syria, as it attempts to achieve four main goals:

1. Protect the Assad regime against the opposition.
2. Increase its presence and influence in Syria, and build weapon-production facilities.
3. Maintain Syria as the vital bridge between Iraq and Lebanon.
4. Get closer to the Golan Heights to create another potential front against Israel.

Today, although Iran has achieved most of these goals, the challenges to its power consolidation are not trivial. Iran has been facing significant challenges due to its newly developed role in Syria, and these challenges—financial and structural—are reflected in the evolution of its most prestigious proxy—Hezbollah. This does not mean that Iran will reconsider its Syria involvement. On the contrary, regional hegemony is the main priority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the group will keep fighting for regional power as long as the primary casualties of this campaign are non-Persian Shia (i.e., Arabs and Afghans) who comprise the foot soldiers in Iran’s regional militias. But these challenges present opportunities that could be used to counter Iran in Syria and the region.

### IRAN’S TACTICAL OBJECTIVES

#### *Secure the Lebanese-Syrian Border*

Hezbollah’s first mission was to protect this border—from both sides. The reason was not to protect Lebanon—as their leaders claimed—but to guarantee the Shia militia’s long-term control over the border. Hezbollah’s objective is to ensure the flow of weapons from Syria to Lebanon without interruption.

Hezbollah’s first serious battle was in 2013 in the town of al-Qusayr—on the Syrian side of the border, a battle in which the militia first suffered substantial losses of commanders and trained fighters. Then in July 2017, Hezbollah launched the campaign for Arsal—a town on the Lebanese side of the border also controlled by the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>1</sup> Hezbollah today enjoys unchallenged areas of control around the Lebanon-Syria border, and a secure supply line to and from its home country. The U.S.-backed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which ostensibly patrols this frontier, is not making any effort to stem the movement of Hezbollah personnel and material across this border.

#### *Create a Parallel Military Structure Independent from the State’s Army*

This military structure—under the leadership of Hezbollah on the ground—is composed of all Iranian-backed Shia militias. Individually, these fighters may look scattered and containable, but in reality, they are very well organized under Qods Force (QF) command.

To understand how these Shia militias function, one needs to see them as they see themselves: not as a loose assortment, but as a single army with a very clear structure and hierarchy. As implied already, most Shia militias fighting in the region today are organized, trained, and funded by the IRGC and its Qods Force.

In 1982, Iran created Hezbollah as a parallel military structure to the LAF, and it has since evolved to become stronger than the state and its army. One might actually claim that Lebanon is the weak state within Hezbollah’s state. This success prompted Iran to apply the model in Iraq via the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which also are trying to infiltrate and dominate Iraqi state institutions, just as Hezbollah succeeded in doing in Lebanon.

<sup>1</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, “Arsal: The Last Hurdle to Hezbollah’s Safe Zone,” PolicyWatch 2836 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 21, 2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arsal-the-last-hurdle-to-hezbollahs-safe-zone>.

It is more complicated to do so in Syria; thus, the situation requires an altered model. Shia make up around 2 percent of Syria's population, including Ismailis and Twelvers.<sup>2</sup> Alawites, the Assad clique's sect, are their own esoteric group partly influenced by Shia beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Because of the community's small size in Syria—about 8 percent of the total population when the war started—Iran has steadily brought in Shia foreign fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah members in addition to militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

Iran and Hezbollah also helped create local pro-Iran groups, consisting of Syrian fighters who primarily report to the Qods Force, not to the Syrian regime.<sup>4</sup> Iran wants to make sure that its presence in Syria is permanent, and if their own foreign fighters were forced to leave, they would leave behind a strong residual local force only loyal to Tehran. Iran will continue to strengthen its foothold in Syria and the Levant, among Shia communities specifically, by creating parallel entities with the aim of making them stronger than state institutions.

*Protect Damascus as the Regime's Capital via Demographic Changes*

To protect Damascus, Iran and Hezbollah have worked very diligently over the past six years to secure the suburbs of Damascus. Consolidating control of these suburbs has required systematic and deliberate demographic changes, specifically the ethnic/religious cleansing of Sunni communities, who were pushed out and often replaced with pro-regime groups consisting of Shia and Alawites.

In April 2018, the Assad regime issued the new "Law No. 10" designed to help change Syrian demography. The law gives property owners thirty days to seek out a local administrator and file an ownership claim. In most cases, however, the property owners—mostly Sunni Muslims—left because of the war and can't return within a month.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, many are regime opponents who face arrest or execution should they return. Refugees who don't make it back and file a claim will have their property confiscated, repossessed, or repurposed. And those who do return might only be able to claim a small compensation before the regime takes their land and property.

Many Syrians fear that the regime plans to redistribute the properties of its Sunni citizens to Assad supporters and non-Syrian Shia proxies, providing residences for Iranian-backed Shia militias operating in Syria and their families, making their presence in the country permanent.<sup>6</sup> In fact, numerous witness accounts confirm that Iraqi families, particularly from the Shia-populated southern provinces, are being transferred to Syria to repopulate the recently evacuated Damascus

<sup>2</sup> Branches of Shia Islam.

<sup>3</sup> Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Iran's Shia Militias," Policy Watch 2955 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-is-outpacing-assad-for-control-of-syrias-shia-militias>.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Smyth, "How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah," Policy Watch 2580 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 8, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew R. J. Brodsky and Bassam Barabandi, "Piercing Through Assad's Reconstruction Mirage in Syria," *National Interest*, August 29, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/piercing-through-assad%E2%80%99s-reconstruction-mirage-syria-29962?page=0%2C1>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibrahim Abu Ahmad, "Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics," *Fikra Forum* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 17, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>.

suburbs. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), an Iraqi Shia paramilitary force close to Iran, has reportedly overseen the resettlement of hundreds of such families.<sup>7</sup>

This process has taken place in many other areas that connect Damascus to the Alawite coast and the Lebanese border.

#### *Establish Roots*

A more challenging yet systematic approach by Tehran to establish its power in Syria is by spreading the *velayat-e faqih* ideology—a particularly post-1979-revolution Iranian Shia tradition conferring political power on the mullahs and rejecting the division of religion and politics—by means of creating religious centers and schools, such as *husseiniyat* [congregation halls for Shia commemoration ceremonies] and mosques. This has been a very successful approach in Lebanon, where historically the Shia community had, until recent decades, accepted a separation of state and religion. However, with Russian support, the Assad regime seems to have been able to close a number of these centers throughout Syria. Nevertheless, Iran has succeeded in transforming some of the collective religious and cultural practices, mainly in Damascus and Sayyeda Zainab neighborhood, where many of the IRGC and Hezbollah officials now reside. For example, lately Damascus has witnessed unprecedented events for Ashura when, on the tenth of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar), Shia commemorate the self-described martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein, at Karbala, in 680 AD.

While Syrian law does not allow foreign citizens to buy or own real estate, the Syrian regime has made an exception for Iranians, who are increasingly buying up Syrian lands. These investments appear to be done not only with Bashar Assad, but also with many Shia militia groups. Portions of these lands are located near Shia religious sites, such as the Sayyeda Zainab and Ruqayya shrines in Damascus.<sup>8</sup>

### IRAN'S CHALLENGES

#### *Hezbollah's Discontents and New Regional Role*

Hezbollah is Iran's main proxy force in the region, and the Qods Force relies heavily on the organization to lead and train the various Shia militias it commands. As Hezbollah became more involved during the war in Syria, its main priority was to defend Damascus, while protecting the surrounding suburbs and "useful Syria," which links the Alawite coast to the borders with Lebanon.

Another priority for Hezbollah was to lead all its Shia fighters to control the Syria-Iraq border. This operation succeeded to secure Deir al-Zour, specifically the Abu Kamal, which is 600 km away from the Lebanese border, thereby securing the land bridge, or Shia crescent, that would

<sup>7</sup> Martin Chulov, "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control," *Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>.

<sup>8</sup> Majid Rafizadeh, "How Iran Continues to Profit from the Syrian War," *Arab News*, February 23, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1252101>.

connect Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Also, to achieve proximity—as much as possible—to the Syrian-Israeli border.

In light of these updated missions, Hezbollah's role has expanded from that of a local militia to a key player in Iran's regional army—and it continues to expand its regional portfolio. Along with its Iranian sponsor, the Lebanese group is accumulating influence among Shia and nominally Shia communities across the Middle East, including the Houthis in Yemen. Experience in Syria and elsewhere, meanwhile, has endowed the group with advanced military capabilities.

While the IRGC still serves as a supervisory entity, Hezbollah, Iran's top Arab Shia force is itself training and leading Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani, Afghan, and Yemeni Shia militias. Indeed, as Iran's role in the region grows, so does that of Hezbollah. This gives Hezbollah more confidence when faced with its other domestic and regional challenges; the group believes that during its next war—possibly with Israel—these Shia militias will come to its aid.

#### HEZBOLLAH'S CHALLENGES WITH GROWTH

Just as the 2006 Lebanon war helped Hezbollah reinforce its ranks and capabilities, the recent regional war encompassing mainly Syria and Iraq has boosted the organization, to an even greater extent. Indeed, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal grew from an estimated 33,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 war to an estimated 150,000 today. Similarly, it swelled from a few thousand members in 2006 to an estimated 20,000-plus.

But this growth came with many challenges:

1. Hezbollah is today involved in a long war in Syria and beyond, and it has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters. Although the group did manage to recruit more fighters, many of these newcomers have not undergone the same training usually required by Hezbollah due to the urgency of the war. In a sense, quality was compromised for quantity.
2. Hezbollah's extensive military operations in the region have forced the group to make budget shifts, wherein most resources are now allocated to military operations, thereby limiting the group's ability to provide social services to its constituents in Lebanon. Today, only Hezbollah fighters and their immediate families benefit from social services, leaving many other Hezbollah members, employees, and supporters without access to this network free of charge. These budget shifts are, in turn, causing discontent among the Shia community in Lebanon, which has long depended on Hezbollah for services.
3. In addition to social services and the collective history of the Shia, Hezbollah has used "resistance" against Israel as a main pillar for building its popular support in Lebanon and in the region. Despite Hezbollah's oft repeated trope that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Syria," facts on the ground show a different reality: that Hezbollah is fighting Syrians but not responding to Israel's numerous attacks on its convoys and arms depots in Syria. Practically, the concept of the "resistance" has been shattered by the Syrian war. Hezbollah's base doesn't see the war in Syria from an ideological perspective, but rather from a realist one.



4. Hezbollah's involvement in a sectarian conflict, and its increase in sectarian rhetoric and practices, has prompted a loss in broad Arab backing. Following the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was improbably voted the most popular leader in the Arab world. Hezbollah today is branded by the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a "terrorist" organization and supporter.
5. Because of the disillusionment caused by the above-noted factors, many young men have lost the urge to join Hezbollah's war in the region, or else grown fatigued from fighting on a foreign Arab battlefield. Therefore, Hezbollah has increasingly resorted to financial incentives to recruit fighters, such as fixed salaries and benefits available only to fighters given the recent budget reallocations. In a way, Hezbollah has transformed from a highly coveted career to mainly a "job opportunity" for many young Shia men from poor neighborhoods in Lebanon. The new fighters are mostly there for the financial rewards, and therefore are less disciplined and less principled. This is affecting Hezbollah's fighting force in general and changing its relationship to the Lebanese Shia community.

This list provides a number of opportunities for limiting Hezbollah's influence and expansion in the region and within the larger Shia community. A military option should certainly consider Hezbollah's regional role and the QF-sponsored Shia militias, but in terms of non-military and long-term options, creating economic alternatives for young Shia men could offer an incremental but effective alternative. Support for Hezbollah might not sour, but such openings might help wean the community away from its financial dependence on Hezbollah. While no magic bullet exists for ending the militarization of the Shia community, isolating it or accepting its isolation from the rest of Lebanon will only play into Hezbollah's hands.

Instead, Washington would be better advised to help facilitate jobs and other economic alternatives for Lebanon's young Shia, a tack that would necessarily undermine Hezbollah's ability to recruit fighters. The challenge for the international community is to persevere with this outreach to Lebanon's Shia while simultaneously limiting that organization's military role in Syria.

#### **SHIFTS IN HEZBOLLAH FIGHTERS' PROFILES**

These challenges have pushed Hezbollah to accept a new fighting force that looks very different from the one that fought its last war with Israel in July 2006. Hezbollah's new fighters—those who joined the party after Hezbollah went to Syria—are very different. While Hezbollah is known to be extremely meticulous in selecting and training its fighters, the Syrian crisis forced the party to opt for quantity over quality.

Many Hezbollah fighters and their families believe that they are paying all the costs while Iranians are reaping the benefits. As a result, significant numbers of veterans have been leaving Hezbollah, making room for a new and rather different crop of younger fighters.<sup>9</sup>

According to some members who have taken leave from the war or quit entirely, the newcomers are not joining the fight for reasons of ideology or self-realization. They are there to collect a salary or secure their future—they are not particularly concerned about Hezbollah's broader mission, and they tend to follow Iranian orders without complaining.

Hezbollah spent decades screening and preparing its fighters. The group's leaders picked the crème-de-la-crème of young Shia to join their ranks because they wanted loyal and trustworthy men. Today, Hezbollah's army in Syria is full of relatively unreliable young fighters who do not necessarily share the ethos or dedication to Tehran or the "resistance."

Whereas the older Hezbollah fighter is more ideological, more disciplined, and better trained to fight, the newer Hezbollah recruit is less ideological and more sectarian; less trained but more aggressive. The newer crop also lacks discipline. The motivation for joining Hezbollah has changed. The enemy, as well as the battlefield itself, has changed, with all the accompanying complications. Syria is a long war, with no decisive victory in sight. Social services and financial assistance have shrunk as the military budget expanded. The poor are getting poorer and the war has its own economy, with more benefits for those involved in it.

There is a stark difference in character, behavior, and motivation between the old and new fighters. There is increasing disillusionment with the war and a growing cynicism about the war's "sacredness." While some could afford to leave the fight in Syria, many others are forced to continue for many reasons, mostly power and money.

The result is a wide economic and social gap within the Shia community in Lebanon, with long-lasting repercussions for this community, Hezbollah as both a political party and an armed militia, and Lebanon. The shifts in the profile of a Hezbollah fighter has severe effects that can already be felt today in both Lebanon and Syria. But it has also changed the core of Hezbollah, its image, role, and prospects.

#### **WILL HEZBOLLAH RESPOND TO ISRAELI OR U.S. MILITARY STRIKES?**

When Hezbollah's former military commander Imad Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus in 2008, his brother-in-law Mustafa Badreddine took his place. But when Badreddine was killed in 2016—reportedly on the orders of Iran—no official appointment was made to replace him. Instead, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani became the default military commander for Hezbollah and other Shia militias fighting under his jurisdiction.

Afterward, Soleimani apparently decided to adopt a more hands-on approach to Hezbollah's military operations. While veteran commanders such as Ibrahim Aqil, Fuad Shukur, and Talal Hamiyah have become Soleimani's link to Hezbollah's military divisions, they seemingly do not

<sup>9</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, "Economic Alternatives Could Help Split Shiites from Hezbollah," PolicyWatch 2711 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 18, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/economic-alternatives-could-help-split-shiites-from-hezbollah>

enjoy the trust and advisory capacities that Mughniyah held. Furthermore, the group's newer commanders still lack deep experience and operational capabilities.

The shift to more direct Iranian command began to surface a few years into the Syria war. One indicator came from recent sanctions efforts against Iran, which revealed that the country's financing to Hezbollah had increased over the past six years. The increased investments have had visible effects in Lebanon, where Hezbollah and its political allies recently won the parliamentary elections. By intervening in Syria and other parts of the region, Hezbollah has been paying Iran back for past favors, but in the process has tied itself even more closely to the IRGC.

Iran has wanted different things from Hezbollah at different times. With the Syrian opposition nearly defeated, the Qods Force's mission turned to establishing permanent bases all over Syria. Iran leased space in more than twenty Syrian military installations to house the IRGC's artillery, armor, drones, ballistic missiles, foreign militia proxies, and Special Forces units, each of which has its own weapons depots, runways, and missile launchers.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Tehran's visible effort to entrench itself in Syria for the long term has led to direct confrontations with Israel, and a wider showdown would force the IRGC to go beyond the Qods Force's proxy approach.

In early May, IRGC missile forces in Syria fired some twenty rockets toward Israeli positions in the Golan Heights in a limited response to Israel's earlier attacks on Iranian installations in Syria. The salvo seemed at least partly intended to test Israel's response, which ended up being vast and (appropriately) disproportionate, targeting nearly all Qods Force installations in Syria. Introducing Hezbollah to a confrontation between regular Iranian and Israeli forces would undoubtedly heighten the chances of serious escalation involving Lebanon—and Tehran is currently not prepared for such a conflict.

As Syria becomes the main potential venue of Iranian-Israeli confrontation, Tehran seems to be tasking Hezbollah with establishing fuller control of Lebanon, a vital forward base for the Islamic Republic.

In this sense, Hezbollah is Iran's strongest foreign pawn to play against Israel—yet also its last resort. The group's hold over Lebanon cannot be sacrificed in an open confrontation with Israel at this point. Despite the potential for continued covert operations abroad, Iran will probably keep Hezbollah from retaliating militarily from Syria or Lebanon. The group is unlikely to be used directly until Iran feels it needs to send a strong message to Israel or launch a full-fledged war.

#### **IRAN STILL EYES SOUTH SYRIA**

Following a deal between Jordan and Russia in July 2018, Assad has retaken territory in south western Syria from rebels, closing in on the Golan. Russia has reassured Israel that only Syrian forces will be deployed on or near the Syrian-held Golan.

<sup>10</sup> Hanin Ghaddar and Nader Uskowi. "Iran Will Spare Hezbollah in Its Conflict with Israel, for Now," PolicyWatch 2977 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 5, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-will-spare-hezbollah-in-its-conflict-with-israel-for-now>.

The question is whether Russia can actually guarantee anything when it comes to Iran's presence on the ground. First, it is unlikely that Russia would guarantee the departure of Iranian forces and proxies from the south, one of the most strategically important areas in all of Syria. Second, assuming the Assad regime manages to expel the Syrian opposition from Deraa, would his forces stop Iranian proxies from infiltrating and controlling the border region?

Besides the growing difficulty of distinguishing Iranian proxies from Syrian regime forces (Shia fighters are integrating within certain brigades by wearing either Syrian army uniforms or civilian clothes), Russia's general inability, or unwillingness, to keep its promises in Syria warrants skepticism about its latest security guarantees in the south. For example, when Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013 and the United States was poised to launch military strikes in retaliation, Putin helped convince Washington to hold off by guaranteeing that the regime would surrender its chemical arsenal. Yet Assad kept much of that arsenal and has since used it repeatedly against civilians.

Even more tellingly, Russian forces were rebuffed earlier this month when they accompanied the Syrian army's 11th Division to push Hezbollah forces out of their positions in the border town of al-Qusayr. The plan—which was not coordinated with Iran or Hezbollah—was to take over the Jusiya crossing with Lebanon, then move closer to Syria's Qalamoun region. Yet Hezbollah forces refused to leave their positions; instead, Russian and Syrian troops turned around and left less than twenty-four hours after they arrived, and Hezbollah soon reinforced its presence around al-Qusayr. This small incident—which was probably a Russian attempt to test Iran's reaction—shows that Moscow would probably be unable to dislodge Iranian proxies once they become entrenched in south Syria (or, at least, unwilling to exert heavy enough military pressure to force the issue).

Even if Hezbollah and other militias do withdraw a few kilometers away from the frontier, this would not resolve broader concerns about Tehran's long-term strategic game in Syria. Iranian forces have withdrawn and redeployed many times in many places in Syria, and any move they make to appease Russia would no doubt be temporary.

As for the notion that Assad will push Iran out after achieving victory, the return of his forces to the south means just the opposite. In a major step toward fulfilling Tehran's long-term goals, the presence of Syrian forces would serve as a conduit for Hezbollah and other militias to quietly redeploy in the south anytime they like, without having to deal with opposition pockets.

Therefore, to avoid escalation in south Syria, Assad's forces should be monitored very closely, and Russian forces should not be trusted to act as guarantors of Iranian withdrawal. The only surefire way of keeping Iran out of the south and far from the Golan and Jordan would be a third-party buffer zone along Syria's southern borders, or continuous Israeli kinetic action. The line distinguishing Iranian and Syrian forces grows ever thinner every day, so the need to pursue such alternatives is urgent.

#### **THE LAND BRIDGE AND RUSSIA'S INTERESTS**

Regardless, Iran—with new Shia recruits from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—has almost completed its regional plan. Today, Iran's pan-Shia army is founded, funded, and trained

by the IRGC in order to consolidate Iranian control over the region. In Syria, this Shia army's main mission is to protect the "useful Syria"—which is a geographic corridor stretching from the Alawite coast, through Homs, the suburbs of Damascus, all the way to al-Qalamoun at the borders of Lebanon. It also goes through Homs to the borders of Iraq through Aleppo and Deir al-Zour, thereby linking Syria to Iraq through Tal Afar, where the PMU are very active.

Although a land bridge might not be of major significance to Tehran in terms of transferring weapons, it would provide a larger platform for projecting power and establishing an uninterrupted Iranian presence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In that scenario, would these countries be able to survive as independent and sovereign nations? Another question is whether a strengthened Iranian presence along this corridor would add fire to the radical anti-Shia narrative espoused by the Islamic State, fueling a resurgence of the degraded terrorist organization and exacerbating the area's existing sectarian conflicts.

A land-bridge that carries a sectarian component and narrative only highlights the sectarian identities and weakens national identities in the countries it covers. An Iraq or Lebanese Shia will be a Shia first and Iraqi and Lebanese second. This will not only be beneficial to Iran and its Shia ideology, but also for radical Sunni groups who will use the growing sectarian identities to regroup and strategize a stronger comeback.

Despite the Russian intervention in Syria and its boosted control over Syria's state institutions, Iran's "useful Syria" is still intact. Russian President Vladimir Putin does not mind an Iranian corridor in Syria as long as Tehran does not try to challenge Russian preeminence in Damascus. And Iran knows that it needs Moscow, given that the incoming Trump Administration has signaled a tougher U.S. stance on sanctions and Iranian regional meddling. If Russia wants to call the shots on the international front while Iran secures its position in Syria, Tehran will not make too much noise. Iran and Russia seem to have established control in Syria without an overlapping of each other's interests. Russia is investing in state institutions, mainly security and military institutions, while Iran is investing in parallel institutions. As long as these two don't collide, for the time being, the Russian-Iranian alliance will remain intact.

#### **CONTAINING IRAN IN SYRIA**

In the past eight years of the Syria crisis, Iran has never been a factor for stability in Syria or the Levant. In addition, Iran and its proxies have been threatening U.S. interests in the region as a whole and paving the way for the resurgence of Sunni jihadism after the defeat of ISIS. Thus, countering Iran's operations in Syria is vital to stabilize Syria and its neighboring countries, and to constrict the availability of fertile ground for jihadi groups.

Although Iran has managed to achieve most of its main goals in Syria, these achievements are still fragile and vulnerable. The United States could use these weaknesses to counter Iran in Syria and the region, but a strategy with a clear idea of post-conflict Syria is essential. Washington should compete with Iran where it is weak, and offer alternatives by means of diplomacy or force.

*Expose Assad's Regime*

For example, Assad is very hard to maintain and sell. In addition of killing more than 400,000 Syrians, and using chemical weapons against his own people, Assad is only helping Iran and Russia grow their influence in the region, and will continue doing so. The humanitarian costs resulting from his methods keep rising, lest we forget about the largest refugee crisis in the world. Therefore, maintaining the line that Assad has to go is important, but also focusing the narrative on Assad's war crimes and his dependence on Iran could help. The Assad regime today is not the best alternative for Syria, mainly for these two reasons, and keeping him in power is only going to help Iran and Russia.

*Counter Demographic Changes*

The conscious effort to change Syria's demography is a major issue. Not only does it highlight a sectarian division of Syria and its communities; it also encourages sectarian identities and thereby fuels both Sunni and Shia jihadism. The return of refugees to Syria needs to be negotiated along these lines. The United States can work with Europeans—and refugee host countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey—to ensure that refugees are allowed to return to their hometowns, maintain their land and properties, and are guaranteed safety along the way. At the same time, it is essential to defend refugees from being forced into mandatory conscription into Assad's army upon their return to the country.

*Prohibit Iran's Militias from Infiltrating the South*

Iran's militias, mainly Hezbollah, cannot be allowed to infiltrate to the south of Syria and be close to the Golan Heights. These militias are already facing Israel's attacks and suffering great losses. However, they will not stop trying. South Syria cannot be left alone for Assad's forces to control, as Iran can and will eventually infiltrate them, one way or another. Israel is currently capable of protecting its border, but when Iran decides to use Hezbollah and launch a full-fledged war, and other militias are asked to join from both Lebanon and Syria, Israel will certainly not be left on its own. It's better to avoid such a war and make sure Iran does not have access to the southern Syria front.

*Provide Alternatives to Tribes along the Land Bridge*

The land bridge is still vulnerable in places where Sunni tribes are present. Today, these tribes have resorted to coordination with Iran to protect themselves; however, if provided with an alternative, they would rather avoid Iran's influence on their culture and communities.

*Deepen Work with Local Allies*

Iran's strategy has mostly been about filling the vacuum, mainly that left by the United States in Syria and other parts of the region. If the United States maintained its presence, continued to work with local allies, boosted coordination with regional partners, and increased its military footprint where Iran is mostly invested, this would fill a critical vacuum and deny Iran opportunities to expand its influence. From the perspective of regional actors, American consistency and predictability are crucial. This means defining, communicating, and sticking to specific commitments.

*Go After Hezbollah's Lebanese Allies*

Hezbollah has moved to the region, but Iran still considers Lebanon its operations room—and most significant achievement. Lebanon is not only Iran's main front against Israel; it also offers Iran a regional backyard to initiate and coordinate their regional military operations, mainly in Syria. Accordingly, Lebanon remains Iran's most successful and vital space in the region, and Hezbollah's hometown. Countering Iran in Syria can be more sustainable if Hezbollah is also weakened in Lebanon.

On the political level, although Hezbollah won the parliamentary elections in May 2018, it has done so through its allies.<sup>11</sup> Without these allies, such as President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement party and bloc, and Speaker of the Parliament and head of the Amal Movement Nabih Berri, among others, Hezbollah will hold only thirteen seats.

Sanctioning Hezbollah is important, but Hezbollah's economy is cash-based and sanctions will not significantly affect it. However, one way is to start sanctioning Hezbollah's allies, or enablers, who have no religious or ideological affiliation with Iran. These not only support Hezbollah and enable Iran's control over Lebanon's state institutions, but are robbing state institutions of its resources and participate in Lebanon's instability by helping Hezbollah lead its regional wars from Lebanon.

However, pressuring Hezbollah should be accompanied by a strategy to create political and economic alternatives for the Lebanese people, mainly the Shia community, to make sure Hezbollah does not benefit from this pressure. For example, given that many Shia are today expressing their discontent with Hezbollah's regional role, alternatives to Hezbollah's social services and political narrative are absent. A long-term strategy that provides these alternatives—with very clear target beneficiaries and objectives—can at least show the Lebanese Shia that Hezbollah is not their only choice. The growing level of discontent among the Shia community in Lebanon is an opportunity that requires serious consideration.

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<sup>11</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, "What Does Hezbollah's Election Victory Mean for Lebanon?" PolicyWatch 2966 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-hezbollahs-election-victory-mean-for-lebanon>.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [presiding]. Thank you very much. Thank you for your testimony.

Mr. Heras?

**STATEMENT OF MR. NICHOLAS HERAS, FELLOW, MIDDLE EAST SECURITY PROGRAM, CENTER FOR A NEW AMERICAN SECURITY**

Mr. HERAS. Madam Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Mr. Heras, could you put your microphone just a little closer to your mouth? Thank you.

Mr. HERAS. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss U.S. policy toward Syria today.

Since the United States began combat operations against ISIS in September 2014, it has amassed a zone of control that is nearly one-third of Syria's territory. With this zone, we have control or strong influence over the four major resources that are essential to stabilizing Syria: Water, oil, arable land, and electricity generation. The fact is, through our zone of control, we are as strong or as weak as we choose to be to influence the end game in Syria.

The administration states that U.S. forces will remain in Syria indefinitely to oversee a successful stabilization mission in post-ISIS areas. Withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria is also being tied to irreversible progress on the implementation of the Geneva process, which means a post-war government that has transitioned from Assad, and when Iran and its proxy forces have left Syria. In effect, the Trump administration is saying that it is our policy to remain in Syria indefinitely, until there is both regime change in Damascus and Iran has been forced from Syria.

Our significant zone of control in Syria, and the administration's Syria policy goals, will be challenged by Assad's alliance, which includes Russia and Iran and, also, by Turkey. In 2018, Bashar al-Assad, with Russia and Iran's help, has been consolidating his control over most of western Syria. His major accomplishment was the capture of all territory in southwest Syria, bordering Israel and Jordan. Israel and Jordan relinquished their zones of control in southwest Syria to Russia, as a result of the collapse of the U.S.-negotiated southwest de-escalation zone, which the United States ultimately decided not to defend. These events further established Russia as the key foreign actor responsible for stabilizing western Syria.

Assad's victories in 2018 have also protected Iran's entrenchment in western Syria. From its position in western Syria, Iran and its proxies have the potential to sustain missile volleys deep into Israel, which could force an Israeli invasion all the way to Damascus, which would likely spark a regional war.

For the time being, Russia and Iran are generally in sync with their efforts in Syria. In response to Russia and Iran, and faced with its current reality of not being present in western Syria in a meaningful way, the United States is now pursuing a strategy of using sanctions, an indefinite military presence, and a refusal to support international reconstruction assistance for the Assad gov-



ernment; all designed to pressure Russia to force Assad's departure and withdrawal of Iran.

While this strategy might work, the process of putting enough pressure on Russia to remove Assad and to get Iran and its proxies out of Syria will likely take years, perhaps even decades. That reality should be stated clearly to the American people by the administration. And Congress should carefully consider whether the United States should remain in Syria for many more years, or decades, in order to pursue an end state goal that may not be achievable.

The administration might eventually achieve its goals in Syria with a grand bargain with Turkey. However, striking a grand bargain with Turkey should come on our terms, because without the strong support of the Trump administration, Turkey would not have been able to stand its ground against Russia and Iran and prevent Idlib from becoming a humanitarian nightmare.

We have an interest in removing al-Qaeda and similar groups from Idlib, which can only be accomplished by working with Turkey. But there is no easy path for the United States and Turkey to uproot al-Qaeda and similar organizations from Idlib, because these organizations include a significant number of local Syrian fighters who are actively involved in the security and governance of Idlib. Turkey will need our support to do that, but we should not provide the support at the expense of our best partners in Syria, the multi-ethnic, heroic Syrian Democratic Forces Coalition, which is what Erdogan wants us to do. If Erdogan got his wish, that would directly undermine the U.S. stabilization mission in Syria, which could be a boon for ISIS.

In conclusion, our investment in almost one-third of Syria means that we have a stake in the outcome of the war. We should strive for a post-conflict Syria that is stable and that is not a source of threats to the United States or its partners and allies. We should also take every opportunity to achieve a political settlement in Syria that protects the interests of our local partners.

However, we should also be honest with the American people. If the United States is not prepared to use military force against Assad and his Iranian allies; it could take years, perhaps even decades, to force Assad out of power and to remove Iran from Syria.

Thank you, and I look forward to this discussion.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Heras follows:]



Center for a  
New American  
Security

September 27, 2018

**Written Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee on “U.S. Policy Toward  
Syria-Part 1”**

Nicholas A. Heras, Fellow, Center for a New American Security

Madame Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss U.S. policy toward Syria with you today and to submit this testimony for the record. My testimony will analyze several areas of concern for U.S. policy toward Syria, which are: understanding dynamics relevant to building stability in post-ISIS areas under U.S. control; finding a mechanism to work with our NATO ally Turkey to remove the al Qaeda safe haven in Syria; and determining whether Russia can be a partner to create a post-conflict Syria where Assad has been transitioned from power and Iran and its proxy forces have been withdrawn from the country.

In my analysis, Syria has transitioned from a civil war between the Assad government and its rebel opponents and has now become an arena for interstate competition. This is a competition that the United States, through its control over nearly one-third of resource-rich Syrian territory, is now a party to. I believe that the U.S. presence in Syria means that we are invested in the outcome of the conflict, and we should therefore strive for a post-conflict Syria that is stable and that is not a source of threats to the United States or its regional partners.

However, in my analysis, the U.S. government is enacting a policy in Syria that sets an end state goal that will not likely be achieved for years, perhaps even decades, if it is ever achieved. This end state goal is the removal of the Assad government, and the withdrawal of Iranian and proxy forces from Syria. The U.S. government is tying the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria to “irreversible” progress on achieving this end state goal. I am concerned that the U.S. government is not communicating the likely consequence of its policy clearly to the American public, the consequences being a years-or decades-long American military commitment in Syria. Further, I am concerned that the U.S. government is underestimating the degree to which it relies on Russia’s good faith and effort to achieve this end state goal, if it remains the policy of the U.S. government not to use military force to remove the Assad government from power and force the withdrawal of Iran and its proxy forces.

I believe that a more realistic end state for the U.S. government to pursue, if it will not change its approach to transitioning from Assad and achieving Iran’s withdrawal from Syria, is to support local Syrian partners in the U.S. zone of control to build security, economic recovery, and good governance through stabilization operations. And in pursuing this objective, the United States should look for opportunities to achieve a political settlement in Syria that protects the interests of our local Syrian partners, but is not dependent on either Bashar al-Assad or Iran having been first removed from Syria.

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### Overview of the Situation in Syria That Confronts Current U.S. Policy

Syria's conflict is both less complicated and more complicated than it was when the United States began combat operations against ISIS in the country in September 2014. The Syrian civil war is less complicated because the number of local, armed actors and the territory on the ground that they control has significantly decreased, as a result of the ebb and flow of the war. However, the war is more complicated because the number of foreign actors with zones of control on the ground inside Syria has increased, and these foreign actors are by and large at odds with each other. The United States is one of these foreign actors, and through the counter-ISIS campaign it has a zone of control that stretches across almost one-third of Syria's territory.

We are already at the stage of the conflict that has resulted in the partition of Syria. Events inside Syria over the course of 2018 have solidified the zones of control held by foreign actors, including by the United States and Turkey, both of which have deployed military forces on the ground. Israel and Jordan, which had maintained zones of influence in southwest Syria but without committing to the presence of their military forces in Syria, relinquished their zones of influence to Russia as a result of the collapse of the U.S.-negotiated Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone, which the United States ultimately decided not to enforce and defend.

Further, Israel and Iran are also at a state of open war in Syria, and over the last year Israel has conducted approximately 200 airstrikes inside Syria against targets linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and its proxy forces.<sup>1</sup> The Syrian civil war has also provided the IRGC-QF with the opportunity to scale up and expand the activities of the transnational, "Hezbollah Network" of mainly Shia jihadist fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to fight on behalf of Bashar al-Assad. This network has been deployed to Syria throughout Assad-controlled areas, and most concerning for U.S. forces engaged in the counter-ISIS campaign, has been used as a tool of the IRGC-QF and its Assad government allies to test the resolve of the United States and its partners in eastern Syria.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict between Israel and Iran in Syria is putting increased importance and strain on Israeli-Russian engagement and deconfliction, as Israel increases its military activities in Syria against Iran and the Assad government. Deconfliction between Israel and Russia in Syria has not always been successful, as evident in the recent Israeli airstrikes in Syria, which resulted in confusion from Assad's forces that subsequently shot down a Russian plane landing at the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia, Syria.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Israel Struck Over 200 Iranian Targets in Syria Over Past Year," *Jerusalem Post*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-struck-over-200-Iranian-targets-in-Syria-over-past-year-566487>.

<sup>2</sup> Seth G. Jones and Maxwell B. Markusen, "The Escalating Conflict With Hezbollah in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-conflict-hezbollah-syria>; Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria And Its Regional Effects," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Troianovski, Loveday Morris, and Liz Sly, "In A Blow to Israel, Russia Says It Will Send Syria Powerful Antiaircraft Missiles," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in->

The Trump administration has recently offered greater clarity on what it intends to do in Syria and how it expects U.S. policy to unfold there. Recently, senior administration officials have explicitly stated that U.S. forces will not be withdrawn from Syria until there is “irreversible” progress on the implementation of the Geneva process and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254).<sup>4</sup> Other senior U.S. officials have gone further and stated that the United States will not withdraw its forces from Syria until Iran’s, and their proxy forces, have first been withdrawn from Syria.<sup>5</sup> What these officials are saying without actually saying it is that it is the policy of the U.S. government to remain in Syria until there is regime change in Damascus and until Iran and its proxy forces have been forced from the country.

For the time being, the administration has not clarified how it will accomplish both regime change in Damascus and the removal of Iranian and proxy forces from Syria on a timeline that would not be as long as to be measured in many years, or even decades. It is true that the United States has tremendous potential power on the ground in Syria, having control or influence over four major resources that are essential to stabilizing Syria, which are water, oil and natural gas, arable land and wheat, and electricity generation.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the U.S. zone of control in Syria provides the U.S. with a position that is as strong, or as weak, as we choose for it to be. The U.S. government should be honest with the American people that its policy is to remain in Syria until Bashar al-Assad’s government is removed from power.

#### What Has Changed Since the Committee’s Last Hearing on Syria (February 2018)

Since this Committee last convened a hearing on Syria this past February, events on the ground have proceeded at a dizzying pace, even as U.S. policy to respond to those events mainly failed to follow apace. In the time that has elapsed, the Assad government and its Russian and Iranian

[blow-to-israel-russia-says-it-will-send-syria-powerful-anti-aircraft-missiles/2018/09/24/674745b8-bffe-11e8-be77-516236a26395\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.41978bee102](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.0884b36dc3a6).

<sup>4</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Trump Agrees to Indefinite Military Effort and New Diplomatic Push in Syria, U.S. Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.0884b36dc3a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.0884b36dc3a6); Kevin Baron, “ Mattis: U.S. Troops Can’t Leave Syria Until U.N. Peace Talks Advance,” *Defense One*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2018/08/mattis-us-troops-cant-leave-syria-until-un-peace-talks-advance/150877/>; David M. Satterfield and Brett McGurk, “Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance And Ongoing Efforts to Achieve An Enduring Defeat of ISIS,” U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ips/2018/08/285202.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Trump Agrees to Indefinite Military Effort and New Diplomatic Push in Syria, U.S. Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.0884b36dc3a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.0884b36dc3a6); “Syria: U.S. Will Stay in Syria to Ensure The Defeat of ISIS,” U.S. Diplomat,” *EBL News*, August 26, 2018, <https://eblnews.com/video/syria-us-will-stay-syria-ensure-defeat-us-diplomat-488025>.

<sup>6</sup> Alessandra Massi, Hashem Osseiran, and Kim Bode, “Expert Views: After ISIS, Who Controls Syria’s Natural Resources?” *Syria Deeply*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/11/14/expert-views-after-isis-who-controls-syrias-natural-resources>.

allies have conquered three of the four "de-escalation zones" that were established in western Syria to freeze the conflict: the zones in Homs/Hama in central-western Syria, the East Ghouta suburb of Damascus, and southwest Syria on the borders of Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Turkey also completed its campaign to conquer the ethnic Kurdish-majority region of Afrin, in northwest Syria. Over one million Syrians have been displaced since the start of 2018, according to the United Nations, and until this past month, there was no coherent and actionable U.S. policy to prevent further massive population displacement inside Syria.<sup>7</sup>

#### U.S. Policy Behavior in Syria in 2018

Over the course of 2018, the U.S. government has sent mixed signals about its intentions in Syria, both in regard to the civil war between Bashar al-Assad and his allies and the armed opposition in western Syria, and in northern and eastern Syria where the United States is an actual local actor with strong power to shape events as they unfold on the ground.

I should note that the administration deserves credit for sticking to its policy that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government is unacceptable, which it acted on in 2018. The Assad government's use of sarin gas mixed with chlorine in an attack on the East Ghouta zone near Damascus in early April precipitated military strikes by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom against selected Assad military bases, which was military action similar to what the U.S. military conducted in April 2017. The U.S. should continue this policy of no tolerance of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government, although it should be noted that this policy did not prevent Assad's forces and their allies from using a wide range of other methods—including chlorine gas, starvation sieges, artillery and missile bombardment, incendiary munition and barrel bomb air strikes targeting civilian infrastructure such as hospitals—to force the capitulation of the de-escalation zones.<sup>8</sup>

However, a truth of the Syria war that was brought into clearer focus in 2018 was that no matter the one-off strikes the U.S. and its allies have conducted over the past two years against Bashar al-Assad in response to his use of chemical weapons, these strikes do not deter him and his allies from achieving their military objectives. And indeed, the incoherence in the U.S. approach to Syria, even now, is typified by how the administration responded to the Assad government and its allies' campaign to conquer western Syria's de-escalation zones.

Despite the April 2018 strikes against Assad's forces, Bashar al-Assad and his allies succeeded in their goal to force the surrender of the "low hanging fruit" de-escalation zones in western Syria, Homs/Hama and East Ghouta, that were surrounded by territory controlled by the Assad

<sup>7</sup> Bassem Mroue and Jamey Keaten, "U.N.: Syria War Displacement This Year Worst Ever," Associated Press, September 12, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/syria-war-displacement-year-worst-57765249>.

<sup>8</sup> Yonette Joseph and Christina Caron, "Burning Eyes, Foaming Mouths: Years Of Suspected Chemical Attacks In Syria," *New York Times*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attacks-assad.html>; Nour Alakraa, "Syria's Cycle: Siege, Starve, Surrender, Repeat," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-cycle-siege-starve-surrender-repeat-1521817350>; Angus McDowall and Dahlia Nehme, "Families Broken By The Carnage Of Ghouta's Bombs," Reuters, February 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-military-attack-salami/iran-warns-u-s-israel-to-expect-a-devastating-revenge-state-ny-1615KCN1M40KM>.

government and unable to access support from foreign patrons. Assad's capture of the Homs/Hama and East Ghouta de-escalation zones should not have been surprising to close observers of the Syrian conflict. These two zones were negotiated as part of the Astana diplomatic track among Russia, Iran, and Turkey—the United States was not involved in establishing these zones or enforcing them. In fact, other than to respond to the Assad government's use of chemical weapons in East Ghouta, for which the administration also rebuked Russia, the U.S. government gave no indication that it would respond to protect these two zones and prevent Bashar al-Assad from retaking them.<sup>9</sup>

What was more surprising was the collapse of the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone, which was fully conquered by the Assad government in August, both through military action and through a series of "reconciliation agreements" brokered by Russia. These reconciliation deals are a major line of effort by the Assad government and Russia.<sup>10</sup> Under the reconciliation deals, local armed organizations and civilian councils cooperating with these rebel groups in opposition-controlled areas agreed to stop fighting the Assad government in return for keeping their small arms, a limited form of local autonomy for opposition-held areas, and guarantees from Russia that Russian military police will prevent the Assad government's security forces from carrying out massive campaigns of arrest and detention targeting individuals living in reconciled areas.

The Southwest De-Escalation Zone was, until its surrender in August, the crown jewel of the administration's diplomatic efforts in Syria. It was established in July 2017 as the result of negotiations between the United States, Russia, and Jordan, and could justifiably be viewed as a major success of the new administration's still developing Syria policy. More important for U.S. policy, the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone included the last significant area of control for moderate armed opposition, which held territory on Jordan's northern border and on the Golan Heights, serving as a buffer for Israel against Iranian forces and their proxy Shia militias.<sup>11</sup> I have been particularly focused on developments in Southwest Syria over the last five years, and was in Jordan on research in May just prior to the start of the June campaign launched by the Assad government and its allies against the zone. I was in communication with the opposition throughout the course of June and July when the battle for control over the zone was raging.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Louisa Loveluck, Asma Ajroudi, and Suzan Haidamous, "Chemical Weapons Coverup Suspected in Syria As Inspectors Remain Locked," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chemical-weapons-coverup-suspected-in-syria-as-inspectors-remain-locked/2018/04/20/?hpid=hp-top-table-border:chemical-weapons-coverup-suspected-in-syria-as-inspectors-remain-locked%3Astory%3Ahomepage%3A\\_tcm%3A64440a-11e8-b26c-b0a03e4720a\\_story.html&utm\\_term=.e4739e87e144](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chemical-weapons-coverup-suspected-in-syria-as-inspectors-remain-locked/2018/04/20/?hpid=hp-top-table-border:chemical-weapons-coverup-suspected-in-syria-as-inspectors-remain-locked%3Astory%3Ahomepage%3A_tcm%3A64440a-11e8-b26c-b0a03e4720a_story.html&utm_term=.e4739e87e144).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Grove, "Russia Offers A Carrot To Embattled Syrian Rebels," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-offers-a-carrot-to-embattled-syrian-rebels-1535799600>.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Tsirikov, "Inside Israel's Secret Program To Back Syrian Rebels," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/06/in-secret-program-israel-armed-and-funded-rebel-groups-in-southern-syria/>; Shadi Martini and Nicholas A. Heras, "The One Place In Syria That Works," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/23/the-one-place-in-syria-that-works/>; Neri Zilber, "Why Israel Is Giving Syrians Free Spaghetti (And Health Care)," *Politico*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/10/28/sy-by-israel-is-providing-thousands-of-syrians-with-humanitarian-aid-215754>.

<sup>12</sup> Suha Maayeh and Nicholas A. Heras, "The Fall Of Daraa," *Foreign Affairs*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-07-23/fall-daraa>; Nicholas A. Heras, "De-escalation Deal Means Tricky Transition For Southern Syria Rebels," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, August

What was clear from my research was that the southwest opposition was getting mixed signals from the U.S. government about our intent to enforce the Southwest De-Escalation Zone and to defend it from a potential military campaign launched by the Assad government against the zone. That lack of clarity from the administration here in Washington, D.C., in turn effected how relevant U.S. government organizations in Jordan could advise the southwest opposition on how to proceed, including with a Russian-led and Jordanian-backed effort to secure a deal between the opposition and the Assad government that would likely have been more favorable to the rebels than what followed their surrender this summer. What unfolded in regard to the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone was a failure of U.S. policy, and it came across as weakness in American diplomacy and demonstrated to the Assad government and its allies, especially Russia, that the United States is willing to subcontract Syria's stability to the Russians.

The collapse of the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone is, in my analysis, indicative of the general confusion of U.S. government policy toward Syria, and in particular regarding how to respond to the civil war between the Assad government and its allies and the opposition in western Syria. The U.S. government was not willing to enforce the Southwest De-Escalation Zone, and without that effort, both Jordan and Israel ultimately made the decision that they believed was best for their respective national security, which was to encourage the southwest opposition to cut a deal with Russia and end the fighting that had been displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians, killing hundreds of civilians, and destroying property.

In my analysis, the administration deserves to receive criticism for its approach to the Southwest De-Escalation Zone because the collapse of the zone showed that despite its public statements, the United States was not willing to enforce a deal it brokered, and that the Assad government and Russia clearly violated.<sup>13</sup> The collapse of the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone also removed a clear pathway for the United States to link its military presence in northern and eastern Syria with western Syria, where in the southwest the United States could have worked with local moderate armed opposition against the small but militarily effective ISIS affiliate that was located in that region.<sup>14</sup>

Areas that reconciled with the Assad government via the efforts of Russia are now seeing significant numbers of arrests and detentions of local people by the Assad government's security forces, and many reconciled rebels and members of the White Helmets EMS service are being killed, which undermines the objectives of the *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2017*

15, 2017, <https://iamestown.org/program/de-escalation-deal-means-tricky-transition-for-southern-syria-rebels/>; Nicholas A. Heras, Nicholas A. Heras, "A Profile Of Syria's Strategic Dar'a Province," Volume 7, Issue 6, *CTC Sentinel*, June 2014, <https://ctcs.sma.edu/a-profile-of-syrias-strategic-dar-a-province/>.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Nauert, "Preserving The Southwest De-escalation Zone in Syria," U.S. Department of State, June 14, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/2833252.htm>; Heather Nauert, "Assad Regime Intentions in the Southwest De-escalation Zone," U.S. Department of State, May 25, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282540.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Hassan Hassan, "President Trump Should Invest in Southern Syria's Rebels," *Fair Observer*, January 23, 2017, [https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle\\_east\\_north\\_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/](https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/).

passed by the House last year.<sup>15</sup> The fall of the Southwest De-Escalation Zone further established Russia as the key foreign actor responsible for stabilizing western Syria, which in the southwest keeps Iranian and proxy forces off the Golan Heights and away from the Jordanian border.<sup>16</sup>

The loss of the Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone means that if the United States is to retain potential leverage over the course of the civil war in western Syria, it is dependent on the maintenance of what the U.S. government calls “Greater Idlib,” which includes areas of Idlib, Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo governorates in northwest Syria, remaining independent from the Assad government. An Assad government campaign on Greater Idlib – which is home to an estimated 3.5 million people including over a million displaced from other regions of the country – would have led to a catastrophic humanitarian disaster.<sup>17</sup> The administration was more actively engaged in the situation in Greater Idlib and provided diplomatic “top cover” to shore up Turkey’s bargaining position vis-à-vis Russia and Iran.<sup>18</sup>

Last week, Russia and Turkey agreed to implement a 9–12 mile de-militarized zone around Greater Idlib. This de-militarized zone would be jointly patrolled by Turkish and Russian militaries and in it the armed opposition would remove all heavy weapons (such as tanks, artillery pieces, and surface-to-surface missiles).<sup>19</sup> Turkey also agreed that it would work with its local Syrian armed opposition partners to remove al Qaeda and similar organizations from Greater Idlib.<sup>20</sup> Russia’s deal with Turkey was made out of a desire to prevent attrition of the Assad government’s forces in a battle for Greater Idlib, and to avoid a humanitarian crisis that would freeze the slow effort engaged by Russia to rehabilitate the image of Bashar al-Assad and renormalize his government globally.<sup>21</sup> Russia cannot and will not finance the reconstruction of Syria, and it needs to advance the already painfully slow process of renormalizing Assad to proceed apace and without interruptions.<sup>22</sup> However, stopping the Assad campaign on Greater

<sup>15</sup> For updates on the conditions in the reconciled areas in the former Southwest Syria De-Escalation Zone see: ETANA Twitter Account, [https://twitter.com/etana\\_syria?lang=en](https://twitter.com/etana_syria?lang=en).

<sup>16</sup> “Putin Says He And Trump Agreed On Securing Israel’s Border With Syria,” *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-says-he-and-trump-agreed-on-securing-israels-border-with-syria/>.

<sup>17</sup> Tulay Karadeniz and Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Syria’s Idlib Spared Attack, Turkey To Send In More Troops,” Reuters, September 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/syrian-rebels-see-idlib-deal-as-victory-damascus-as-test-for-turkey-idUSKCN1L10T9?hl=0>.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce Karam, “Idlib Crisis Prompts U.S. To Take A New Tack On Syria,” *The National*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/idlib-crisis-prompts-us-to-take-a-new-tack-on-syria-1.770906>.

<sup>19</sup> “Turkey, Russia Agree On Borders Of Idlib Disarmament Zone,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 21, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-russia-agree-on-borders-of-idlib-disarmament-zone-ministry-137087>.

<sup>20</sup> “Syrian FSA Rebels To Cooperate With Turkey In Idlib, Wary Of Russia,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 23, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/syrian-fsa-rebels-to-cooperate-with-turkey-in-idlib-wary-of-russia-137119>.

<sup>21</sup> Yury Barmin, “Russia’s Bitter Reality Check In Syria,” *Moscow Times*, September 21, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-bitter-reality-check-in-syria-op-ed-62966>.

<sup>22</sup> David Gardner, “Russia Launches A Diplomatic Offensive On Rebuilding Syria,” *Financial Times*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/e99d42f0-a539-11e8-8eef-a7ae1bef351b>; Arshad Mohammed and Phil Stewart, “Despite Tensions, Russia Seeks U.S. Help To Rebuild Syria,” Reuters, August 3, 2018,



Idlib is not enough because the truth is that Greater Idlib has become, per the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk, “the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.”<sup>23</sup>

The administration recently stated that the United States and its partners such as Turkey, and not the Assad government and its allies such as Russia, should conduct operations in Greater Idlib to remove al Qaeda and similar organizations from that region.<sup>24</sup> The United States has an interest in removing al Qaeda and similar groups from Greater Idlib, whether we are talking about transnational al Qaeda operatives and foreign fighters or local Syrian members seeking to irreversibly change the social and political norms of their communities to provide enduring safe havens for al Qaeda. There remains significant uncertainty on what the administration will do to address this challenge moving forward. Specifically, whether the administration plans to work with Turkey and its Syrian armed opposition partners against al Qaeda and similar groups and whether that partnership would be effective.

#### **Matters of Concern for U.S. Policy on Syria**

There are several matters of concern that are relevant to the United States in Syria, all of which impact U.S. policy toward the conflict there and the indefinite maintenance of U.S. forces in Syria. These matters relate to: (1) administering the U.S. zone of control in northern and eastern Syria for the post-ISIS stabilization mission; (2) achieving U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria to work toward the irreversible advancement of the Geneva process and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254; (3) defending against the Assad government and its allies’ strategy to undermine the U.S.-led coalition’s stabilization mission in northern and eastern Syria; (4) engaging constructively with Russia to achieve a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict, and (5) deterring and diminishing Iran in Syria and the western Levant and preventing a larger Israeli-Iranian conflict.

#### Administering the U.S. zone of control in northern and eastern Syria for the post-ISIS stabilization mission

According to Brett McGurk, 99% of the would-be Caliphate that ISIS once ruled in Syria and Iraq has been conquered. Senior U.S. officials responsible for the post-ISIS stabilization mission report that that the United States has raised approximately \$300 million from multiple Coalition countries, including a large pledge of \$150 million from Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup> The United States is prioritizing stabilization programs focusing on irrigation canals, demining, water pumps, basic health, and basic essential services. Currently, a particular area of focus for U.S.-led Coalition

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria-exclusive/exclusive-despite-tensions-russia-seeks-u-s-help-to-rebuild-syria-idUSKBN1X0Z1P>

<sup>23</sup> Ben Hubbard, “In A Syria Refuge, Extremists Exert Greater Control,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/world/middleeast/idlib-syria-displaced-militants.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Elise Labott, “U.S. Envoy To Syria Says U.S. Will Stay Until There Is An ‘Enduring Defeat’ Of ISIS,” *CNN*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/politics/us-envoy-syria-enduring-defeat/index.html>.

<sup>25</sup> David M. Satterfield and Brett McGurk, “Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance And Ongoing Efforts to Achieve An Enduring Defeat of ISIS,” U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/265202.htm>.



stabilization efforts is Raqqa, where Mr. McGurk states all 26 sectors of the city have safe drinking water and more than 150,000 people have returned.<sup>26</sup>

Securing and maintaining financial support for the stabilization mission in northern and eastern Syria is important to ensuring the success of the U.S. mission to prevent the reemergence of ISIS. There have been frequent complaints by organizations implementing programs on the ground inside of the U.S. zone in northern and eastern Syria that there has not been enough support from the U.S. team responsible for overseeing the stabilization mission.<sup>27</sup> It is understandable that Raqqa, once the putative capital of ISIS's Caliphate, and which was significantly destroyed by the U.S.-led coalition campaign to capture the city, would currently receive the greatest amount of attention from the United States.<sup>28</sup> However, there are other vulnerable areas of northern and eastern Syria, particularly Deir al-Zour, that are currently underserved and where security concerns about attacks from ISIS remnants make it difficult for the coalition's local and international implementing partners to operate.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. government should be sure to put more attention into stabilizing Deir al-Zour, which is likely to be the first area of northern and eastern Syria where ISIS would attempt a comeback.<sup>30</sup>

The success of the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization mission in Syria will also be determined by the ability of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria that governs the U.S. zone, to develop into a structure that can provide security and good governance for the people of this region of Syria. Herein lies the challenge and the opportunity for the SDF. The SDF is a multi-ethnic military alliance – with a large part of its strength being the People's Protection Units (YPG) – an umbrella organization of local community-based militias, many of which are composed of ethnic Kurds, and a significant number of which are associated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD, which is the

<sup>26</sup> David M. Satterfield and Brett McGurk, "Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance And Ongoing Efforts to Achieve An Enduring Defeat of ISIS," U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/265202.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Rhys Dubin, "Three Months After U.S. Freeze, Syrian Recovery Remains In Limbo," *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2018; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/29/three-months-after-u-s-freeze-syrian-recovery-stuck-in-limbo-isis-trump/>; Sarah el-Deeb, "Syrians In Raqqa Afraid, Angry, Frustrated As They Rebuild," Associated Press, April 8, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/syrians-in-raqqa-afraid-angry-frustrated-as-they-rebuild/479081813/>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Who Will Rule Raqqa After The Islamic State?," *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/13/who-will-rule-raqqa-after-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>28</sup> "Syria: Raqqa In Ruins And Civilians Devastated After U.S.-Led War of 'Annihilation,'" Amnesty International, June 5, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/syria-raqqa-in-ruins-and-civilians-devastated-after-us-led-war-of-annihilation/>; Tamer el-Ghobashy and Alice Martens, "How American Neglect Imperils The Victory Over ISIS," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/syria/raqqa-residents-abandoned-and-forgotten/?utm\\_term=.c40929cea5f1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/syria/raqqa-residents-abandoned-and-forgotten/?utm_term=.c40929cea5f1).

<sup>29</sup> Aris Roussinos, "These Are The Soldiers Pushing Out What's Left Of ISIS In Syria," *Vice News*, June 11, 2018, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/59cjq8/soldiers-pushing-out-whats-left-of-isis-in-deir-azzour-syria](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/59cjq8/soldiers-pushing-out-whats-left-of-isis-in-deir-azzour-syria); Nicholas A. Heras and Omar Abu Layla, "The Security Vacuum In Post-ISIS Deir Ezzour," *Syria Deeply*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/11/15/the-security-vacuum-in-post-isis-deir-azzour>.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Nidal Betare, "Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project," Center for a New American Security, October 2, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/deir-azzour-tribal-mapping-project>.

dominant Syrian Kurdish political party, is in turn strongly influenced by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a predominately Turkish-Kurdish organization that is at war with the Turkish government and that the United States lists as a terrorist organization.

Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK and the U.S. relationship with the YPG and the PYD is significant and is a driver of tensions among the NATO allies. Since the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK began in 1984, it is estimated that 40,000 people, including civilians and combatants, have been killed.<sup>31</sup> The current phase of hostilities between the Turkish military and the PKK occurred as the result of the breakdown of peace talks between the Erdogan-led government and the PKK in 2015. One pathway to alleviating tensions between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds would be for the U.S. government to get Ankara to restart peace talks with the PKK.

These most recent rounds of fighting between the PKK and Turkey have killed approximately 3,000 people, including civilians and combatants, and has led to widespread destruction in several cities in Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey.<sup>32</sup> A semi-autonomous organization within the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), has conducted several high-profile attacks against targets in tourist areas of western Turkish cities that are frequented by foreigners, including in Istanbul and Ankara.<sup>33</sup> The Turkish government believes that TAK has established a safe haven in northern and eastern Syria in the zones controlled by the YPG (i.e. those under the influence of the U.S. military) to plan attacks inside of Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Turkey's assessment, the fact of the matter is that the U.S. military has nurtured the development of the SDF since 2015, developing it from an alliance forged between the YPG and Arab-majority armed opposition groups. This alliance fought together to defend the northern Syrian city of Kobani from ISIS in the summer of 2014, and it was this successful example of inter-ethnic cooperation under the leadership of the YPG at Kobani that piqued the interest of the U.S. military and its coalition partners.<sup>35</sup> Since 2015, the SDF, under the guidance of the U.S. military and other coalition partners, has been built organically to reflect northern and eastern

<sup>31</sup> "Turkish Military Kills Three PKK Militants in North Iraq Near Border," Reuters, September 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-iraq/turkish-military-kills-three-pkk-militants-in-north-iraq-near-border-sources-idUSKCN1C414E>.

<sup>32</sup> Berkay Mandiraci, "Turkey's PKK Conflict Kills Almost 3,000 In Two Years," International Crisis Group, July 20, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkeys-pkk-conflict-kills-almost-3000-two-years>.

<sup>33</sup> Remarks by General Raymond Thomas, Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOCOM: Policing The World," Aspen Institute, July 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLSx76E>.

<sup>34</sup> Safak Timur, "Kurdish Militant Group Claims Responsibility for Deadly Istanbul Bombing," *New York Times*, December 11, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/world/europe/kurdish-tak-istanbul-double-bombing.html>; Metin Gurcan, "The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm's-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers Party," *CTC Sentinel*, July 27, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-kurdistan-freedom-falcons-a-profile-of-the-arms-length-proxy-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party>.

<sup>35</sup> Metin Gurcan, "The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm's-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers Party," *CTC Sentinel*, July 27, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-kurdistan-freedom-falcons-a-profile-of-the-arms-length-proxy-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party>.

Syria's communal diversity and to guard against the region's history of inter-communal violence that ISIS had previously used to its advantage in northern and eastern Syria.<sup>36</sup>

The intellectual underpinning of the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria's governance model is the "Democratic Confederalism" theory first proposed by Abdullah Ocalan, who is considered the leader and inspiration of the PKK. Ocalan's theory was written as a series of essays in 2005 in response to inter-ethnic violence, mainly between Arabs and Kurds, which afflicted northern and eastern Syria in 2004. Ocalan's ideas are given form with the establishment of the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, and are literally the governing framework that is replacing ISIS and serving as the partner for U.S. stabilization efforts.

For the time being, Turkey will remain a problem and a potential source of threats to the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization effort working through the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria and the SDF because it views the PYD and by extension the YPG and SDF to be an existential threat. Turkey's distrust of the both the SDF, and to be frank, the United States, will continue to create security problems for the U.S.-led coalition and its SDF partners in Syria.<sup>37</sup> Over the last year, there has been a rising number of assassination attempts, some of them successful, against SDF officials and their local, mainly Arab allies.<sup>38</sup> These social, political, and security challenges – although for the time being manageable for the SDF – are easily exacerbated with Turkish support, which seems forthcoming.<sup>39</sup>

In effect, the U.S.-led coalition wants the SDF to govern areas of northern and eastern Syria that were under the control of ISIS and are Arab-majority such as Manbij, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zour in a manner that will conform to the wishes of the local population. This is to keep the local population from wishing for the return of ISIS, but in so doing the United States wants the SDF to be a self-running machine, without too much input required from the U.S.-led coalition. But the challenge is that the SDF's default setting is to run a government according to Ocalan's vision and to set the social norms according to the ideology of the PYD, which is problematic for many locals in places like Manbij, Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, as it can cause discord that can be utilized by a range of opponents – be they ISIS, the Assad government, or Turkey. Special consideration should also be given for the internally displaced people (IDP) who are residing in camps within the U.S.-led coalition's zone of control in northern and eastern Syria.

<sup>36</sup> Remarks by General Raymond Thomas, Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, "SOCOM: Policing The World," Aspen Institute, July 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLISx7M>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish Enclaves In Syria Battle Islamist Militant Groups," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, May 2, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/kurdish-enclaves-in-syria-battle-islamist-militant-groups/>.

<sup>37</sup> Dorian Jones, "Turkish-U.S.-Syrian Cooperation Deepens As Bilateral Relations Remain In Crisis," *Voice of America*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkish-us-syrian-cooperation-deepens-as-bilateral-relations-remain-in-crisis-/4536473.html>

<sup>38</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "IS Continues Small-Scale Attacks Targeting Manbij's Security," *Kurdistan 24*, September 6, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ca633d8e-9a1e-4ee7-b5a5-9d0b7946f07a>; Sarah el-Deeb, "A Key Kurdish Official Linked To The U.S. Has Been Found Dead In Syria," Associated Press, March 15, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-senior-kurdish-official-key-to-us-policy-in-syria-killed-2018-3>.

<sup>39</sup> "Turkey To Increase Safe Zones in Syria," *Says Erdogan*, *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 24, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-increase-safe-zones-in-syria-says-erdogan-137142>

There are also hundreds of thousands of people in these IDP camps throughout this zone, both in the areas that are administered by the Self Administration for Northern and Eastern Syria and in the Rukban camp in the al-Tanf zone that is directly under the control of U.S.-led coalition forces on the Syrian-Jordanian border in the central-eastern Syrian Desert. The humanitarian conditions in these IDP camps are challenging and are in dire need of being addressed. Various international and local non-government associations estimate there could be more than 300,000 IDPs from eastern Syria in different camps in the territory administered by the Self Administration for Northern and Eastern Syria, and that SDF authorities have been linked to harsh security measures that prevent camp residents from moving freely out of these camps back to their homes.<sup>40</sup>

Rukban camp, which is located in the vicinity of the U.S.-led coalition's forward military base in the al-Tanf zone on the Jordanian-Syrian border in northeast Jordan, is home to approximately 55,000 displaced Syrians, the majority of whom are from areas of central and eastern Syria that were formerly under the control of ISIS.<sup>41</sup> Jordan considers Rukban to be a threat to its national security because of the potential of ISIS operatives to be present in the camp. There are credible reports of security and safety concerns in the camp due to the presence of criminal organizations and armed groups that are seeking to maintain control of the sporadic humanitarian assistance that enters the camp. According to Syrian opposition sources in the camp, approximately half of the camp's residents are threatened from famine due to lack of access to food. Moreover, inflation on existential foodstuffs and potable water in the camp has made it so that residents of the camp are increasingly unable to afford to meet their nutritional needs. The U.N. also has had only sporadic access to the camp, and there is currently no frequent and reliable cross-border access to Rukban from Jordan, creating severe difficulty in getting humanitarian aid into the camp.<sup>42</sup>

Achieving U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria to work toward the irreversible advancement of the Geneva process and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254

In addition to the challenges posed by Russia and Iran, we also have significant challenges being posed by our NATO ally, Turkey. The administration's new Syria team states its commitment to achieve a modus vivendi with Turkey in Syria that can be used to support U.S. counterterrorism goals and to advance the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254. Even over time, a U.S.-Turkish grand bargain could create one unified, "NATO zone" stretching from northwest to southeast Syria that would be beyond the reach of the Assad government and its allies, and a zone that would possess the country's best arable land, oil, water resources, and

<sup>40</sup> "Syria: Thousands of Displaced Confined To Camps," Human Rights Watch, August 1, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/01/syria-thousands-displaced-confined-camps>.

<sup>41</sup> Aron Lund, "Blame Game Over Syrians Stranded In The Desert," The Century Foundation, June 18, 2018, <https://www.century.org/content/report/blame-game-syrians-stranded-desert/?agreed=1>; Sam Heller, "What An Unfolding Humanitarian Disaster In A U.S.-Protected Enclave Tells Us About American Strategy In Syria," *War On The Rocks*, November 20, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/26162/>.

<sup>42</sup> "U.N. Refugee Chief Urges U.S. Others To Take In More Refugees," *Voice of America*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-refugee-chief-urges-us-others-to-take-in-more-refugees/4250552.html>; Sara Kayyali, "Syrian Refugees Trapped In A No-Man's Land," *Al-Jazeera*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/syrian-refugees-trapped-man-land-171201095110243.html>.

electricity producing resources.<sup>43</sup> Yet, achieving a long-term and mutually beneficial arrangement with Turkey will be difficult.

What is clear is that Turkey will not willingly surrender its territorial zone of control in northwest Syria back to Bashar al-Assad out of concern that it would lose leverage on the ground in Syria to prevent the establishment of a PKK safe haven. And while that might seem to be an advantage for current U.S. policy, it is also a problem. That problem relates to Turkey's aggressive posture towards the SDF and the YPG, which is what brought the Turkish military on the ground in Syria to begin with when it launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016.<sup>44</sup> Erdogan's decision to enter Syria, motivated by a desire to prevent what the Turkish government feared would be a contiguous, Kurdish-controlled zone stretching across its southern border with Syria, and to a lesser extent to clear ISIS from its last stronghold near the border, has been one of the most consequential decisions of the war. More than two years later, Turkey has slowly but steadily worked by, with, and through its Syrian rebel proxy groups to gain additional pieces of territory in northwest Syria, adding the Afrin region in February, and as a result of the recently announced deal with Russia, it is adding Greater Idlib and its surrounding areas.

What makes Greater Idlib so difficult is that there is no easy path for Turkey and the United States to uproot al Qaeda and similar organizations from this region because the truth is that these groups have developed a significant degree of community cover from the local Syrian population. All of the major extremist groups in Greater Idlib, including Huras al-Din (the declared al Qaeda affiliate in Syria) with an estimated 500 fighters, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (once Jabhat al-Nusra, the former declared al Qaeda affiliate in Syria) with an estimated 8,000-10,000 fighters, the Turkistan Islamic Party (which was founded by ethnic Uighur jihadist fighters) with an estimated 1,500-2,000 fighters, and Jund al-Aqsa (which has ties to ISIS) with an estimated 1,500 fighters, are to one degree or another tightly woven into the local Syrian community in Greater Idlib. These organizations, although they include a significant number of foreign fighters, also possess many Syrian members and are actively involved in the security and governance of the region.

Taking them on will not be easy, and will likely result in bloodshed and mass displacement inside of Greater Idlib, which will impose a human and political cost on Turkey and potentially the United States if it joins Turkey in that effort. Turkey's preferred method in Greater Idlib is to use its various Syrian rebel proxy forces to take on al Qaeda and similar organizations, especially the National Liberation Front (NLF) with an estimated 25,000-30,000 fighters and the Syrian National Army, also with an estimated 25,000-30,000 fighters. The NLF is an umbrella organization of different armed opposition groups, while the Syrian National Army is directly trained, paid, and armed by Turkey and is predominately based in the Turkish-controlled border areas in northern Aleppo governorate. The NLF includes armed opposition groups that were vetted by the CIA and previously received U.S. military support, although these groups are not

<sup>43</sup> Ilan Goldenberg and Nicholas A. Heras, "Turkey And The United States Should Work Together To Avert Disaster In Idlib," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/high-stakes-in-idlib-for-us-turkey/>.

<sup>44</sup> Seyma Nazli Gurbuz, "One Year On, Turkey's Euphrates Shield Still Model Of Effective Counterterrorism Fight," *Daily Sabah*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/08/24/one-year-on-turkeys-euphrates-shield-still-model-of-effective-counterterrorism-fight>.

the majority of the fighters within the NLF. Despite these manpower advantages, it is unclear if either the NLF or the Syrian National Army have the capability, or the desire, to engage in a bloody civil war inside of Greater Idlib. Least of all a war against organizations that share their immediate goal of overthrowing the Assad government.

Despite receiving Turkish training, and in the case of the Syrian National Army funding from Turkey, these rebel forces are still at best makeshift armies.<sup>45</sup> And both of these forces are riddled with questionable actors and include groups such as the militant Salafist, al Qaeda nurtured, and frequent Hayat Tahrir al-Sham ally, the organization Ahrar al-Sham, that share the same end state goal in Syria as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>46</sup> Their quarrel with each other is over who has the power within the opposition and how to govern who gets its spoils, not over what end state comes out of the revolution. With these Syrian rebel “armies,” it remains to be seen if Turkey really can remove al Qaeda and similar organizations from Greater Idlib all alone.

It is also true that further conflict could erupt in Greater Idlib, as the Syrian armed opposition does not want to give up the war against Bashar al-Assad.<sup>47</sup> This is a common feature of the armed opposition throughout Syria, and this resistance against the return of the Assad government is shared among a diverse range of current and former rebel fighters, such as in the “reconciled” areas of southwest Syria, by Arab fighters that are part of the SDF, and through the array of armed opposition groups in Greater Idlib. One dynamic about Greater Idlib that bears careful attention is that Greater Idlib has the largest concentration of armed opposition fighters remaining in the conflict. This is the product of the size and concentration of local armed opposition groups in Greater Idlib, including al Qaeda and similar organizations, and because Greater Idlib is the dumping ground for rebel fighters that did not want to cut reconcile with the Assad government in other areas of Syria. Greater Idlib is the abode of the violent anti-Assad movement in Syria, and despite Turkey’s effort to organize the wide array of groups in Greater Idlib under its control, in one manner or another, continuing the military campaign against the Assad government remains a key objective of the groups that are based there.

It is also worth taking a closer look at Afrin, which has been a historically ethnic Kurdish region that over the course of the civil war was controlled by the YPG and remained relatively untouched by the war and was a haven for tens of thousands of people displaced from other regions of Syria. The plight of the people of Afrin has been a big hole in U.S. policy and it deserves special attention for U.S. policy because this region is very important to the YPG – a major component of the SDF and America’s best and closest partner in Syria. The unresolved situation in Afrin could be the trigger for a larger conflict between Turkey and Syria’s Kurdish community. I’ll be blunt: the United States has generally ignored the situation and has not adequately addressed what has unfolded in Afrin since the conclusion of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch in February.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah el-Deeb, “Blurring The Border, Turkey Deepens Roots In Northern Syria,” Associated Press, June 19, 2018, <http://m.startribune.com/blurring-the-border-turkey-deepens-roots-in-northern-syria/465892662/>.

<sup>46</sup> Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, March 2018), pg. 279; Jennifer Cafarella, Nicholas A. Heras, and Genevieve Casagrande, “Al Qaeda Is Gaining Strength In Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/01/al-qaeda-is-gaining-strength-in-syria/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Idlib Buffer Zone: Pro-Turkey Syrian Rebels Refuse To Disarm,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/idlib-buffer-zone-pro-turkey-syrian-rebels-refuse-to-disarm/a-45607466>.

According to the World Health Organization, close to 170,000 residents of Afrin have been displaced, most of them ethnic Kurds.<sup>48</sup> The Turkish-backed Syrian opposition occupation force in Afrin has been credibly linked to human rights abuses and looting and illegally seizing property.<sup>49</sup> In response to these abuses, a coalition of YPG-linked resistance groups has embarked on a campaign to destabilize the Turkish-backed, Syrian rebel occupation forces in Afrin.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the consequences of Operation Olive Branch have been severe and are still causing tensions between the YPG and the U.S.-led coalition, because despite pressure from the Coalition, the YPG will not surrender its right to liberate Afrin from Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies.

Afrin has been largely forgotten by the United States because U.S. policy toward the YPG has been to categorize the YPG organization that exists east of the Euphrates as the SDF, and therefore, part of the counter-ISIS campaign, and the YPG organization west of the Euphrates as a separate entity that is not supported by the Coalition. This of course is not how the YPG perceives itself, and the result of the Turkish campaign in Afrin was to cause the counter-ISIS campaign in eastern Syria to nearly ground to a halt in February as the YPG sent forces from the battles against ISIS to confront Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies.<sup>51</sup> The precedent set by Turkey in Afrin should be a cause for concern for the U.S. government as Erdogan has stated that it is his intention to launch similar operations against the SDF in the areas east of the Euphrates.<sup>52</sup>

We should be concerned that inconsistencies in U.S. policy vis-à-vis Turkey have not helped us balance the concerns of Turkey with the concerns of the Syrian Kurds within the SDF. One example of this inconsistency is former Vice President Biden's promise to Erdogan in 2016 that

<sup>48</sup> Sangar Ali, "WHO: Nearly 170,000 Displaced From Afrin Need Urgent Assistance," *Kurdistan 24*, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2ch4ba31-2020-4aab-8ba5-5029b07497a>.

<sup>49</sup> "Afrin Loot Is Legitimate Spoils Of War, Leaked Transit Document Shows," *Rudaw*, August 23, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/23082018/>; "Syria: Turkey Must Stop Serious Violations By Allied Groups And Its Own Forces In Afrin," *Amnesty International*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>; "Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property," *Human Rights Watch*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/syria-turkey-backed-groups-seizing-property>.

<sup>50</sup> Ammar Hamou, Mohammed al-Haj Ali, and Avery Edelman, "YPG's Insurgent Campaign Edges Closer To Afrin Rebels, Civilians With Deadly Attack," *Syria Direct*, September 6, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/ypg%E2%80%99s-insurgent-campaign-edges-closer-to-afrin-rebels-civilians-with-deadly-attack/>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "YPG Kills 10 In Targeted Bombing Of Militant Group In Afrin City Center," *Kurdistan 24*, August 15, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/e6860d3f-4892-4c5f-a9c0-13096bca332c>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "YPG Continues Attacks On Turkish Army And Rebels In Afrin," *Kurdistan 24*, July 17, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/02701924-a219-4978-870e-ddd5e103ed9>.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Barnard, "Turkey Asks U.S. To Stop Kurds From Shifting Fighters To Western Syria," *New York Times*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-us-afrin.html>; Liz Sly, "Kurds Pull Back From ISIS Fight In Syria, Saying U.S. 'Let Us Down,'" *Washington Post*, March 6, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kurds-pull-back-from-isis-fight-in-syria-say-they-are-let-down-by-us/2018/03/06/3f67c2ca-2173-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-isis%3Aterm%3A714206c15601](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kurds-pull-back-from-isis-fight-in-syria-say-they-are-let-down-by-us/2018/03/06/3f67c2ca-2173-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-isis%3Aterm%3A714206c15601).

<sup>52</sup> "Turkey's Erdogan Vows To Impose Secure Zones East of Euphrates In Syria," *Reuters*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-vows-to-impose-secure-zones-east-of-euphrates-in-syria-idUSKCN1M40D>.





the SDF, not just the YPG units within the SDF, would withdraw from the disputed region of Manbij, which is technically west of the Euphrates, and back over to the east bank of the Euphrates.<sup>53</sup> That broken promise is still remembered by Erdogan and the Turkish public who feel they were lied to by their NATO ally.<sup>54</sup> U.S.-Turkish joint military patrols in Manbij would be a positive step forward.<sup>55</sup> However, the administration's new Syria team should remain wary of Turkey's intentions because Erdogan has insisted on his right to dismantle the SDF east of the Euphrates.

Turkey is a NATO ally, and it may be the lodestar for the administration's new Syria strategy, but the intentions of the Turkish government toward the SDF-administered areas east of the Euphrates should be a cause of great concern for the U.S. government.<sup>56</sup> If Erdogan was to act on his desire, it would mean that Turkey would be directly undermining the U.S. stabilization effort in northern and eastern Syria, which would be a boon for ISIS.

Defending against the Assad government and its allies' strategy to undermine the U.S.-led Coalition's stabilization mission in northern and eastern Syria

The Assad government and its allies are actively seeking to undermine the U.S.-led coalition, its local Syrian partners, and the coalition's stabilization effort in Syria. Bashar al-Assad's decision not to completely abandon northern and eastern Syria, and to maintain a small forward operating presence in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah in this region, provides his forces and their IRGC-QF allies with the opportunity to contest the U.S.-led coalition and the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria. Over the course of the civil war, the YPG and the SDF have engaged in periodic clashes against local forces that remain loyal to Bashar al-Assad in northern and eastern Syria.<sup>57</sup>

There are indicators that the Assad government and its allies, particularly the IRGC-QF and its Hezbollah Network, are taking active measures to reestablish lines of influence inside the U.S zone of control in northern and eastern Syria, with a focus on Sunni Arab tribes such as those that live in Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir al-Zour governorates. The Assad government and its allies

<sup>53</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Biden Warns Kurds Not To Seek Separate Enclave On Turkish-Syrian Border," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-visits-turkey-on-mission-to-repair-strained-relations/2016/08/24/bc684904-6a04-11e6-99bf-f0e3a6449a6\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main\\_biden-turkey:home-box-pagination:page-four>:hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main\\_biden-turkey:home-box-pagination:page-four](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-visits-turkey-on-mission-to-repair-strained-relations/2016/08/24/bc684904-6a04-11e6-99bf-f0e3a6449a6_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_biden-turkey:home-box-pagination:page-four>:hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_biden-turkey:home-box-pagination:page-four)

<sup>54</sup> Ragıp Soylu, "Three Broken U.S. Promises On Manbij," *Daily Sabah*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ragip-soylu/2018/02/15/three-broken-us-promises-on-manbij>

<sup>55</sup> Zeynep Bilginsoy, "Turkey Says It Will Patrol Northern Syria Town Of Manbij With U.S. Forces," Associated Press, September 23, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/09/23/turkey-says-it-will-patrol-manbij-in-syria-north-with-us-forces/>

<sup>56</sup> Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, "Kurdish Militants Must Leave Syria, Turkey Tells U.S. Envoy," Reuters, September 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-usa/kurdish-militants-must-leave-syria-turkey-tells-u-s-envoy-idU3KCN1LKND>

<sup>57</sup> Vladimir van Wilgenburg, "YPG To Investigate Clash With Regime That Killed 11," *Kurdistan 24*, September 15, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/612b308-052b-4299-b4af-ba29e29188a6>; Vladimir van Wilgenburg, "U.S.-Backed Kurds To Assad's Forces: 'Surrender Or Die,'" *Daily Beast*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-backed-kurds-to-assad-forces-surrender-or-die>; Aris Roussinos, "Kurds Assert Control Of Hasakah: The Battle for Rojava," *Vice News*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqYEvaZVEI>

are currently pursuing two main lines of efforts: information operations and unconventional warfare through the network-building, mobilization, and arming of proxy militias to undermine the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria and the SDF.

This first line of effort, information operations, specifically challenges the legality of the operations of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, to weaken international support for the U.S. military and its allies' campaign against ISIS and to send the signal to local actors in northern and eastern Syria that it is the government of Bashar al-Assad, and not the United States, that will have staying power. In its messaging to Syrian, Arab, and global audiences, Bashar al-Assad and his allies have started to single out the U.S. military as "invaders" threatening to occupy Syrian land. Implicit in these communications is the message that local Syrian partners of the U.S.-led coalition are traitors to their country, and that there is no alternative to patriotism but to support the Assad government.<sup>58</sup> The Assad Government is also trying to build lines of influence into identity communities other than Arabs in northern and eastern Syria, including ethnic and sectarian minority communities such as Assyrians, Armenians, and Circassians.<sup>59</sup>

The second line of effort is to establish an infrastructure of local militias that are loyal to Damascus and that can target the U.S.-led coalition and its SDF partners. This line of effort is being supported by the IRGC-QF and its Hezbollah Network, which together have a dedicated intelligence cell in the northeastern city of Qamishli that focuses on recruiting and supporting high value Arab tribal militias. This cell is operating in the heart of the U.S. zone of control in Syria and is a persistent threat to U.S. and coalition service members and their local Syrian partners. From Assad government-controlled military bases in northern and eastern Syria, Damascus can provide weapons and financial assistance to Sunni Arab sheikhs willing to mobilize local militias.<sup>60</sup>

Recent military gains made by the Assad government, as a result of its counter-ISIS campaign that has been conducted with its allies separate from the U.S.-led coalition's campaign, has strengthened Bashar al-Assad's position in northern and eastern Syria. The Assad government is seeking to use the local, predominately Sunni Arab tribal forces that it has been building to threaten local staff working with the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria and the staff of local and international non-governmental organizations supporting the U.S.-led coalition's stabilization mission. Local militia forces loyal to the Assad government are increasingly threatening the staff of organizations that work with the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria and the U.S.-led coalition with kidnapping and assassination. These threats are contributing to a complicated and hostile environment for these organizations that

<sup>58</sup> Alison Tahmizian Meuse, "Hezbollah To Syria's Kurds: 'Don't Bet On Americans,'" *Asia Times*, September 20, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/article/hezbollah-to-syrias-kurds-dont-bet-on-the-americans/>; Tom Perry, "Assad Calls U.S. forces 'Invaders', But Still Hopeful On Trump," Reuters, March 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-assad-idUSKBN160AU>.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir van Wilgenburg, "Tensions Soar Between Syrian Kurds And Christians," *Middle East Eye*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tensions-soar-between-syrian-kurds-and-christians-1646831127>.

<sup>60</sup> Nicholas A. Heras, "The Struggle For Syria's Al-Hasakah Governorate: Kurds, The Islamic State, And The IRGC," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, April 3, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-struggle-for-syrias-al-hasakah-governorate-kurds-the-islamic-state-and-the-irgc/>.

support the U.S. stabilization mission in northern and eastern Syria to perform their work, raising the difficulty faced by the coalition’s stabilization mission.

Additionally, there has been an increase in the number of Hezbollah Network militias that have been deployed to areas of northern and eastern Syria that are under the control of the Assad government. The majority of these militias are drawn from IRGC-QF groups that are from Iraq and deployed to areas of eastern Syria such as in Raqqqa and Deir al-Zour governorates that are in close proximity to the U.S. zone of control and to areas under the authority of the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria.<sup>61</sup> These IRGC-QF-backed militias have periodically attacked positions held by the U.S.-led coalition and the SDF throughout northern and eastern Syria, including in Deir al-Zour governorate and near al-Tanf.<sup>62</sup> Hezbollah Network militias working on behalf of the Assad government will be a persistent threat to U.S. and partner forces in Syria.

#### Engaging constructively with Russia to achieve a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict

It is true that over the course of the Syrian civil war the Assad government has become dependent on both Russia and Iran. This point can be taken further, and it can also be stated that the United States and its regional partners are now and will continue to be dependent on Russia to both deter and diminish Iran in Syria and the western Levant (Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria). A dynamic that is not often acknowledged here in the United States is that Russia has been deeply involved in Syria since before the civil war against Bashar al-Assad began.

This is a natural result of the fact that since the Cold War, the old Soviet Union and its successor state the Russian Federation’s systems and institutions were used as a model for the Assad government’s past and current structure.<sup>63</sup> Since the Cold War, Russia had maintained a naval supply depot inside Syria, and the Russian military had been the most important foreign partner for training the Syrian Arab Army that is loyal to Bashar al-Assad.<sup>64</sup> It is worth noting that the Russians also went to great lengths to support the succession of Bashar al-Assad to the presidency when his father Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000.

The fact of the matter is that Russia, in one incarnation or another, has been acknowledged by the United States to be the primary foreign patron of both Assad governments, and Syria was

<sup>61</sup> Nicholas Blanford, “At Remote Desert Garrison In Syria, A U.S.-Iran Confrontation Is Brewing,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0606/At-remote-desert-garrison-in-Syria-a-U-S-Iran-confrontation-is-brewing>.

<sup>62</sup> Alessandria Massi, “Why Syria and the U.S. Clashed For Control East Of The Euphrates,” *Syria Deeply*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.syriadeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/02/14/why-syria-and-the-u-s-clashed-for-control-east-of-the-euphrates>; Liz Sly, “U.S. Troops May Be At Risk Of ‘Mission Creep’ After Deadly Battle In The Syrian Desert,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces/2018/02/08/syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces/?hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&utm\\_term=.2cc63a79b14a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces/2018/02/08/syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces/?hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&hpid=hp-top%3A-syria%3Ahomepage%3Fh=20180208-syria-accuses-us-of-aggression-after-its-warplanes-strike-pro-government-forces&utm_term=.2cc63a79b14a).

<sup>63</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “America’s Assad Quandry,” *The National Interest*, October 17, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-assad-quandry-18078>.

<sup>64</sup> Ron Synovitz, “Explainer: Why Is Access To Syria’s Port At Tartus So Important To Moscow?,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 19, 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-why-is-access-24619441.html>.

always part of Russia's sphere of influence, not that of the United States.<sup>65</sup> From the start of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war, it has been clear that Russia has maintained a special interest in the maintenance of the Assad government. Prior its September 2015 military intervention on behalf of the Assad government, Russia in partnership with China provided significant diplomatic top cover for Bashar al-Assad in the United Nations.<sup>66</sup> Russia also acted as an arbiter on behalf of Bashar al-Assad with the United States, most notably the September 2013 agreement that was supposed to result in the elimination of the Assad government's chemical weapon stockpiles.<sup>67</sup>

What has changed since September 2015, beyond the obvious effects of the Russian military's direct participation in the war, is that Russia is investing in an active and overt effort to rehabilitate and reshape the next generation of the Assad government's military forces. Russia's effort in this regard concerning the Syrian Arab Army is running parallel to, and in concert with, Iran's own effort to establish a system of local Syrian security forces that are under the authority of the IRGC-QF. For the time being, Russia and Iran are generally in sync with their efforts, as both view their projects to shape the next generation of the Syrian security regime as benefiting Bashar al-Assad's government and therefore benefiting both Iran and Russia in their position in Syria.<sup>68</sup> This reality demonstrates the challenges that are inherent with the United States government tying the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria to the implementation of the Geneva process and UNSCR 2254, because as dynamics on the ground are developing, neither Russia nor Iran has incentive to reform the Syrian security forces in a manner that is consistent with the U.N. process.

Russia has been feeding the idea that it is the great balancer of Iran in the western Levant – in Syria but also in Lebanon via Hezbollah – and has been promoting the narrative that it will oversee the phased withdrawal of IRGC-QF-linked forces from Syria once U.S. forces have withdrawn and Assad is back in control over the country. If the administration continues along this policy pathway, it will be taking a big risk that Russia is willing and able to accomplish the following key requirements to diminish Iran in Syria:

- (1) Overseeing the transition of Assad's wartime security forces away from IRGC-QF-mobilized, Syrian and foreign militias;
- (2) Keeping Hezbollah Network militias away from Israel and Jordan's borders, and forcing these militias to withdraw from Syria;

<sup>65</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, "Syria: Identity Crisis," *The Atlantic*, February 1993.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/02/syria-identity-crisis/303860/>.

<sup>66</sup> Rick Gladstone, "Friction At The U.N. As Russia And China Veto Another On Syria Sanctions," *New York Times*, July 19, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/russia-and-china-veto-un-sanctions-against-syria.html>; "Security Council Fails To Adopt Draft Resolution On Syria As Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League's Proposed Peace Plan," United Nations, February 4, 2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. And Russia Reach Deal To Destroy Syria's Chemical Arms," *New York Times*,

September 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/world/middleeast/syria-talks.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Think-Tanks Bark And The IRGC Moves On," *Syria Comment*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.jawadalamimi.com/blog/the-think-tanks-bark-and-the-irgc-moves-on/>.

(3) Eliminating the IRGC-QF's extensive logistical network of missile depots in central and western Syria that are a strong logistical tail to Hezbollah's missile teeth in southern Lebanon; and

(4) Reducing or removing the strong Iranian influence over key decision makers in Assad's senior security, military, and governance apparatus.

In effect, the administration is saying that these tasks, each one monumental in its own right, should be Russia's job as the sheriff overseeing the stability of the western Levant and preventing a region-shaking conflict between the Israelis and Iranians. This may seem to be the best of bad options for the administration, and indeed the Obama administration deserves equal blame for creating the conditions that allowed Iran to entrench itself in Syria, but it remains a gamble to make. The Russians do not have anywhere near as pervasive a presence on the ground in Syria as Iran does, and perhaps most important, Russia does not have incentives to break with Iran in Syria if Russia wants to maintain a hassle-free administration of its growing air and naval bases in western Syria. Over time, Russia and Iran may contest each other for exclusive control over the Assad government, although for the time being they remain allies committed to ending the war with a victory for Bashar al-Assad.<sup>69</sup>

This situation is likely to unfold in a way to frustrate the objective to reform the Syrian military and security services as written by the House in the *No Assistance for Assad Act* and *Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2017*. The Committee, House, and the broader Congress should also be aware that the conditions that could meet the objectives for reforming the Syrian military and security forces that are set out in those two Acts would likely be the result of Russia making the determination that it wants to unlock significant reconstruction funding for Syria, but that means that Russia's power to shape the future of Syria is reinforced not diminished. This policy also means that the United States is in a position in which it is dependent on Russia to both stage-manage a transition away from Bashar al-Assad, and to diminish Iran's presence in Syria.

The administration, and the Congress, have been uneven in recognizing this fact, and recently senior administration officials have even gone so far to state that the new U.S. policy is informed by their assessment that Russia cannot advance these Geneva goals.<sup>70</sup> Not being present in western Syria in a meaningful way, the United States is now pursuing a strategy through sanctions, indefinite military presence, and refusal to support international reconstruction assistance for the Assad government that is designed to pressure Russia to force Assad's departure and the withdrawal of Iran. This strategy might work, but the U.S. government should be transparent with the American people that the process of putting enough pressure on Russia to

<sup>69</sup> Ilan Goldenberg and Nicholas A. Heras, "The Pro-Assad Alliance Is Coming Apart," *Foreign Affairs*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-06-04/pro-assad-alliance-coming-apart>.

<sup>70</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Trump Agrees to Indefinite Military Effort and New Diplomatic Push in Syria, U.S. Officials Say," *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20e-11e8-9a6a-555d92a3585d\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-trump-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-trump-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&term=.0884b36dc3a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-shift-trump-agrees-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20e-11e8-9a6a-555d92a3585d_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-trump-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-trump-syria%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&term=.0884b36dc3a6); David M. Satterfield and Brett McGurk, "Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance And Ongoing Efforts to Achieve An Enduring Defeat of ISIS," U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm>.

remove Assad and to get Iran and its proxies out of Syria will take years, perhaps more than a decade.

Under those conditions, the U.S. military and financial commitment to Syria would be on a time scale resembling its commitment to Afghanistan. That reality should be stated clearly to the American people. A key consideration for U.S. policy is whether there is an actual time scale that is acceptable to the United States, especially for Congress and the American people, through which U.S. actions can put pressure on Russia to stage manage the transition from the Assad government and its security regime and force the withdrawal of the IRGC-QF and its associated forces from Syria.

Detering and diminishing Iran in Syria and the western Levant and preventing a larger Israeli-Iranian conflict

The western Levant is the area of the Middle East where the IRGC-QF's expeditionary capabilities are the most well developed, and it is also the part of the region that is the most likely to trigger a region-wide conflict.<sup>71</sup> As a result of Iran's expansion in western Syria over the course of the Syrian conflict, and Lebanese Hezbollah's large mobilization of fighters and deployment to Lebanese-Syrian border regions, western Syria has effectively become strategic depth for IRGC-QF linked forces against Israel in the next war between the two parties. Israel's northern border, southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, and western Syria have over the course of the Syrian war become one theater of conflict.<sup>72</sup>

The IRGC-QF's steady entrenchment in western Syria also allows it and its Hezbollah Network to have the potential to sustain missile volleys on the Israeli homeland from western Syria in the event of another war between Iran and Hezbollah and Israel. The position that the IRGC-QF has established in Syria could also allow it and its Hezbollah Network to sustain missile strikes into Israel even in the event that the Israelis engaged in an invasion deep into Lebanon. In the worst-case scenario, the IRGC-QF's presence could force an Israeli invasion all the way to Damascus to stop the missile barrages. And in the effort, this would likely force the Israelis to spark a larger-scale conflict with Iran in the Middle East.

Between Iranian advisors and the Hezbollah network, at least tens of thousands of Iranian forces are garrisoned in Syria, including hundreds within close proximity to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>73</sup> Further complicating the challenge from the IRGC-QF's Hezbollah Network is the reality that the IRGC-QF is building an entire parallel structure within the Assad government's security forces that is modeled on Iran's *basij* militia system for local homeland defense, or Iraq's *Hashd Shuabi* system. This parallel security structure is directed by high-ranking officers

<sup>71</sup> Herb Keiron, "Netanyahu: Israel Will Hit Iran Everywhere In Syria, Not Only Along Border," *Jerusalem Post*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/PM-Isaac-will-hit-iran-throughout-syria-not-only-along-border-560165>; June Raf Sanchez, "Israel Prepared To Go To War To Block Iran In Syria, Says Benjamin Netanyahu," *The Telegraph*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/05/06/israeli-pm-better-confront-iran-sooner-later/>.

<sup>72</sup> "Syria, Lebanon Will Be 'One Front' If War Erupts Against Israel: Minister," Agence France Presse, October 10, 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4966246/Syria-Lebanon-one-war-erupts-against-Israel-minister.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Teheran's Shia Foreign Legions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/teheran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387>.



with the Assad regime's security and intelligence services, and this corresponds with evidence that the IRGC-QF has gained strong influence over the decision-making of a segment of the Ba'ath deep state that supports Bashar al-Assad.

Part of the difficulty that come from the challenges of the western Levant is that they require *detering* Iran's ability to use this area of the Middle East to apply massive strategic pressure on Israel, while simultaneously *diminishing* the IRGC-QF's presence in the western Levant. The administration's policy to date, particularly as it pertains to the civil war in western Syria, has not created the conditions that would either deter Iran from building a military infrastructure in western Syria, or diminish it by forcing the withdrawal of Iranian and Hezbollah Network forces.

#### **Recommendations for Congress and the U.S. Government**

U.S. policy toward Syria, at least for the time being, is becoming more sharply focused, even as the end state goals in Syria for this policy to be considered successful are still not being explicitly stated by the U.S. government. The administration and Congress should take the opportunity to be honest with the American people about what the end state goal is for the United States in Syria as the policy is currently constituted – which is regime change. The administration, by linking the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Syria to the irreversible advancement of the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254, is committing itself to a policy of regime change. The House, by incorporating language in the *No Assistance for Assad Act* and *Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2017* that calls for the reformation of the Syrian military and security services and for the immediate transition to democratic government in Syria that respects the rule of law, human rights, and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors, is also in effect seeking regime change in Syria. If this is the policy of the U.S. government, then I respectfully recommend that at every opportunity, the administration and the Congress express in clear language to the American people that U.S. troops and other U.S. public servants will not be brought back from Syria – with all the associated costs that this policy will entail both in terms of the potential cost of U.S. lives and taxpayer dollars – until Bashar al-Assad and the security regime that supports him is no longer in power, which could take many years.

The Committee, the House, and the broader Congress has an opportunity to engage in active and frequent oversight over U.S. and coalition partner programs that are being managed by the United States government in the U.S. zone of control in northern and eastern Syria. So long as the United States government is committed to an indefinite U.S. presence on the ground in Syria for the purpose of stabilizing post-ISIS areas, Congressional oversight should include the broadest range of topics that are relevant to stabilization operations. These should include programs related to: providing humanitarian assistance; providing security and establishing mechanisms for peace and conflict resolution, good governance and public administration; supporting nascent Syrian civil society; and rehabilitating civilian and critical infrastructure. Of special interest to this Committee, the House, and Congress should be oversight over U.S. government and Coalition programs that promote good governance and inclusivity in the administration of the areas controlled by the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria. These programs are vital to ensuring that the legacy of the United States and its coalition partners in Syria has built a local governance and administration in post-ISIS areas that is democratic, inclusive, and compatible with the principles laid out in the Geneva process and UNSCR 2254 and in line with the objective of supporting a democratic Syria as expressed by the

House in the *No Assistance for Assad Act* and *Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act* of 2017. This process of oversight should begin as soon as possible, and due to the innovative nature of the U.S. government effort to stabilize post-ISIS areas in Syria from the bottom-up, as recently explained by Mr. McGurk, could include public and classified hearings of U.S. government officials who are responsible for overseeing and implementing stabilization projects on the ground inside Syria.<sup>74</sup>

As the Assad government and its allies are engaged in a shadow war to undermine the U.S.-led coalition presence in northern and eastern Syria, and to foment instability that threatens the SDF and its adjutant forces, and seeks to hinder stabilization programs that support local communities so that they can function outside of the control of the Assad government in Damascus, the U.S. government should develop a clear strategy to counter these efforts to frustrate and potentially reverse gains in the stabilization effort. These efforts could also result in attacks and kidnapping attempts against U.S. and coalition personnel, local partner forces, and the employees of local and foreign non-government agencies that contribute to our stabilization mission in Syria. The Committee, the House, and the broader Congress should request that the administration and relevant U.S. military and government agencies formulate a strategy to counter Assad's shadow war against the coalition, the SDF, and international and local partners of the Coalition that are engaged in the stabilization effort in northern and eastern Syria.

Current U.S. policy in Syria, as has been recently defined by the administration, is dependent on an enduring agreement between the United States and Turkey in Syria. The recent appointment of Ambassador James Jeffrey, who was formerly the United States ambassador in Ankara and is widely regarded as one of the nation's preeminent experts on Turkey, as the State Department's Representative for Syria Engagement, belies this fact. Further, the current U.S. government policy to link the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria to the irreversible advancement of the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254 is dependent on a viable Syrian opposition governance structure that is present on the ground inside of Syria. Without the Turkish zone of control in northwest Syria there would be no territory inside Syria for a credible, alternate governance and administration system to the Assad government to be established, except in the areas controlled by the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria which is not popular with large segments of the Syrian opposition movement. Putting aside the significant issues between the United States and Turkey that are not directly concerned with Syria, there are still considerable challenges related to U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria. The Committee, the House, and the broader Congress should seek out greater clarification from the administration on how it will encourage U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Syria while protecting the gains that have been made in the counter-ISIS campaign by the U.S.-led coalition and the SDF and in the program to provide stabilization in post-ISIS areas of Syria working with the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria. The Committee should request a report from relevant U.S. agencies concerning whether the Turkish military and its Syrian rebel partner forces have committed activities during Operation Olive Branch that violated the spirit of the *Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act* of 2017.

<sup>74</sup> David M. Satterfield and Brett McGurk, "Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance And Ongoing Efforts to Achieve An Enduring Defeat of ISIS," U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/c/pa/lprs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm>.



There is evidence that the United Nations, due to the nature of the conflict and its proclivity to work through Damascus, is serving as a proxy for the Assad government's interests in Syria. Numerous think tanks, NGOs and journalists have reported on the UN's lack of neutrality when it comes to the Syrian Conflict, especially the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).<sup>75</sup> Put bluntly, the U.N. should not be considered a neutral actor in the Syrian conflict and U.S. funding for U.N. operations in Syria has been used by the Assad government to purchase assistance for areas under its control, while over the course of 2018 consistently failing to provide humanitarian access to besieged, opposition-run de-escalation zones. It can also be argued that U.S. funding for U.N. operations in Syria helps the Assad government circumvent U.S. sanctions directed against it and Syrian persons that part of or close to its security regime. These circumstances make continued U.S. funding for U.N. operations in Syria against the intention of both the *No Assistance to Assad Act* and the *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2017*. The Committee, the House, and the broader Congress should hold public hearings with officials from relevant U.S. government agencies, the U.S. mission to the U.N., relevant U.N. officials, and representatives of U.S.-based and international NGOs that operate in Syria to determine the extent to which U.S. assistance to U.N. operations in Syria support the Assad government and allow it to circumvent U.S. sanctions. If in the course of its oversight role the Congress finds that U.S. support for U.N. operations in Syria assists the Assad government to violate the human rights of its people and circumvent U.S. sanctions, Congress should strongly consider redirecting future U.N. appropriations earmarked for Syria to funding for U.S. and coalition partner programs for the stabilization of Syria in areas that are not controlled by the Assad government and its associated forces.

There are currently hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people seeking shelter in areas of Syria that are under the control of the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria or under the control of the U.S. military and coalition partner forces in the al-Tanf zone, specifically the al-Rukban camp. These IDP populations are highly vulnerable and there is strong evidence that their needs are being underserved, which is a threat not only to the lives and human security of the residents of these camps, it creates conditions for ISIS to use for recruitment. The Committee, the House, and the broader Congress should conduct hearings with relevant U.S. government officials, international and local humanitarian relief organizations, and outside experts to determine how the United States government and coalition partners can better serve the needs of these IDPs in areas directly under U.S. and coalition control. If found to be appropriate, the Congress should carefully consider increasing funds earmarked for addressing the needs of these IDP populations in areas directly under U.S. and coalition control.

<sup>75</sup> Emily Burchfield, "The Danger of U.S. Assistance to the U.N. Rewarding Assad," The Atlantic Council, March 8, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syria-source/the-danger-of-us-assistance-to-the-un-rewarding-assad>; Kambiz Foroohar, "How Assad's Allies Got \$18 Million From The U.N.," *Bloomberg*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-01/what-sanctions-assad-allies-got-18-million-in-ira-syria-payoffs>; Nick Hopkins and Emma Beals, "U.N. Pays Tens Of Millions To Assad Regime Under Syria Aid Program," *Guardian*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/un-pays-tens-of-millions-to-assad-regime-syria-aid-programme-contracts>.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much.  
Ms. Yacoubian?

**STATEMENT OF MS. MONA YACOUBIAN, SENIOR ADVISOR FOR SYRIA, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, U.S. INSTITUTE OF PEACE**

Ms. YACOUBIAN. Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Boyle, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on U.S. policy toward Syria.

I am currently a Senior Advisor on Syria, the Middle East, and North Africa at the U.S. Institute of Peace, although my interest in Syria dates to 1985, when I was Fulbright student based in Damascus.

I would like to note that the views I express today are my own and not necessarily those of USIP.

Today's hearing is particularly timely. Syria's brutal conflict, now in its eighth year, is entering its most dangerous phase, posing a significant challenge to U.S. strategic interests.

Two key developments account for this precarious time in Syria. First, the Syrian civil war is entering a messy and protracted end game. Unfortunately, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by the critical support of Russia and Iran, is likely to prevail. Assad's reliance on external patrons, especially Iran, threatens to upend the regional power balance.

Tehran has provided unprecedented military support to the Syrian regime. Iran's military entrenchment in Syria threatens Israel's security, as well as the regional order. The old rules of the game establishing strategy deterrence between Israel and Syria no longer apply. Neither Israel nor Iran appears to be interested in an all-out war, but they may be on a dangerous collision course.

Second, as the military campaign against ISIS enters its final phase, new conflicts and fault lines are emerging. Most urgently, the conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds looms large, with the potential for broader destabilization. Potential hostilities between the U.S. and Russia pose a less immediate, but more significant threat. As the Assad regime seeks to expand its control further east, the possibility of clashes between Russia and its proxies and the United States is likely to increase.

Finally, while ISIS has been ousted from much of Syria, the extremist movement could morph into a potent insurgency. ISIS has retained its capabilities, most notably, its ability to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

Given these dangerous developments, the Trump administration's renewed focus on Syria is timely and important. While Syria poses significant challenges, the United States has policy options to shape an outcome more favorable to key U.S. objectives in Syria. These include the enduring defeat of ISIS, curbing Iranian influence, and shaping a political settlement to the conflict.

I recommend adopting a 3D approach to Syria that leverages core elements of U.S. power: Defense, diplomacy, and development to pursue U.S. objectives in Syria. In my written testimony, I develop this strategy through three interrelated and mutually reinforcing baskets of policy options.

The defense basket focuses on maintaining the 2,000-plus U.S. Special Operations Force presence in Syria as a foundational element of the strategy. The benefits of the U.S. military presence in Syria are significant; and include liberating the ISIS-held areas, training local hold forces, and providing an important source of leverage that enhances U.S. influence in Syria.

The diplomatic basket emphasizes the need to rejuvenate U.S. regional diplomacy in three areas: Improving ties with Turkey; engaging Israel, Jordan and Russia to prevent unintended escalation between Israel and Iran, and deepening engagement with our European allies.

The development basket highlights the importance of restoring U.S. stabilization assistance, which is critical to ISIS's enduring defeat. Encouraging Gulf allies and others to contribute to these efforts is important and to be commended, but there is no substitute for U.S. leadership, anchored by concrete commitments on the ground.

I would like to conclude with an over-the-horizon perspective on Syria. Unfortunately, Syria could be an important harbinger of future Middle East conflicts. Three trends, embodied by the Syrian conflict, demand greater understanding in order to anticipate and better prepare for future conflicts in the region.

First, the rise of ISIS, a new generation of Jihadists with a demonstrated capacity to innovate and adapt.

Second, battlefield tactics that routinely transgress all laws of armed conflict, including the use of chemical weapons.

And third, massive levels of civilian displacement that have overwhelmed the humanitarian assistance infrastructure and imperiled neighboring refugee-hosting countries.

The Syrian tragedy will resonate for generations to come. It is essential to seize the opportunity to develop effective policy responses to the current conflict, as well as more forward-leading strategies for addressing future challenges.

Thank you, and I am happy to take your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Yacoubian follows:]



**United States Institute of Peace**

**“U.S. Policy Toward Syria: Part I”**

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the  
Middle East and North Africa**

**Mona Yacoubian**

**Senior Advisor for Syria, Middle East and North Africa**

**United States Institute of Peace**

**September 27, 2018**

### **Introduction**

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch and members of the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on U.S. policy toward Syria. The timing for this hearing is especially important given the dangerous developments in Syria and the challenges they pose to U.S. interests.

I am a senior advisor on Syria, Middle East and North Africa at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values. Syria's multifaceted conflict and its regional—if not global—reverberations continue to pose a significant challenge to U.S. strategic interests.

My testimony today is distilled into three key points:

1. Syria's brutal conflict is entering its most dangerous phase, with significant geostrategic and humanitarian consequences.
2. While Syria poses significant challenges, the United States has policy options to shape an outcome more favorable to key U.S. objectives including the enduring defeat of ISIS, curbing Iranian influence, and shaping a political settlement to the conflict.
3. Looking over the horizon, the Syrian conflict's complexity embodies trends that could define future conflicts in the Middle East. Distilling key "lessons learned" from the Syrian conflict will be essential to better prepare for the region's future challenges.

### **The Syrian conflict is entering its most dangerous phase.**

The conflict in Syria is at a perilous inflection point. The Syrian civil war is entering a messy and protracted endgame. Unfortunately, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by the critical support of Russia and Iran, is likely to prevail. Meanwhile, counter-ISIS military operations are moving toward a final stage, with an estimated 98% of ISIS-occupied territory occupied now liberated. Yet, Syria's multifaceted conflict—now well into its eighth year—is far from over.

### **Two key developments account for this precarious time in Syria.**

*First, the Assad regime's continued march to regain control over lost territory signals its likely victory over rebel factions in the Syrian civil war.*

**Implications of Assad's Survival.** The regime will stop at nothing to ensure its survival, coming at an inestimable price to Syrian civilians. Assad's survival could also upend the regional order, emboldening Iran and its allies and posing new threats to Israel.

Starting in December 2016 with the fall of eastern Aleppo, the regime—supported by Russia and Iran—has systemically clawed back areas once under rebel control. More recently, in May 2018,

the regime regained full control of the Damascus suburbs for the first time in seven years. This offensive was followed by a move to the south where the regime won back the governorates of Dera'a and Quneitra, including the strategic Nassib border crossing with Jordan.

Northwestern Idlib province stands as the last remaining anti-Assad rebel stronghold. It also harbors a significant al-Qaeda presence. Earlier this month, the international community watched with deep concern as the regime appeared poised to mount a brutal offensive. An agreement between Russia and Turkey to establish a de-militarized zone in Idlib forestalled the offensive, at least temporarily. Russia and Turkey will jointly oversee the zone which should be cleared of all extremist elements and heavy weaponry by October 15.

Several issues could lead to an unraveling of the agreement. Most prominently, Turkey may not manage to clear the zone of extremist elements or persuade its allies to relinquish their heavy weapons. Meanwhile, the Assad regime vows that it will reassert control over the province, a non-starter for rebel groups on the ground. Russia's track record of enforcing ceasefires is also poor; Moscow has repeatedly violated such agreements. At best, the agreement will buy time for more intensive diplomacy. Barring the success of these efforts, a renewed military offensive remains likely by year's end.

The humanitarian cost will be high should the current agreement collapse. An estimated three million civilians, including one million children, currently reside in Idlib. Fighting in Idlib could lead to as many as 800,000 civilians displaced, sparking what one United Nations official termed possibly "the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

Damascus has prosecuted its campaign to consolidate control with extreme brutality, imperiling Syrian civilians. The Assad regime repeatedly has transgressed international norms and laws governing armed conflict. It has used chemical weapons, bombed civilians indiscriminately and deliberately targeted medical facilities. This past April, in its battle to reclaim the Damascus suburbs, the regime used chemical weapons in an attack that left more than 40 civilians dead. The United States, together with British and French allies, responded with coordinated strikes hitting chemical weapons-related sites.

**Iran's Military Entrenchment.** Assad's survival is due in no small part to Iran's unprecedented military support, potentially altering the regional balance of power. Tehran has supported Assad with troops, weapons and funding. Hard numbers are difficult to confirm but estimates range from several hundred to a few thousand Iranian troops in Syria. Tehran has also mobilized up to 25,000 fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Lebanon, including several thousand Hezbollah fighters. Iranian fighters and their proxies have been deployed to nearly 40 facilities across Syria. Iran's military funding is estimated in the millions, possibly billions of dollars. Tehran has also supplied the Assad regime significant amounts of arms and military equipment.

Iran's military entrenchment in Syria threatens Israel's security as well as the regional order. The old "rules of the game" establishing strategic deterrence between Israel and Syria no longer apply. While Israel has acquiesced to the Assad regime remaining in power, Jerusalem has underscored it will not tolerate a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria nor allow for the transfer or production of precision-guided missiles. Israel has also made clear it will enforce

these red lines. The Israeli Intelligence Minister recently revealed that Israel has undertaken 200 military attacks against Iranian targets in Syria over the past two years.

Neither Israel nor Iran appears to be interested in all-out war, but they may be on a dangerous collision course. Israel wants to prevent Iran from transforming Syria into another Lebanon. Iran wants to preserve and deepen its presence in Syria. A shadow war is already playing out between Israel and Iran in Syria, and prospects for continued escalation remain high. The most significant danger is that hostilities between Israel and Iran escalate into a conflict that spirals out of control. Syria's accidental shootdown of a Russian plane following Israeli airstrikes illustrates the precariousness of the situation. In response to the shootdown, Moscow announced plans to send an S-300 missile defense system to Syria, adding yet another layer of complexity.

A key question centers on whether Iran's investment in Syria is reversible. If true, reports that Iranian backed forces are already integrating into Syria's military and security infrastructure suggest that Iran's pervasive influence will be very difficult to dismantle. Another question revolves around whether Russia wields sufficient leverage to force Iran out of Syria, or at least to diminish significantly Iran's influence on the ground. Although Russia's objectives in Syria may increasingly diverge from those of Iran, Moscow remains unlikely to possess both the desire and capacity to diminish Iran's power in Syria.

*Second, as the military campaign against ISIS enters its final phase, new conflicts and fault lines are emerging.*

**Turkish-Kurdish Conflict.** Conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds looms large with the potential for much broader destabilization. Ankara has long voiced its alarm at the prospect of a Kurdish entity along its southern flank. For Turkey, the Kurdish threat is existential, equal if not greater than that posed by ISIS. This past March, Turkey, relying on Syrian proxies, seized control of the Kurdish canton of Afrin in northwestern Syria. In response, an incipient Kurdish insurgency in Afrin may be taking shape, signaling greater instability in this region.

Further to the east, mounting tensions in Manbij raised the specter of the United States and Turkey—NATO allies—engaging in direct military confrontation. U.S.-led diplomacy has de-escalated the situation with a “road map” that envisions joint U.S.-Turkish patrols, the withdrawal of Kurdish commanders from the city and the devolution of security and governance responsibilities to the local Arab population. Yet, Turkey appears to be raising the stakes again, with the Turkish Defense Minister recently demanding that Kurdish militants abandon Syria entirely. Turkish President Erdogan previously threatened to oust the Kurds from all areas along Syria's border with Turkey.

**U.S. Hostilities with Russia.** Potential hostilities between the United States and Russia pose a less immediate, but more significant threat. This past February U.S. forces engaged in direct hostilities with several hundred pro-regime forces, including a significant number of Russian mercenaries in eastern Syria. The firefight—sparked by an unsuccessful attempt by regime proxies to retake a key gas field—left 200-300 Russian contractors dead. Rigorous efforts at U.S.-Russian de-confliction have averted additional hostilities. Yet, as the regime consolidates its control in the west of the country, it is likely to turn its attention increasingly toward the east.

The regime could seek to retake critical hydrocarbon facilities currently under the control of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. These efforts could once again put the United States and Russia in direct confrontation. Adding to the tensions, Russia reportedly warned the United States that its forces are prepared to attack the remotely-located U.S. base at Tanf, highlighting another potential flashpoint between U.S. and Russian forces.

**An ISIS Insurgency.** Finally, while ISIS has been ousted from much of Syria, the extremist movement appears to be morphing into a potent insurgency. In its most recent report to Congress, the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve noted a higher number of ISIS fighters remaining in Syria than previously estimated. More importantly, though vastly diminished, ISIS's current capabilities are considered to surpass those of Al-Qaeda in Iraq at its peak in 2006-2007. According to a recent United Nations report, the ISIS "bureaucracy remains essentially intact" as well as its "collective discipline." Meanwhile, the core grievances that fueled ISIS remain unaddressed, if not exacerbated, suggesting the terrorist group will continue to draw on a significant pool of potential recruits.

#### **U.S. Policy Options – Adopting a “Three D” approach to Syria**

The Trump Administration's recent announcement of a new Syria team led by Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, a seasoned diplomat, provides an important opportunity to consider U.S. policy options for Syria. Ambassador Jeffrey's appointment coincides with what he terms "a more active approach" on Syria. Maintaining a U.S. military presence in Syria for the foreseeable future and re-energizing U.S. diplomacy on Syria comprise the most critical elements of this new approach. Increasing pressure via new sanctions and refusing to fund reconstruction in regime-held areas are additional elements.

The Administration's renewed focus on Syria is a welcome development. While the challenges posed to U.S. interests in Syria are significant, the United States can undertake steps to shape the conflict's trajectory in a more positive direction. Adopting a "Three-D" approach that leverages elements of U.S. power—defense, diplomacy and development—would facilitate a Syria strategy that pursues core U.S. national security interests within realistic constraints of what is possible.

Specifically, this "Three-D" approach should seek progress on three key U.S. objectives in Syria:

1. Ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS;
2. Counter the further expansion of Iranian influence;
3. Shape a political settlement to the conflict, containing the Assad regime in the interim.

A "Three-D" approach to Syria would rely on three inter-related and mutually reinforcing baskets of policy options.

**The Defense Basket.** Maintaining the 2,000 plus U.S. special operations force (U.S. SOF) presence on the ground inside Syria is a foundational element of a "Three-D" approach to Syria. The benefits of the U.S. military presence are significant:



- **Liberating ISIS-held areas.** Working “by, with and through” the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), U.S. SOF have played a critical role in liberating ISIS-held areas, pushing ISIS out of key cities into more desolate areas in the Middle Euphrates Valley (MERV). The current focus is to clear the MERV of ISIS remnants.
- **Training Local Hold Forces.** As part of these efforts, U.S. SOF are continuing to train local forces to serve as hold forces in their towns and cities, a key element in any sustainable strategy to ensure against the re-emergence of ISIS.
- **Providing Security for Civilian-led Stabilization Efforts.** U.S. SOF on the ground also facilitate the work of the small cadre of U.S. civilian stabilization experts from the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) who are implementing critical stabilization programming together with their local Syrian partners.
- **Impeding Further Expansion by the Assad Regime or Iran.** The U.S. military presence in Syria serves as a key counterweight against the Syrian regime and Iran. Were the U.S. to withdraw, the Assad regime backed by Iran undoubtedly would seek to capitalize on the U.S. absence and retake these areas.
- **Serving as Important Source of Leverage.** The U.S. and its local Syrian partners have built important leverage on the ground that enhances U.S. influence in Syria. The U.S.-allied SDF currently controls an estimated 25% of Syrian territory. This region encompasses critical resources that are the lifeblood of the Syrian economy: oil and gas installations, including two of Syria’s largest and most productive oil fields; essential water resources; and rich agricultural land. The region also holds strategic significance given its location along trading routes as well as the “land bridge” Iran seeks to build across Iraq and Syria.

**Detering Chemical Weapons Use.** The U.S. military can also play a leading role in deterring the future use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, a critical element of an Assad containment strategy while the regime remains in power. Creating an effective chemical weapons deterrence strategy against a regime that routinely disrespects international norms will be a challenging, but an essential element of U.S. policy toward Syria. Since 2017, the United States has twice responded with military force to Assad’s use of chemical weapons. Yet, it remains unclear whether sufficient deterrence has been established. Together with Britain and France, the United States has vowed to respond militarily should the regime use chemical weapons in Idlib. Planning for this contingency should be well in place should the Russian-Turkish de-escalation agreement collapse.

**The Diplomatic Basket.** Rejuvenating U.S. regional diplomacy focused on Syria is equally critical. The United States should deepen multifaceted diplomatic efforts that address various aspects of the Syrian conflict with regional players, European allies and Russia:

**Improve ties with Turkey – a key regional stakeholder in the Syrian conflict.** U.S.-Turkish ties are at a nadir, yet cooperation with Turkey on Syria is critical. Turkey’s role in Syria is anchored by its control of two key enclaves (Afrin and Euphrates Shield), its presence in Idlib,

and its participation in the Astana Process. Turkey also hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees estimated at 3.5 million.

U.S. tensions with Turkey over Syria may be deep, but not irreconcilable. Fortunately, important progress on Manbij has been insulated from the downturn in bilateral relations. U.S. diplomatic efforts should focus on sustaining and deepening this cooperation. Encouraging broader de-escalation between Turkey and Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) elements will be essential to addressing Turkish-Kurdish tensions in Syria. While the United States currently has limited leverage in this regard, U.S. diplomatic efforts should seek openings to help restart Turkish-PKK negotiations which broke off in 2015.

**Engage with Israel, Jordan, and Russia to prevent unintended escalation in the deepening shadow war between Israel and Iran inside Syria.** Israel is establishing new red lines regarding Iran's military presence in Syria and the potential manufacture and proliferation of guided missiles. The use of kinetic measures to communicate these red lines may be effective in the short term but can easily spin out of control. Even if a shaky state of deterrence is holding, the risk of miscalculation leading to escalating hostilities, if not all out war, is high. Reinvigorated U.S. engagement on these challenging issues is needed. Heightened tensions between Israel and Russia underscore the need for the United States to play a more assertive role. Specifically, the United States should engage Israel, Jordan and Russia in discussions aimed at establishing and institutionalizing more comprehensive and robust de-confliction mechanisms.

**Deepen engagement with European allies on Syria.** Despite tensions with European allies on other Middle Eastern issues, Syria remains an area of cooperation. Coordinated U.S. and European statements on Idlib may have played an important role in impelling Russia to negotiate an agreement with Turkey. Earlier this year, Britain and France joined the United States to undertake joint missile strikes against Syria following the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack on Douma. Meanwhile, Germany remains a key partner on stabilization efforts inside Syria. The United States should build on these shared interests to forge a strong counterweight to the Russian-Iranian axis on Syria.

**The Development Basket.** Restoring U.S. stabilization assistance is essential to a successful "three D" approach on Syria. U.S. stabilization assistance has been critical to the post-ISIS liberation strategy in Syria. Encouraging Gulf allies and others to contribute to these efforts is important and to be commended. But there is no substitute for U.S. leadership anchored by concrete commitments on the ground.

**Highlighting a Success.** To date, U.S. stabilization efforts in eastern Syria have been a success with tangible achievements on the ground. Leveraging limited resources and a small team of civilian experts on the ground, the United States has led efforts to stabilize communities in ISIS-liberated areas. Focused on de-mining, rubble removal, restoring essential services, and building the capacity of local governance structures, U.S. stabilization assistance has played a critical role in helping displaced Syrians return to their homes and ensured against the emergence of dangerous power vacuums that ISIS or other like-minded extremists could exploit.

**A Strategic Imperative.** As highlighted in the recent U.S. government Stabilization Assistance Review, stabilization efforts are increasingly recognized across the Interagency as a strategic imperative. Restoring U.S. stabilization funding will help consolidate and sustain the military gains made against ISIS in Syria. Stabilization assistance focused on governance, livelihoods and social cohesion is critical to addressing underlying popular grievances. Building representative local government that is accountable to the local population is perhaps the most powerful antidote to both the Assad regime and extremist groups such as ISIS. Providing agricultural inputs to farmers, revitalizing markets in urban areas, providing small business loans and vocational training can help struggling communities to recover. Addressing communal tensions and beginning to repair the frayed social fabric of local communities through dialogues and other efforts to restore social cohesion would round out the stabilization effort.

**A Future Template.** This model of decentralized governance offers a template for the future. A highly-decentralized Syria marked by devolving significant authority from the central government in Damascus to local communities will be essential for a *sustainable* political settlement to the conflict. Investing now in strengthening local governance and supporting localized economic and social recovery will help ensure that these communities stand as an effective counterweight to the regime and lay the foundation of a future, peaceful Syria.

#### **Lessons Learned from Syria as a Twenty-First Century Conflict**

Unfortunately, Syria's violent conflict could be an important harbinger of future conflicts in the Middle East. The Syrian conflict serves as a "canary in the coal mine" telegraphing the complexity of the challenges that lie ahead. Specifically, the Syrian conflict has been characterized by:

- **the rise of the so-called Islamic State**, a new generation of jihadists with a demonstrated capacity to innovate and adapt, leveraging new tactics and espousing a more virulent Salafi-jihadist ideology;
- **battlefield tactics that routinely transgress all laws of armed conflict**, including the indiscriminate bombing of civilians and the repeated use of chemical weapons;
- **massive levels of civilian displacement and humanitarian need** that have overwhelmed the humanitarian assistance infrastructure and imperiled neighboring refugee-hosting countries.

Understanding these developments will be critical for anticipating and preparing for future challenges emanating from the region. Each of these challenges—the rise of ISIS, the routine transgression of international laws, and catastrophic humanitarian crisis—demands new and more creative approaches. To address these challenges, policy makers and analysts should focus on the following:

- **Build greater understanding into the drivers of violent extremism** and the most effective responses to prevent the spread of violent extremism, leveraging the findings of the Congressionally-mandated, USIP-hosted Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, along with similar efforts currently undertaken both inside and outside the U.S. government;

- **Develop new strategies and doctrine on the use of force to deter the use of chemical weapons** by finding a way to use force that effectively deters the use of chemical weapons without leading to an uncontrolled escalation in the conflict;
- **Invest in more creative approaches to address civilian displacement in violent conflict**, particularly efforts that bridge humanitarian assistance with longer term development efforts that facilitate livelihoods and education for displaced civilians.

The Syrian tragedy will resonate for generations to come. It is essential to seize the opportunity to both develop effective policy responses to the current crisis as well as more forward-leaning strategies to similar challenges to U.S. interests that will likely arise in the future.

*The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. Excellent, excellent testimony. I am going to ask a question of you, Ms. Ghaddar and Mr. Heras. And I hope I am not doing a great disservice to your names. Mine is a very difficult name. I don't know how to pronounce mine, either.

But, Ms. Ghaddar—

Mr. CONNOLLY. I am sorry, but isn't Ros-Lehtinen?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. I don't know. It sounds like "Laytinen." It is Finnish. Go figure.

Mr. CONNOLLY. By the way, did you know I worked in—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. I did know that.

Mr. CONNOLLY. All right. [Laughter.]

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. But did you know about Dana working in the White House?

Anyway, this is a private, silly joke we have got going.

Mr. CHABOT. Madam Chair?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Yes, sir?

Mr. CHABOT. If I could just say, it is funny every time. [Laughter.]

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. It never gets old.

Mr. CHABOT. For anybody that knows what the heck they are talking about.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Old guys doing the same old hat skills routine. [Laughter.]

Thank you.

But, in your testimony, you were highlighting Iran's efforts to change Syria's demography, and you highlighted that Iran is ethnically and religiously cleansing Sunni communities, replacing them with pro-Assad Shia and Alawite groups. This is so alarming. You recommend that the United States work with our partners to ensure that refugees return to their properties and defend them from being conscripted into Assad's army. Can you tell us more about what Iran's objectives are with this demographic change? And related to that, how can we ensure that refugees that are first able to return safely to their home—we all, I am sure, want to go back home, but how safe is it for them? And second, resilient enough so that they aren't susceptible to Iran and Assad's influence?

Thank you, Ma'am.

Ms. GHADDAR. All right. Thank you. This is a very, very important question. Thank you for asking me to elaborate. I would love to.

The demographic changes are actually happening in certain areas in Syria, and in areas that what I call useful Syria, what Iran really is trying to control, it is the land, the corridor, basically, that connects the Alawite coast to the Lebanese border and to the Iraqi border. So, this corridor, according to Iran, has to be protected. Because they need to protect it from inside, the communities who live along this corridor in the towns and villages that are located in this corridor have to be demographically changed.

So, most of the Syrians, the Sunni communities who were pushed out to Lebanon from Homs and the suburbs of Damascus; and a lot of them were moved to Idlib. So, the refugees we see in Idlib, the

displaced refugees—we see today in Idlib—are mostly coming from this land corridor.

So, they used a strategy that relied on besieging, hunger, and forcing people to make deals and leave these towns. They send them to Idlib and Lebanon. And today, they brought in a lot of families of the fighters from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. They are giving them, according to this new law—Law No. 10, that basically legalized these demographic changes—they give the refugees only 30 days in order to claim their property in person. Otherwise, they take it and they can give it to the new families. The idea behind this is not only to protect Damascus, but also to make sure that this corridor within Syria, their useful Syria is protected.

I hope this answers the demographic changes part. Sorry, what was—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Now how do they reach the person supposedly to let them know that they have 30 days?

Ms. GHADDAR. They just issued the law.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Yes.

Ms. GHADDAR. Good luck, yes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. That is fine.

Ms. GHADDAR. If you know about it, you know about it. If you don't know about it—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. It could be anywhere?

Ms. GHADDAR. Yes, exactly. So, some people knew; some people didn't.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And then, I asked about—

Ms. GHADDAR. In terms of the safe return of the refugees—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Right.

Ms. GHADDAR [continuing]. I will give you just an example of the case of the refugees in Lebanon and the Lebanese Government, which is today more and more becoming pro-Hezbollah. They are trying to push the refugees out. Some of them actually went, some of them were forced to join the Assad army.

The act of forcing them out is not humanitarian. So far, the refugees in Lebanon have been denied, the status of refugees. This policy of the government in Lebanon, which is basically Hezbollah's policy, is to make sure that they are pushed out without guaranteeing anything to them.

So, they do not want to go that way. They want to go to their homes, but they are not going to their homes. They are going to Idlib. Those who left, they were pushed to Idlib, and this is what we are seeing today in Idlib, more and more pressure on the refugees who are actually forced to leave places like Lebanon.

So, that is what I am saying, is that the Lebanese Government, the Lebanese army takes a lot of money from the U.S., right? In terms of equipment? There is a lot of leverage that can be used in order to force the Lebanese Government to make sure that refugees—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And we are not using it.

Ms. GHADDAR [continuing]. Are not going to be forced to go to Syria.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Yes. But we have leverage because we give a lot of money to the Lebanese forces?

Ms. GHADDAR. Yes, exactly. Exactly. You do have leverage. You can use it in order to force the Lebanese Government not to force the refugees out that way.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Not to force them out?

Ms. GHADDAR. That way.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Okay. Thank you so much. You are such an expert in this.

Ms. GHADDAR. Thank you.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Mr. Heras, you highlighted the risky nature of the administration's apparent policy of pressuring Russia to help achieve our stabilization goals in western Syria. And I had said in my opening statement that John Bolton, National Security Advisor, recently called Russia's promised sale of S-300s to Assad as "significant escalation."

Does it seem to you that the administration is starting to acknowledge that Russia will, indeed, not be a useful partner for us in Syria? And even if we could pressure Russia to help us, what do you see as the pressure points? What is our leverage? We talk about where we have leverage with the Lebanese forces. What do we do with Russia? And if we aren't able to successfully pressure Moscow—and I don't know how we could ever do that—what alternatives are there?

Thank you, and take your time.

Mr. HERAS. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

I do believe that the administration is cognizant of the challenge that comes from asking Russia to apply pressure on Assad and Iran. Fundamentally, the challenge is that Russia is in a good position. Its military installations, the air base at Khmeimim in Latakia in coastal western Syria has been expanded. It is turning Khmeimim base into a hub of its future operations in the wider Middle East and North Africa; and now presents a strategic challenge to the United States. And it has expanded its Cold War era naval port that it had in Tartus, also, in Coastal, Western Syria.

Russia is also embedded in reforming Assad's security forces. And the major challenge for Russia is to normalize Assad. And that will be its challenge. The longer that it takes for Russia to normalize Assad, and to try to open the taps for international reconstruction assistance, the more pressure Russia could potentially feel.

And that is a potential way to unlock Russia's agreement to transition from Assad. The challenge, then, is: Can you get Russia to agree to remove enough of Assad's security and intelligence regime to make a meaningful, democratic Syria in post-conflict, that respects human rights and is willing to join the family of nations? And that is an open question.

The second challenge is, does Russia have an incentive to remove Iran and its proxies from Syria? My understanding of how the administration policy is unfolding is that, in lieu of waiting for Russia, a maximum pressure strategy on Iran could potentially weaken its position in Syria over time because of the cost of maintaining its presence there.

But I would emphasize that, both, trying to put pressure on Russia, and trying to put pressure on Iran will take time. The question

is, will that time be spent productively by the United States to stabilize the area of Syria that we control?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And, Ms. Yacoubian, do you have anything to add to what we have just discussed? Feel free to comment.

Ms. YACOUBIAN. Just a quick point. I would very much agree with Nick's analysis. And I think, in particular, if we are trying to understand what are the points of leverage with Russia, which is an excellent question, I do think this desire to eventually extricate itself in terms of reaching some sort of internationally-blessed political settlement is important.

And I would point to the recent demilitarization zone that was negotiated with Turkey as an important data point in this. I certainly concur with the skepticism in terms of how long this will last. But the fact that at the last minute the Russians did, in fact, yield to what it saw as international pressure from the international community writ large, that the international community would not tolerate the blatant and widespread massacre, quite frankly, of Syrian civilians living in the zone, is evidence that Russia is trying to preserve some sort of negotiations, some sort of way to have some kind of longer-term political settlement to the conflict. That is where I think our leverage lies.

And I would also agree that our presence on the ground is another important source of leverage. It indicates real U.S. skin in the game. It can translate into leverage at the negotiating table. It is, as Nick noted, at least 25 percent of Syrian territory, and it is important Syrian territory. It has oil and gas resources, water resources, valuable agricultural land. I think this is an important source of leverage, that we need to explore and understand better how we can bring that to the negotiating table, and how we can actually help influence the trajectory in Syria.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much. Really excellent witness testimony.

And I am going to turn to Mr. Boyle and ask Mr. Chabot if he could do me a favor and chair for a little while. I have to return two phone calls. I sincerely apologize. You will be in better hands.

And Mr. Boyle is recognized.

Mr. BOYLE. Thank you.

Actually, I was going to get into the question of the issue of what leverage, if any, we have over Moscow. I found your comments encouraging—in a situation that generally is not encouraging.

One challenge, about talking about this, is that there are so many different areas that we could go down in a short period of time. I am not going to use my time talking about what we could and should have been doing over the last 7 years. That is instructive to learn from and to apply to conflicts moving forward, but perhaps better to think now of what we can do.

Just one last point, though, having said that I am not going to talk about the last 7 years. One point I do want to bring up, for those who think that this is a isolated Syria issue, I have not heard this link drawn by anyone except for me. What was the Syrian civil war—now I think it is more accurate to just say the Syrian war, because there are so many players there—has had such a destabilizing effect, its refugee crisis, more than 5 million or so pouring



into European countries. It is my view that that has helped radicalize, one of the things that has helped radicalize, politics in a number of European countries.

I would daresay you would not have had Brexit without the fact that, every single day the first thing you were seeing, if you were in Europe traveling at any point during that time, was the throngs of people crossing into the different borders and the lengths they were going to in order to flee a nightmare situation. That has had a psychological impact. I just know from relatives and friends I have in Western European countries. I don't think that that part of the story is really well understood in Washington.

Be that as it may, moving forward, I have talked about—and we had my colleague Adam Kinzinger here a moment ago—he and I have both talked about, as cofounders and co-chairs of our Syria Caucus, the idea of still doing no-fly zones, roughly analogous to what we did in the 1990s with Iraq. Which, oh, by the way, succeeded.

Not looking back and saying, well, if we had done it back then, back in 2011—as some people, we now know, argued at the time—if we were to at least do that now, maybe around Idlib, what would that look like? Is it practical, the risk of inadvertently escalating things specifically with Russia? You certainly run the risk there of a conflict on the ground that otherwise wouldn't have existed back in Iraq in the nineties. So, please explore for me to what extent you believe that this is a feasible option today, in moving forward. Any one of you.

Mr. HERAS. Well, thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I agree with you that there is still potential to accomplish this objective. If you look at a map of Syria, we have essentially created a de facto no-fly zone or no-strike zone in our area of control, in the deconfliction zone. That includes Northern and Eastern Syria and that includes the al-Tanf zone in the Syrian desert near Jordan's border.

The Turks have also accomplished that objective in the Euphrates Shield Zone and, then, Afrin, and could potentially extend that to Idlib, depending on how that agreement takes place. Assuming that the United States and Turkey can come to a modus operandi for working together, you would have a zone stretching from the deserts of Deir ez-Zor to the highlands of Latakia, from southeastern Syria to northwestern Syria, that would encompass more than half of the country. And that would be a large space with which to protect Syrian civilians for a long time.

Ms. YACUBIAN. I certainly am sympathetic to the desire to create a no-fly zone over Idlib. I think the complexity lies in the Russian presence, in particular. As we know, when Russia entered the Syrian war in the fall of 2015, that was truly a watershed event that, in my view, turned the tide of the war in favor of the regime.

I think that Russia's control of the skies in that area would make it a very precarious endeavor. And so, I think what might be important is to, in fact, look at the current demilitarized zone, look at the current ceasefire, and really bolster our efforts, perhaps together with Turkey, to ensure that that diplomacy ultimately succeeds. Again, I realize the odds are long.

But, in my own view—and I am not a military strategist—I think that the obstacles and the complexities of establishing a no-fly zone over Idlib, however important or desirable that would be, I think are quite difficult. The other issue, of course, is we have to remember—

Mr. BOYLE. Let me just interject and say, obviously, if you were going to do it, it sure as heck would have been a lot easier before suddenly Russia arrived on the scene.

Ms. YACUBIAN. Exactly. So, that shifted dynamics. And then, of course, as we know, because of the successive “reconciliation agreements” that have been negotiated with the Assad regime, there are a number of more hard-line extremists who now have also been shoved up into Idlib. Special Envoy McGurk has said that it is the largest al-Qaeda haven since 9/11. So, there is actually a real challenge and a real issue in the province with respect to extremist element that poses yet another challenge, I think, to U.S. interests.

Mr. BOYLE. Thank you.

Mr. CHABOT [presiding]. The gentleman’s time has expired, but the gentleman is recognized for the purpose of offering—

Mr. BOYLE. Yes, I appreciate his indulgence, and I thank the witnesses for their answers.

This says “Madam Chairman,” but let me say, Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record a statement from 25 international jurists regarding the legal obligations of multilateral and donor countries for reconstruction in Syria, reflecting principles of international humanitarian law, human rights law, and international criminal law. This document has also been submitted to the U.N. and EU.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. CHABOT. Without objection, so ordered.

And the gentleman’s time has expired, and the chair will now recognize himself for 5 minutes.

We thank Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen for holding this important hearing.

I want to thank the witnesses.

As a long-time and senior member of the full Foreign Affairs Committee and a past chair of this committee; I would note that I have followed this issue from the very beginning. And many have spoken out on both on sides of the aisle. Unfortunately, this travesty; this horrific, ongoing saga continued, and tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people perished as a result. It is a travesty, it really is.

Let me say, with the help of Moscow and Tehran, Assad has now regained most of the territory west of the Euphrates. We know he set his sights on retaking Idlib, and right now Russia and Turkey have agreed to a tenuous ceasefire, but this could easily collapse, as many others have in the past, unfortunately. And if it does, there is no question that we are going to see a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, as millions of Syrians flee Assad’s brutality.

We all hope that a peaceful solution, a peaceful resolution, of this part of the conflict can be reached. And I think we also urge the administration to continue to work to ensure that Assad does not carry out this plan to attack Idlib, which would result in so many lives being lost.

There also remains other significant challenges to our interests. Most notably, Iran continues to extend its influence and develop a permanent presence in Syria. This threatens our closest ally in the region, Israel, and will remain an enduring problem for the foreseeable future.

And I want to thank the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—I don't get to thank the Senate too often—but I would like to thank them for passing the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. Assad is a butcher, and this legislation could help us to stop him from killing even more of his own people. So, I want to commend the Senate for that.

Now, to a couple of questions, and I would welcome any of the panel to respond. The demilitarized zone announced by Turkey and Russia in Idlib last week, for the time being forestalled, as I mentioned before, the likely severe humanitarian crisis that many were expecting. What is the likelihood that the agreement will hold? And considering all the complexities of this war, this civil war, and war in general, how should we respond if it doesn't?

Ms. Ghaddar, maybe I will go to you, since you didn't make it into that last round; we ran out of time. So, I will go to you. Thank you.

Ms. GHADDAR. Thank you very much.

Today, we know that this agreement gave a breather, right? It is not finalized. Turkey has only 1 month, today less than a month, in order to implement the conditions, in order to create the space.

But we all know that Russia might take the opportunity to go back to strike, if Turkey didn't have enough time to do this or if it has difficulties, especially that there are a lot of radical groups, who did not agree to the agreement. So, this is going to be very complicated. It is not going to be easy for Turkey to do that.

And we all know, that the Iranian troops have moved closer to Idlib. So, they are still preparing for the battle. This might actually happen.

But there are a lot of lessons learned, actually. When we talked before about the no-fly zone, it is not the only solution. There are a lot of things that can be done, a lot of things that the U.S. can do in order to respond to such a thing.

A lot of the people in Idlib—if we were worried about a humanitarian crisis—a lot of these people are actually not from Idlib. They are from different parts of Syria. They need to go back home. And this is what I talked about, about the demographic changes. You can avoid a big humanitarian crisis if it is facilitated the return of these refugees from Idlib, to their hometowns around Damascus and Homs, and other places where Hezbollah does not want them to go.

Also, there are different things. For example, I give you the example of South Syria, Southwest Syria, where another agreement was made between Jordan and Russia. This agreement allowed Assad forces to go in and control the borders and enclose over the Golan Heights. And today, that is a problem because, if you don't have a third party who actually manages the conditions, and makes sure that this agreement is implemented, a third party that is not the local actors that made the agreement, it is not going to work. Because today we have the Assad regime in Southeast Syria,

very close to the Golan Heights and Jordan border, and it is so easy for Iran to infiltrate Assad's army. Today we are making the war between Iran and Israel more possible than ever. This is something that we need to consider also when looking at Idlib, not to make the same mistakes.

Mr. CHABOT. Very good. Thank you very much. My time has expired.

The gentleman from Illinois, Mr. Schneider, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

And I want to pick up exactly where you just left, Ms. Ghaddar, because you said, and I quote, "We are making the war between Israel and Iran more possible every day." And that is a great concern. There are so many issues we need to talk about within the context of the war in Syria, but I want to focus on this one.

It has been stated before: U.S. presence is exclusively in the Northeastern part of Syria. It is north and east of the Euphrates River. Iranian presence is south and west. There is separation between the U.S. and Iran.

Again, it was said earlier, Iran's focus is on the Alawite coast, connecting with Lebanon, and then, the corridor linking to Iran, to the Mediterranean, that land bridge.

Ms. GHADDAR. And the Iraqi border.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And the Iraqi border, correct. And then, through Iraq.

And Iran's presence, in Syria, is becoming increasingly permanent. It is the integration into the military. It is the establishment of the permanent bases. And perhaps of greatest concern, is the development of indigenous missile manufacturing capability that allows, again, as it was stated earlier, for Iran to sustain a targeted, aggressive, expansive missile attack against Israel from two fronts, both in Lebanon and in Syria.

Israel can defend herself, and it is necessary that we always ensure that Israel has the strategic advantage, the qualitative military edge to do so, but there are risks as time goes on. We talked about the incident that happened outside Latakia; but now, Russia is threatening to install the S-300s, which increases the risk to Israel's necessary actions to defend herself against Iran.

All that to lead up to three questions that I will throw out to the panel.

One, what are the long-term risks for the United States, and, in particular, our ally Israel, of not changing the dynamic in southwestern Syria?

Two, what is the leverage we have over Iran now, and what should we be working toward in the future to try to achieve that?

And three, it was mentioned in your testimony, that there is dissolutionment within Lebanon, with respect to Hezbollah. How might the United States work with Israel, work on our own, to increase—how can Congress work to increase and exploit that dissolutionment with Hezbollah to try to get some strategic leverage? And I will leave it to you, I think, to answer.

Ms. GHADDAR. I have gone into a lot of details in my written testimony. So, just to be brief because we are short on time, and to

allow my colleagues, also, to answer, I will just take the Lebanon question, and leave the rest to them.

The discontent among the Shia community is huge. I have never seen the Shia community in Lebanon divided as it is today. And that is because of Hezbollah's regional role, the growing Hezbollah's regional role. I think the best way to do it, is to compete with Hezbollah where they are weak, compete with Iran in general where they are weak.

And today, their weakness is financial. Today, their weakness is not being able to provide services. That is why, when I talk about an alternative in Lebanon, an alternative for the Shia in general, it has to be economic. It has to be about jobs. It is about livelihoods. And this is where Hezbollah cannot function today.

I think my colleagues have more to say about the rest. The rest is all in my testimony.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

Mr. HERAS. Thank you, Congressman.

I would say that, as our policy stands now, we are allowing Russia, essentially, to be the referee between Israel and Iran in Syria. Which is a dangerous path to be on. Israel and Iran are, in effect, at war in Syria. Over the last year, Israel has conducted, by their own estimate, approximately 200 strikes inside Syria, and it is likely to increase.

The challenge in the Southwest is we had the opportunity this summer to enforce the southwest de-escalation zone, and we passed on that opportunity. The armed opposition, some of whom that we had supported for the better part of half a decade, is now under Assad and are under reconciliation deals, as has been mentioned.

We have very little leverage left in western Syria, except potentially in Idlib; where there is a witch's brew of armed opposition groups, including extremist groups, that we have to get rid of first before we can actually make that actionable.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Ms. Yacoubian?

Ms. YACOUBIAN. Very quickly, my comment would really, basically, roll up with what both Hanin and Nick have said, which is to say, focus on where we are in the east. I do believe that Iran is fairly well entrenched in the west, and that might even be an area that we need further study on, the degree to which they are actually integrating into the Syrian military and security apparatus. How entangled are they? That, for me, is an open question, an important one.

But I think in the east, our presence in the east is a very important bulwark against further Iranian expansion. And I don't just mean the military presence. I actually think even more important is the non-kinetic activities we are undertaking on the ground in Syria, the stabilization work, the work on governance, on restoring essential services, on providing, frankly, hope for the Syrians that are living there. In some ways, it mirrors or shadows what Hanin is saying is the most effective way of responding in Lebanon. So, too, I think, in eastern Syria. Providing hope, providing another source of livelihoods, governance, et cetera, is, I think in many ways, the most effective and perhaps sustainable counterwork to the expansion of Iranian influence.

Thank you.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. My time has expired.

I will close with one last thought. This committee has taken action, for example, with Hezbollah, the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act, and the subsequent that passed last week, the extensions or expansion of that. There is more we can do, we can stay focused with the Caesar Act. And I hope that this committee will continue to stay focused on this issue, in specific vis-a-vis Israel and Iran, but, also, more broadly, into the crisis in Syria.

With that, I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [presiding]. Thank you so much. And we all hope that as well. Thank you, Mr. Schneider.

And now, I am very pleased to yield to Mr. Curtis of Utah.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you very much.

And thanks to our witnesses for being here.

I am thinking about refugees, as much of the world is. As everybody knows, in this situation, the world, many countries are struggling to figure out how to deal with this.

Is there a scenario, and at what level can we hope for seeing these refugees return to Syria? And what would we need to see before that was possible?

Ms. GHADDAR. Very quickly, Assad has to go. If Assad stays in power, the refugees will be forced to join his army, upon their return. They will be forced to lose their hometowns, lose their land. The demographic changes are going to increase. The only way to stabilize the situation for the refugees to come back, without feeling the fear of being persecuted by Assad again is that Assad has to go. We have to start here, and then, there are a lot of things that can be done afterwards. But I think that is the only way.

Mr. HERAS. I would just build on what Hanin said, that Russia has weaponized refugee flows. The refugee flows from Syria have increased since Russia intervened militarily in September 2015. Russia is using refugees as a pressure point, particularly on the European Union, to try to renormalize Assad.

And to build off a point that was made by Mona, the demilitarized zone was successful, in part, because the administration had made it very clear to Russia that, if it continued with an offensive against Idlib, it could kiss any type of pathway to reconstruction assistance goodbye. And that is a leverage point on the Russians.

Ms. YACoubIAN. I would concur with what both my colleagues have said. I would just add maybe two points.

One is, I think Syrian refugees themselves say they are not comfortable returning, or at least many of them that I have talked to, they are not comfortable returning with Assad still there.

I think we have to keep our eye on the issue of forced returns. This was mentioned earlier with respect to Lebanon. As the conflict continues—and as I have said, it is in its eighth year—we are seeing growing fatigue in refugee-hosting communities and neighboring countries, and growing pressures to force refugees back into Syria prematurely. This is something I think we need to keep an eye on.

Finally, given the magnitude of the challenge, we also need to think about the prospect of a lost generation of Syrian children and

difficulties with access to education, particularly amongst Syrian refugees and, also, inside Syria. This is an issue I think that has not only moral implications, but actually long-term security and strategic implications for the United States. So, I would urge us to consider and think about, ways to provide assistance, that addresses some of these issues, education, in particular.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you. Very thoughtful responses.

A lot of us around the world questioned how and when to respond to Syria's particular use of chemical weapons. I am curious, what level of violence or civilian casualties do you believe would be necessary to trigger a U.S. military response? Should the U.S. launch air strikes against Syria if chemical weapons are not used?

Ms. GHADDAR. The Assad regime has killed a lot of Syrians, less than half with chemical weapons; more with regular traditional weapons. I think the military response should have been done before. Half a million deaths, it is a big number. But it is not just Assad, we have the Iranians as well. We have Hezbollah, the Shia militias. All of these guys have been killing civilians and causing a refugee crisis. And the Russians as well.

So, last time there was a military response by the U.S., it targeted Assad's facilities. I think drawing a clearer line in the sand against Iranians in Syria, is also very important by not avoiding a confrontation with Iran, a military confrontation. I think Iranians do not want the confrontation more than anyone else, and they will try to avoid confrontation. A clear line in the sand when it comes to Iran is also very important.

Mr. HERAS. I would just say that, as it stands now in the Syrian Civil War, the only way for the U.S. to actually have leverage on the behavior of Assad and his allies, is to send a clear message that any type of future offensive against opposition-controlled areas would necessitate a response. Otherwise, there is no pathway for a successful U.S. strategy in this area.

Mr. CURTIS. Regardless of chemical weapons or not?

Mr. HERAS. Yes.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you.

Ms. YACUBIAN. Very briefly because of time, what I outlined in my testimony is essentially the notion that, as I have said, we have seen this regime transgress all laws of armed conflict; in particular, though, I think most egregiously the use of chemical weapons.

I think this poses a real challenge for the United States in terms of developing doctrine that finds, as I put it—I don't think I used the exact term—but the "sweet spot," if you will, for the use of force, how to use force in a way to effectively deter the Assad regime from committing further atrocities, but in a way that does not force Syria into deeper—that doesn't escalate the conflict in ways that, again, also do not go to the benefit of Syrian civilians. I am not sure that we have figured that out yet. What does that use of force look like?

Mr. CURTIS. Yes, thank you. Unfortunately, I am out of time. I appreciate that. And I yield my time, Madam Chair.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much. We value your service on our committee, Mr. Curtis. Thank you.

And, I want to thank our witnesses for being here. You are fresh faces to our committee. I hope that it is the beginning of many

other appearances that you will make on this most pressing humanitarian disaster, that is unfolding before our eyes, and we feel powerless. And that is a bad feeling for the greatest country in the world to be feeling.

Thank you for excellent testimony. We look forward to hearing from you again. Thank you.

Ms. GHADDAR. Thank you very much.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you to the audience, too.

With that, the subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:16 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]



# A P P E N D I X

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
Heena Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman**

September 20, 2018

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>).

**DATE:** Thursday, September 27, 2018

**TIME:** 1:30 p.m.

**SUBJECT:** U.S. Policy Toward Syria (Part I)

**WITNESSES:** Ms. Hanin Ghaddar  
Friedmann Visiting Fellow  
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Nicholas Heras  
Fellow  
Middle East Security Program  
Center for a New American Security

Ms. Mona Yacoubian  
Senior Advisor for Syria  
Middle East and North Africa  
U.S. Institute of Peace

**By Direction of the Chairman**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Middle East and North Africa HEARING

Day Thursday Date 09/27/18 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:08pm Ending Time 3:16pm

Recesses  ( to ) ( to ) ( to ) ( to ) ( to ) ( to )

Presiding Member(s)

*Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Kinzinger, Chabot*

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session   
Executive (closed) Session   
Televised

Electronically Recorded (taped)   
Stenographic Record

TITLE OF HEARING:

*U.S. Policy Toward Syria: Part I*

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*GOP: Reps. Chabot, Kinzinger, Zeldin, Curtis  
Dem: Reps. Connolly, Boyle, Schneider, Lieu*

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an \* if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes  No   
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

*Document Submitted by Rep. Boyle  
Statement for the Record Submitted by Rep. Gerald Connolly*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_  
or  
TIME ADJOURNED 3:16 pm

  
Subcommittee Staff Associate

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE BRENDAN F. BOYLE, A  
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

24 September 2018

**Statement of eminent jurists on legal obligations when supporting reconstruction in Syria**

For the attention of: UN Secretary-General Guterres, EU High Representative Mogherini, World Bank President Yong Kim and Foreign Ministers of donor countries,

As respected experts of international law, we write to emphasize the need to ensure reconstruction efforts in Syria abide by existing international law obligations. Without adherence to these standards, the provision of reconstruction assistance can facilitate past, continuous, or new violations of international law, which would in turn give rise to complicity or shared international responsibility. Those engaged in such assistance may incur a legal obligation to provide remedies and reparations to those harmed.

Together with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Resolution 2254 establishes a path for peace, and conditions for Syria and for the international community's engagement with reconstruction efforts. Amongst the criteria in Resolution 2254 are constitutional reforms, a political transition, free and fair elections, and other 'confidence building measures' that will contribute to lasting peace and a viable political process. Necessary confidence-building measures in Syria include legal, political, and institutional reforms, the documentation of past crimes, the establishment of safe and sustainable conditions for the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the restitution of confiscated property, and accountability for past violations of international human rights (IHRL), humanitarian (IHL) and criminal (ICL) law.

These confidence-building measures are not only necessary for peace. They are also international legal obligations. While always incumbent upon Syria, the obligations most pertinent to the reconstruction process – which we have distilled here into 10 principles – have implications for, and often extend obligations to, other actors involved in the reconstruction process. The obligations underlying these principles have been developed during and in response to periods of intense strife. They represent not constraints but lessons learned about the preconditions necessary for, and the legal standards that underpin, true long-term peace and security. They are minimum, and non-exhaustive, obligations.

Reconstruction assistance for Syria must abide by and be conditioned upon these 10 principles.

**10 Principles for Reconstruction in Syria**  
**Reflecting International Human Rights, Humanitarian, and Criminal Law Obligations**

1. Financial or practical assistance, and the conditions attached to or associated with such assistance, must not undermine human rights protection.
2. Donors, funders, and partners need to ensure that they do not facilitate or entrench sectarian, ethnic, or religious cleansing within Syria.
3. The whereabouts of missing and disappeared persons must be investigated, documented, and disclosed.
4. Relevant parties must engage in human rights due diligence before each new reconstruction project to ensure they are not complicit in past, continuous, or new violations of international law.
5. Preventative policies and practices must be adopted and implemented to combat corruption.
6. Security and justice sector reforms are required.

7. Voluntary repatriation and the return of refugees and IDPs can be facilitated provided it can be done safely and sustainably, with clear information, after consultation, and with the consent of those displaced.
8. Violations of international criminal law and criminal breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law must be credibly and effectively investigated, prosecuted, and adequately punished.
9. Victims must have access to prompt, adequate, effective, and independent remedies capable of awarding appropriate and integral reparations.
10. Throughout the reconstruction process, particular attention must be paid to gendered and intersectional harms.

#### **Consequences of a breach**

Many of these principles relate to continuous violations of IHRL, IHL, and ICL. Financial or practical assistance that facilitates past, continuous, or new violations of IHRL, IHL, and/or ICL breaches can meet legal definitions of complicity.

States and international organizations that support past, continuous, or new violations may incur an international obligation to provide remedies and reparations to those harmed.

Individuals and businesses that fail to abide by these standards may be held accountable either through civil claims or through criminal prosecution.

#### **Further explanations and support**

We elaborate the principles in the attached 'Commentary on the Principles,' and are ready and willing to support efforts in operationalizing these principles.

Sincerely yours,

1. **Nadia Bernaz**, Associate Professor of Law, Wageningen University, the Netherlands
2. **Michael Bothe**, Professor Emeritus of Public Law, J.W. Goethe University Frankfurt/Main
3. **Christine Chinkin**, Emerita Professor of International Law, London School of Economics and Political Science; Director, Centre on Women, Peace and Security at London School of Economics and Political Science
4. **John Dugard SC**, former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Occupied Palestine
5. **Jared Genser**, Adjunct Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center
6. **Pablo de Greiff**, Senior Fellow and Director, Transitional Justice Program, School of Law New York University; former UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence
7. **Geoff Gilbert**, Professor of Law, University of Essex School of Law and Human Rights Centre
8. **Nicola Jägers**, Professor of Law, Tilburg University
9. **Wayne Jordash QC**, Managing Partner, Global Rights Compliance
10. **Sabine Michalowski**, Professor of Law, University of Essex School of Law and Human Rights Centre
11. **Justice Charles Mkandawire**, President of the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association
12. **Sir Geoffrey Nice QC**, Professor of Law, Gresham College
13. **Stanley Nyamanhindi**, Chief Executive Officer, SADC Lawyer's Association

14. **Navi Pillay**, President, International Commission Against the Death Penalty; former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2008-2014), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
15. **Nelson Camilo Sánchez**, Assistant Professor of Law, University of Virginia School of Law
16. **Stephen Rapp**, Fellow, Center for Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Museum; former US Ambassador-at-Large, Global Criminal Justice (2009-2015)
17. **Naomi Roht-Arriaza**, Distinguished Professor of Law, University of California, Hastings College of the Law
18. **Clara Sandoval**, Deputy Director, Essex Transitional Justice Network (ETJN); Professor, School of Law and Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex
19. **Ben Saul**, Challis Chair of International Law, University of Sydney; Associate Fellow, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London
20. **Carsten Stahn**, Professor of International Criminal Law and Global Justice, Universiteit Leiden; Programme Director, Grotius Centre for International Studies
21. **David Tolbert**, Ford Foundation Fellow, Duke University; former President, International Center for Transitional Justice
22. **Arnold Tsunga**, Member, Africa Judges and Jurists Forum (AJJF) and Pan-Africa Lawyers Union (PALU)
23. **Rodrigo Uprimny**, Professor Emeritus, Department of Law at the National University Colombia
24. **Tara Van Ho**, Lecturer, University of Essex School of Law and Human Rights Centre
25. **Jens Vedsted-Hansen**, Professor of Law, Aarhus University

[Affiliations for identification purposes only].

## Commentary on the Principles

### **These principles represent existing international obligations.**

These principles represent the minimum, non-exhaustive, obligations that attach to reconstruction and reconstruction assistance. Engagement with reconstruction should be conditioned upon the realization of, at a minimum, all 10 principles.

### **Security Council resolutions must be respected.**

The path to peace, set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254, calls for a political process to co-exist with and act in parallel to a ceasefire. This process is intended to secure ‘credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance’ that will secure a lasting, peaceful solution to the conflict. This durable solution is a necessary precondition to securing all other rights and obligations. Without extensive institutional, political, social, cultural, and economic reforms and an inclusive governance structure, Syria is unlikely to be able to fulfil the other obligations outlined here. UNSCR 2254 identifies benchmarks upon which reconstruction assistance should be conditioned, including a political transition process (Operational Paragraph 2), constitutional reforms, free and fair elections (OP4), and other ‘confidence building measures to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire’ (OP10). Additionally, states should remember that under Security Council Resolution 1325 women should be consulted and included in any reconstruction process, and specific attention should be paid to gendered harms.

The conditions in these Security Council resolutions are in addition to, and do not supplant or displace, the obligations outlined in the 10 Principles for Reconstruction in Syria.

### **While always incumbent upon Syria, the obligations most pertinent to the reconstruction process – which we have distilled here into 10 principles – have implications for, and often extend obligations to, other actors involved in the reconstruction process.**

All the obligations we outline apply to Syria. Most also require donor states, international and multilateral organizations, and businesses to refrain from supporting reconstruction assistance that would breach these obligations. Where reconstruction assistance would constitute complicity in past, continuous, or new breaches of IHRL, IHL, and/or ICL, assistance must be avoided. Similarly, some of the obligations here are owed by all states at all times. Throughout this Commentary, we indicate when there are specific obligations owed by specific actors, but any reconstruction efforts or assistance that breaches these principles should be avoided.

States create international law, but in doing so they also create obligations for other international subjects. International organizations have a distinct legal personality from their Member States, but the organizations are bound by IHRL and IHL standards. States cannot do collectively what they are prohibited from doing separately. The purpose of an international organization is to develop, advance, and accomplish particular collective goals; states create these organizations to accomplish together what an individual state cannot accomplish alone. Consequently, international organizations must abide by the same obligations owed by their Member States.

Under international law, businesses are also expected to respect human rights and therefore to meet the principles outlined here. The role of businesses in reconstruction efforts raises particular obligations and responsibilities for home states. Home states should ensure their nationals, including businesses, do not breach IHRL, IHL, or ICL obligations when operating in Syria. The commission of criminal breaches of international law by nationals – including business leaders and, where domestic law allows, businesses – must be prosecuted. All breaches should be remedied. Given the conflict-affected nature of Syria, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights recognize that home states should also provide assistance to their business nationals to ensure the latter understand their responsibilities and the risks of doing business in Syria. This should include training and other outreach efforts

aimed at ensuring businesses undertake appropriate due diligence and establish or engage with independent operational grievance mechanisms that operate in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. States should also consider new legislation mandating due diligence in Syria and other conflict-affected areas, requiring businesses to report on their processes and procedures, and establishing accessible remedial mechanisms for those impacted by business operations in Syria. In this regard, we wish to draw attention to and praise France's efforts to hold their business nationals accountable for participation in international crimes in Syria. This demonstrates the type of leadership and commitment expected of all states.

#### PRINCIPLES

##### **1. Financial or practical assistance, and the conditions attached to or associated with such assistance, must not undermine human rights protection.**

The basic tenet of IHRL is that states must respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. While the obligations to protect and fulfil human rights are often (although not always) obligations of effort, the obligation to respect human rights is one of outcome. The failure to respect a human right by a state entails international responsibility.

The obligation to respect human rights is also owed by international and multilateral organizations and businesses. International and multilateral organizations may incur international responsibility for their support of activities that fail to respect human rights. Businesses that fail to respect human rights should be held accountable through civil or criminal processes in Syria and/or their home states.

Those entities that provide financial and practical assistance should condition their support upon specific commitments to implement relevant IHRL standards, and must withdraw their support if during the course of their operations they know or have reason to believe their efforts are negatively impacting or undermining the realization of human rights. New economic agreements and legislation upon which loans are conditioned – which often include trade or investment reforms and new bilateral trade and investment agreements – must include clauses that protect and require respect for human rights by all economic actors.

##### **2. Donors, funders, and partners need to ensure that they do not facilitate or entrench sectarian, ethnic, or religious cleansing within Syria.**

Those engaged in reconstruction assistance should be aware of the impact reconstruction can have on the rights to housing and an adequate standard of living, amongst other rights. Syria has an international obligation to ensure access to adequate and appropriate housing and property on a non-discriminatory basis. The realization of the right to housing is intimately related to the realization of other adequate conditions of living that Syria is bound to respect, protect, and fulfil on a non-discriminatory basis, including access to clean, affordable, and adequate water, health care, and education. These obligations exist regardless of the cause of displacement and Syria has a responsibility to ensure that all individuals who have been displaced are able to access adequate and affordable housing on a non-discriminatory basis regardless of any previous legal tenure. It is only through the satisfaction of these IHRL obligations that Syria can hope to re-establish anything resembling the pluralistic, tolerant, and safe society it once enjoyed.

Continued forced displacement is often the result of on-going IHRL, IHL, and/or ICL breaches. Where forced displacement has resulted in discriminatory or arbitrary property transfers or confiscation, the transfer or confiscation must be voided as a first and most basic means of reparation. Any reconstruction effort that takes advantage of such discriminatory or arbitrary property transfers or confiscations, or that leaves such transfers or confiscations in place, has the potential to entrench, institutionalize, and embed continuous criminal breaches of IHRL and/or IHL. Additionally, where mass displacement has been accompanied by discriminatory or arbitrary property transfers or confiscation, new reconstruction efforts risk exacerbating sectarian, ethnic, and/or religious divisions, and may constitute the commission of a new crime against humanity.



We feel it is necessary to draw attention to Syrian Law No. 10 of 2018, which has the potential to turn the process of reconstruction into a form of ethnic cleansing. This law appears to entrench breaches of IHRL and IHL, and to disproportionately harm those already rendered vulnerable by the conflict. Of particular concern are:

- (1) the requirement in the law that property owners submit documentation to local authorities within 30 days of an area being designated for redevelopment;
- (2) the lack of compensation for those owners affected; and
- (3) the lack of due process for those harmed by the law.

Given the large number of displaced and disappeared persons, the sectarian nature of the violence, and the known destruction of property registries, the requirements in the law are unrealistic and are likely to violate the right to housing for those individuals, and their families, who have been displaced or disappeared or who are residing in conflict-affected areas. This can have the additional effect of undermining the right of return as a means of reparation for refugees, IDPs, and other asylum seekers. The lack of due process and the procedures associated with the law give rise to the potential for false and discriminatory transfers of property without a means by which to challenge the transfers.

The broad nature of the law, and the historic use of similar decrees, raises grave concerns about the compatibility of Law No. 10 with IHRL and IHL guarantees. Given the gravity of concerns, states, international and multilateral organizations, and businesses have an obligation to ensure that they do not fund or facilitate reconstruction projects that rely on property registrations resulting from Law No. 10, or that use Law No. 10 in a way that furthers ethnic, religious, political, or gender-based discrimination or ethnic cleansing.

### **3. The whereabouts of missing and disappeared persons must be investigated, documented, and disclosed.**

Enforced disappearance represents a continuous criminal breach of human rights and has been recognized as a form of torture for the family of those disappeared. In order to stop these continuous violations, a process of investigating, documenting, and disclosing the whereabouts of missing and disappeared persons is needed. The current political and social conditions indicate that this process would best be carried out by an international commission rather than by the Syrian government. Families should be informed on the whereabouts of their loved ones, or, in an on-going manner, on the process of locating their family members. Where an investigation indicates that the missing person has, in fact, been killed, this must be appropriately communicated to the family and the remains should be returned to the family in accordance with their wishes.

The widespread nature of enforced disappearances in Syria represents a particular problem for post-conflict reconstruction. As noted above, the demands of Law No. 10 of 2018 place an unreasonable burden on those who have been disappeared and their families. It appears that enforced disappearances have been used to dispossess individuals of property and potentially to ensure ethnic, religious, or sectarian cleansing. The failure to identify, document, and disclose those who have been disappeared and their current whereabouts throws into question the validity of subsequent uses of property. The use of property for reconstruction in a manner that utilizes, institutionalizes, or embeds the harm caused by an enforced disappearance will create new breaches of international law and complicate necessary reparations efforts.

Given the widespread nature of the disappearances, and the potential harm caused to family members by the absence of an official finding of death in legal areas such as property restitution and inheritance, Syria should adopt a law addressing the status of disappeared persons and conferring rights on their surviving relatives.

### **4. Relevant parties must engage in human rights due diligence before each new reconstruction project to ensure they are not complicit in past, continuous, or new violations of international law.**

As noted above, in the Commentary to Principles 2 and 3, there is a significant risk that the conflict facilitated property confiscation and transfers in breach of IHRL, IHL, and ICL. New reconstruction projects that would embed and institutionalize these continuous violations can constitute complicity. To ensure their respect for human rights – in line with Principle 1 – all relevant parties must engage in human rights due diligence. This standard applies to

any party, public or private, that is providing financing, personnel, or practical assistance, including through their supply chains or subsidiary businesses, to reconstruction efforts in Syria.

Human rights due diligence must include an effective consultation with those affected, adequate reparations to those whose rights are harmed by the project, and a process for those affected to challenge the decision. This should be a robust and on-going process aimed at identifying and mitigating human rights impacts. Human rights due diligence must include, at a minimum:

- the development and disclosure of standards by which the project will be assessed for its compliance with human rights;
- the establishment of an independent, transparent, and trusted process by which individuals can raise claims and concerns, and seek reparations when harmed;
- the documentation and examination of property rights and claims;
- the collection of data about human rights harms associated with the property to date and those that would arise as a result of the proposed use for the property; and
- consultation and collaboration with affected individuals, communities, and other stakeholders on both the harms expected and the appropriate means of mitigating those harms.

Throughout the process, particular attention should be paid to impacts on women and groups in situations of vulnerability, including children, the elderly, ethnic and religious minorities, and persons with disabilities.

Where a project would cause, exacerbate, or entrench the results of international crimes or discrimination, it cannot be undertaken. In other instances, efforts to mitigate the harm may be used where necessary because the project furthers a legitimate public interest and those harmed by the project are afforded due process with adequate and effective reparations.

#### **5. Preventative policies and practices must be adopted and implemented to combat corruption.**

Corruption undermines human rights and development. States parties to the UN Convention against Corruption have specific obligations to combat corruption. States, international, and multilateral institutions should adopt preventative policies and practices. Donor states, international and multilateral institutions, and businesses should adopt policies of transparency for all funds to Syria. States should regulate their corporate nationals operating in Syria, and investigate and where appropriate prosecute and punish, instances of corruption, including by their businesses or business leaders.

#### **6. Security and justice sector reforms are required.**

The realization of peace and security, and the protection, enforcement, and fulfilment of IHRL, IHL, and/or ICL must be removed from the military, the police, and other security and justice institutions, at least until a thorough investigation (and where appropriate prosecution and punishment) is undertaken by individuals, a commission, or a tribunal whose independence and trustworthiness is unimpeached by their role in the conflict. This should not, however, lead to mass vetting based on ethnic, religious, or political affiliation.

**7. Voluntary repatriation and the return of refugees and IDPs can be facilitated provided it can be done safely and sustainably, with clear information, after consultation, and with the consent of those displaced.**

Given the difficulties faced by refugees, IDPs, and by some host countries, voluntary repatriation options that offer full guarantees and that comply fully with international standards should be sought and supported. This cannot be done, however, without adequate protections to ensure refugees and IDPs are not placed in a position of new or renewed persecution or on-going IHRL violations. Given the current status in Syria, forced repatriation is likely to give rise to complicity in torture, triggering both the state's responsibility to provide remedies and reparations, as well as individual criminal responsibility for complicity in torture. Repatriation should therefore only be facilitated after the preconditions for a sustainable and safe return have been undertaken, including clear respect for human rights and the rule of law. Additionally, those who have been displaced must be consulted, given clear and accurate information, and consent to being returned.

Cessation of refugee status can only be authorised with UNHCR's approval if there is a fundamental change in circumstances in Syria, which we have not yet seen, and should only be done when the conditions allow for sustainable and safe return in dignity.

The law must ensure that no one is rendered stateless as a consequence of displacement or birth abroad during displacement. This must be guaranteed on a non-discriminatory basis. In regard to those born abroad during displacement, this guarantee must be afforded regardless of the gender of the displaced parent and guaranteed on a non-discriminatory basis.

**8. Violations of international criminal law and criminal breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law must be credibly and effectively investigated, prosecuted, and adequately punished.**

The obligation to investigate, prosecute, and punish international crimes and criminal breaches of IHRL and IHL is simultaneously owed by all states. This obligation attaches to, at least, instances of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture, enforced disappearance, and genocide. The exceptional recognition of universal jurisdiction for these crimes underscores the gravity of the crimes committed and the importance of fulfilling this obligation.

We would be remiss if we did not draw attention to two particular crimes that were prevalent during the Syrian conflict and that we are concerned may go unprosecuted or under-prosecuted: attacks on humanitarian aid workers and journalists as war crimes; and sexual and gender-based violence as a war crime and, in some instances, crimes against humanity and/or genocide.

First, particular attention should be paid to attacks on humanitarian aid workers and journalists as war crimes. The work humanitarian aid workers undertake is necessary and facilitates the realization of other protections provided in IHL. Targeting humanitarian aid workers is prohibited. Similarly, journalists retain their status as civilians; their work does not make them legitimate military targets, and targeting them is prohibited. Targeting these protected persons is a war crime. There are serious and repeated allegations that both state and non-state actors have targeted humanitarian aid workers and journalists. These allegations must be investigated, and where appropriate, prosecuted and punished.

Second, instances of sexual and gender-based violence must be investigated as forms of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In armed conflicts, torture and inhuman treatment are war crimes regardless of whom they are perpetrated against. Rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence can also be means of perpetrating crimes against humanity and genocide. There are widespread allegations of the use of rape and other sexual or gender-based violence by state and non-state actors. Some of these allegations indicate the use of rape as a form of genocide. Any credible attempt to investigate, prosecute, and punish international crimes must include a focus on sexual and gender-based violence.

**9. Victims must have access to prompt, adequate, effective, and independent remedies capable of awarding appropriate and integral reparations.**

Victims of gross IHRL violations or serious violations of IHL are owed adequate reparations under international law. Reparations, according to the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation, include restitution, rehabilitation, compensation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-recurrence. Given the large number of potential victims in a context such as Syria, provisions should be made through a systematic approach capable of providing complex and appropriate reparations expeditiously and without burdening or re-traumatizing victims.

Victims cannot be returned to a place of on-going violations or to the *status quo ante* if that would return them to a situation where they would continue to suffer IHRL, IHL, or ICL violations. Comprehensive guarantees of non-recurrence are necessary. Such guarantees form part of an integral reparations plan and should be aimed at responding to the underlying political, social, cultural, and economic causes of the conflict and the resulting breaches of IHRL, IHL, and ICL. Reparations can be designed in ways that further sustainable development – beyond their potential to assist in reconciliation and social reparation – and that can facilitate innovative approaches to reconstruction.

Other reconstruction needs cannot be used to displace obligations towards victims.

**10. Throughout the reconstruction process, particular attention must be paid to gendered and intersectional harms.**

Violations that appear to be indiscriminate will often have specifically gendered impacts that require responses aimed at these harms while addressing existing structural inequalities. Gendered harms can be exacerbated by issues of intersectionality when women and girls are members of other minority groups or groups in situations of vulnerability.

Gendered impacts may be most clearly evident in regard to violations related to torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment (see Commentary to Principle 8, above). However, there are often less evident gendered impacts that arise in post-conflict reconstruction and re-development. For example, the location of new reconstruction projects may impact women and girls' security or property rights in a way not experienced by their male counterparts. Additionally, the failure to locate missing and disappeared male relatives is likely to impact property rights and security for women and girls. This can undermine women's ability to participate in the peace process and ultimately lead to a failure to realise the standards in Security Council Resolution 1325.

Attention must be paid throughout the reconstruction process, and in each new project or initiative, to the potential for gendered-based and intersectional harms. Women from diverse backgrounds should be involved in the planning of new reconstruction processes and should be consulted throughout the process so that gendered and intersectional harms can be identified. Where such impacts are identified, there is an obligation to mitigate and remediate the harm.

**Consequences of a breach**

Financial or practical assistance that facilitates on-going IHRL, IHL, and ICL breaches can meet the legal definition of complicity. States that support past, continuous, or new violations may incur shared international responsibility for those violations, and incur an obligation to provide remedies and reparations to those harmed.

Individuals and businesses that fail to abide by these standards may be complicit in international crimes, and held accountable either through civil claims by those harmed or through criminal prosecution. As noted above, home states have an obligation to investigate, and where appropriate, prosecute and punish their nationals who are involved in, directly or through complicity, corruption or criminal violations of IHRL, IHL, and ICL. This obligation includes effectively investigating, and where appropriate prosecuting and adequately punishing, business leaders. Where domestic law allows, this should be extended to businesses and other juridical persons. Additionally, home states should make remedial processes and reparations available for victims through civil claims.

**Statement for the Record**  
*Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia*

As the Syrian conflict trudges through its eighth year, 98 percent of ISIS-held territory has been reclaimed, but numerous strategic threats to U.S. interests remain. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration's erratic approach and lack of a coherent strategy in Syria have emboldened President Bashar al-Assad and his patrons Russia and Iran. The Trump Administration has allowed other parties on the ground – namely Turkey, Russia, and Iran – to shape the conflict and ongoing negotiations to reflect their own interests to the detriment of U.S. national security and long-term stability in the region. This unilateral retreat may very well be the Administration's objective, but it makes America less safe.

Assad's forces are preparing to launch military operations to reclaim the last major rebel-held area in Idlib province. Throughout the conflict, the Syrian Government has taken advantage of the so-called "de-escalation zones," negotiated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, for strategic military purposes. Last week, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish another demilitarized buffer zone between the Syrian army and the opposition along the borders of the Idlib region. But given Assad's track record of violating these agreements, we should be preparing for a new humanitarian catastrophe whereby the region's three million inhabitants seek to flee an indiscriminate assault from Assad's forces.

Former Secretary of State Tillerson correctly outlined the dangers of U.S. disengagement in Syria: "As a destabilized nation and one bordering Israel, Syria presents an opportunity that Iran is all too eager to exploit." The problem is, the Trump Administration's disengagement has already exacerbated the Iranian threat to Israel. President Trump acquiesced to a ceasefire deal with Russia that permits Iran or its allied Hezbollah forces to operate dangerously close to Israel's border. Something we should all be concerned about is that fact that this Administration is making it easier for Iran to operate in Syria while at the same time National Security Advisor John Bolton is committing the United States to Syria as long as Iranian proxies are on the ground. These are potentially conflicting purposes that commit the United States to a forever war in Syria with a scope far greater than our current fight against ISIS.

In addition to these geopolitical concerns, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe. There are 13.1 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, 6.1 million Syrians internally displaced, and 5.6 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. This crush of humanity has strained resources within countries hosting massive refugee populations, drastically changed regional demographics, and destabilized neighboring countries. Despite a record high number of refugees worldwide, the Trump administration recently announced a record low refugee admissions goal for FY 2019. That is why I recently introduced the Lady Liberty Act (H.R. 6909) with more than 60 cosponsors to require the President to set the refugee admissions ceiling at a minimum of 110,000 refugees annually.

The Assad regime has perpetrated atrocities on the Syrian civilian population -- including sectarian violence, mass killings, torture, and the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs -- and it shows no signs of subsiding. Twice in the course of a year, a Trump Administration announcement of retreat from Syria presaged a brutal chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime, followed by a kneejerk kinetic response lacking a larger strategy. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result, then someone should evaluate the sanity of this Administration.

The United States and the international community must reinforce the international norm against the use of chemical weapons, and I support targeted military retaliation to do so. But kneejerk, one-off attacks will neither deter Assad's inhumane actions, nor hasten the end of the brutal Syrian civil war. Instead, these kinetic responses without an overarching strategy endanger American lives and diminish U.S. global leadership. The Trump Administration must work with Congress to develop a comprehensive strategy that includes robust diplomatic efforts to bring a political settlement to this conflict.

Earlier this year, the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee held a Syria hearing, in which one of the expert witnesses described the dangerous consequences of the Trump Administration's Syria policy for U.S. interests. The Middle East Institute's Charles Lister said, "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... 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."

This crisis cannot end while a civil war rages on. Ultimately, it is political negotiations that will bring lasting relief to the millions of affected Syrians who have known only violence and displacement for more than seven years. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has been unwilling to make the diplomatic investments that would be necessary to ensure that a negotiated settlement reflects U.S. national security interests and protects humanitarian concerns. If the Administration continues down this path, then the United States will be forced to accept a Syrian future shaped by our adversaries.

