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

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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to create a post-conflict Syria where Assad has been transitioned from power and Iran and its proxy forces have been withdrawn from the country.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.

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.¹ 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.²

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.³

¹ 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>.

² 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>.

³ 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).⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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-antiaircraft-missiles/2018/09/24/674745b8-bffe-11e8-be77-516336a26305_story.html?utm_term=.41978beeb102](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?noredirect=on&utm_term=.41978beeb102).

⁴ 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?noredirect=on&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/150872/>; 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>.

⁵ 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?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0884b36dc3a6; “Syria: U.S. Will Stay in Syria to ‘Ensure The Defeat of I.S.’-U.S. Diplomat,” *EBL News*, August 26, 2018, <https://eblnews.com/video/syria-us-will-stay-syria-ensure-defeat-us-diplomat-488025>.

⁶ Alessandria 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>.

⁶ Alessandria 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.⁷

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.⁸

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

⁷ 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>.

⁸ 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-1521817360>; 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-tv-idUSKCN1M40KM>.

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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

⁹ 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-blocked/2018/04/20/1ca0f164-440a-11e8-b2dc-b0a403e4720a_story.html?utm_term=.e4739e87e144.

¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹ Elizabeth Tsurkov, “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/why-israel-is-providing-thousands-of-syrians-with-humanitarian-aid-215754>.

¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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://jamestown.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://ctc.usma.edu/a-profile-of-syrias-strategic-dara-province/>.

¹³ 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/2018/06/283252.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>.

¹⁴ 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/.

passed by the House last year.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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).¹⁹ Turkey also agreed that it would work with its local Syrian armed opposition partners to remove al Qaeda and similar organizations from Greater Idlib.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² However, stopping the Assad campaign on Greater

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ “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/>.

¹⁷ 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-idUSKCN1LY0T9?il=0>.

¹⁸ 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>.

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

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

²¹ 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>.

²² David Gardner, “Russia Launches A Diplomatic Offensive On Rebuilding Syria,” *Financial Times*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/e89d42f0-a539-11e8-8ecf-a7ae1beff35b>; 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.”²³

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.²⁴ 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 the United States has raised approximately \$300 million from multiple Coalition countries, including a large pledge of \$150 million from Saudi Arabia.²⁵ 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-idUSKBN1K02JP>.

²³ 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>.

²⁴ 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>.

²⁵ 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>.

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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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

²⁶ 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>.

²⁷ 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/>.

²⁸ "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=.c40929ceaf5f

²⁹ 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/59jqj8/soldiers-pushing-out-whats-left-of-isis-in-deir-ezzor-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-ezzor>.

³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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

³¹ "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>.

³² 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>.

³³ 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=wCqCnLjSx7M>.

³⁴ 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>.

³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ These social, political, and security challenges – although for the time being manageable for the SDF – are easily exacerbated with Turkish support, which seems forthcoming.³⁹

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.

³⁶ 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=wCqCnLjSx7M>; 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/>.

³⁷ 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>

³⁸ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "IS Continues Small-Scale Attacks Targeting Manbij's Security," *Kurdistan 24*, September 6, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ca633dbe-9a1e-4ee7-85a5-9d0b704df02a>; 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>.

³⁹ "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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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

⁴⁰ "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>.

⁴¹ Aron Lund, "Blame Game Over Syrians Stranded In The Desert," The Century Foundation, June 18, 2018, <https://tcf.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/2017/11/16162/>.

⁴² "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.⁴³ 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 2016.⁴⁴ 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

⁴³ 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/>.

⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ And both of these forces are riddled with questionable actors and include group 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁵ 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/485892662/>.

⁴⁶ 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/>.

⁴⁷ “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.⁴⁸ The Turkish-backed Syrian opposition occupation force in Afrin has been credibly linked to human rights abuses and looting and illegally seizing property.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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

⁴⁸ Sangar Ali, "WHO: Nearly 170,000 Displaced From Afrin Need Urgent Assistance," *Kurdistan 24*, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2cb4ba21-202d-4aab-8ba5-5029b074f97e>.

⁴⁹ "Afrin Loot Is Legitimate Spoils Of War, Leaked Transit Document Shows," *Rudaw*, August 23, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/230820181>; "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>.

⁵⁰ 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-4892-4c58-a9cd-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-aa19-4978-870e-ded15e10ded9>.

⁵¹ 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/2018/03/06/3fd2c2ca-2173-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html?utm_term=.7142d6c15601.

⁵² "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-idUSKCN1M40DX>.

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.⁵³ That broken promise is still remembered by Erdogan and the Turkish public who feel they were lied to by their NATO ally.⁵⁴ U.S.-Turkish joint military patrols in Manbij would be a positive step forward.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

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

⁵³ 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-f0cf3a6449a6_story.html?utm_term=.e1e16720414d.

⁵⁴ Ragip 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>.

⁵⁵ 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-syrias-north-with-us-forces/>.

⁵⁶ 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-idUSKCN1LK1ND>.

⁵⁷ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "YPG To Investigate Clash With Regime That Killed 11," *Kurdistan 24*, September 15, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/6f12b30d-052b-4299-b4af-ba39e29188a6>; Wladimir 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=iqYEva7VE-I>.

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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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

⁵⁸ 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-idUSKBN16IOAU>.

⁵⁹ Wladimir 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>.

⁶⁰ 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 Raqqa 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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

⁶¹ 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-US-Iran-confrontation-is-brewing>.

⁶² Alessandria Massi, "Why Syria and the U.S. Clashed For Control East Of The Euphrates," *Syria Deeply*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.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/bab1502a-0cb4-11e8-8890-372e2047c935_story.html?utm_term=.2cc63a790f4a.

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

⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

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.⁶⁸ 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;

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

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

⁶⁶ 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/2012/07/20/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>.

⁶⁷ 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>.

⁶⁸ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Think-Tanks Bark And The IRGC Moves On," *Syria Comment*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.joshualandis.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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰ 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

⁶⁹ 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>.

⁷⁰ 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-approves-an-indefinite-military-and-diplomatic-effort-in-syria-us-officials-say/2018/09/06/0351ab54-b20f-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_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.

Deterring 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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.⁷³ 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 Shaabi* system. This parallel security structure is directed by high-ranking officers

⁷¹ Herb Keinon, "Netanyahu: Israel Will Hit Iran Everywhere In Syria, Not Only Along Border," *Jerusalem Post*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/PM-Israel-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/>.

⁷² "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>.

⁷³ Ali Alfoneh, "Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-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.⁷⁴

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*.

⁷⁴ 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>.

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).⁷⁵ 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.

⁷⁵ 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/syriasource/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-un-syria-payouts>; 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>.