

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism

Hearing: 10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria

Witness statement by

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The conflict in Syria is not a civil war and only the United States can push it towards a resolution. Syria's is an international conflict threatening US national security interests and is a source of global terrorism. Syria has also become a platform for Iran and Russia to assert themselves vis-à-vis the West generally and the United States specifically. The Syrian conflict presents the United States with a security risk, but the United States' general disengagement on Syria over the past ten years has also caused the US reputational damage. Today there is an opportunity for the administration of President Joseph Biden to reverse this damage and for the US to play a leading role in steering this conflict to a close. This would affirm US commitment to international norms and address the root causes of the Syrian refugee crisis. Drawing the conflict to a close would also consolidate the defeat of ISIS in Syria and overseas. **An end to the Syrian conflict can only happen if it includes supporting the formation of legitimate alternatives to President Bashar al-Assad's regime as part of a Syrian-led political process under the auspices of the United Nations, using the UN-led Geneva process as a mechanism of implementation of a peace deal brokered diplomatically between the United States and Russia.** A viable resolution to the conflict would also reduce Iranian influence in Syria, thereby helping contain Iran's regional intervention in the Middle East, and would ensure that Syria is free of weapons of mass destruction.

All the aims mentioned in the above scenario have been explicitly communicated by the United States as key objectives for Syria but they are yet to be realized. Dynamics on the ground in Syria as well as the diplomatic situation present challenges to those objectives, but they are not impossible to achieve. Far from having to passively accept the current status quo in Syria as fait accompli, the United States is the only international actor with the ability to open the door to a peace deal for Syria.

Diplomatic situation

US disengagement on Syria over the past decade has paved the way for Russia and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad to take advantage of the vacuum to assert themselves diplomatically. The Syrian regime and Russia as well as Iran are primarily directly responsible for why the objectives of the peace process led by the United Nations have not yet been achieved. There has not been a cessation of hostilities, and the Syrian regime and its allies continue to use violence against the civilian population. The regime is not releasing adequate information about detainees and alongside Russia continues to engage in war crimes. There is no freedom of movement for journalists and no freedom of association in regime-held areas. The regime and its

Russian ally continue to block humanitarian aid intended for Syrians under the pretext of protecting Syria's sovereignty.

Although the UN-led peace process established a Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) composed of representatives of the Syrian regime, the opposition, and civil society, the Assad regime—under de facto Russian direction—has been largely uncooperative during the five rounds of meetings of the SCC, with the meetings resulting in no agreement on a draft of a new constitution. There has also been no progress on the formation of a transitional governing body as stipulated by UN Resolution 2254. The parliamentary elections held in regime-held Syria in July 2020 were neither free nor fair, and it is expected that the looming presidential election scheduled for summer 2021 will be similarly fraudulent.

It has become clear that the UN-led peace process is not likely to be the first step towards achieving a resolution for the conflict in Syria. The Syrian regime and Russia are deliberately stalling the peace process to consolidate their military gains on the ground and using those military gains to bolster their political position. Russia and the Assad regime are hoping that the international community will eventually tire of the peace process going nowhere and subsequently accept Bashar al-Assad as the de facto ruler of Syria. Such a scenario would pave the way for normalization with the Assad regime, bestowing Assad with legitimacy and opening the door for reconstruction funds to flow into Syria from the West and elsewhere. All this would allow Assad to continue to act with impunity, prolonging Syrians' suffering and maintaining the risk of regional instability. The United States must not let that happen. **Only the United States has enough leverage over Russia to bring it to the negotiating table to broker a peace deal for Syria and to make the UN-led peace process fruitful.**

Humanitarian environment

The United States has a moral responsibility to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria in line with the United States' own declared values. The humanitarian situation in Syria continues to worsen. Largely due to both damage from the war and the corrupt and criminal behavior of the Syrian regime, the economic crisis in Syria is currently worse than during any previous time since the Syrian conflict began. Add to that the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods in Syria. In March 2021, UNHCR reported that "In the past year alone, the Syrian pound has lost three quarters of its value while the cost of food and other essential items has rocketed by more than 200 per cent... over 13 million Syrians require humanitarian and protection assistance and almost 90 per cent of the population lives in poverty". There is also concern that the current UN authorization for cross-border aid from Turkey into northwest Syria, which expires in July, might not be renewed if Russia vetoes it. Consequences of such a veto would be catastrophic, with the UN calculating that more 75% of civilians in northwest Syria rely on UN aid. The situation is worsened by Russia's deliberate military attacks on hospitals and schools and the Syrian regime's influence over where the UN distributes aid inside Syria.

The European Union and the United Nations held the fifth Brussels Conference in March 2021, during which humanitarian pledges for Syria were made. However, the level of aid pledged in this conference was less than in previous years. More broadly, all humanitarian assistance currently flowing into Syria is not enough to restore Syrian people's livelihoods or even cover needed basic provisions adequately. As long as the conflict continues to rage, no amount of aid will be able to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. **Addressing Syria's humanitarian and**

economic needs adequately requires resolving the conflict as a first step. Rebuilding a viable post-conflict state in Syria requires international commitment akin to a Marshall Plan.

Millions of Syrians remain displaced inside Syria, millions continue to be refugees outside, and thousands are detained or disappeared. There is a growing movement among the Syrian diaspora, mainly in Europe, to push for accountability for anyone involved in war crimes in Syria. The Syrian regime persists in making conditions inside Syria difficult for those who may wish to return. For instance, Law Number 10 strips people of property rights and a newly introduced law on evading military service imposes a fine of \$8000 on those who failed to perform their service; the law also dictates that property belonging to the evaders or their families could be seized in lieu of payment. Many people who returned to Syria and “settled” their status with the Syrian state have been subjected to arrest or harassment by the regime.

Even inside regime-held areas, there is widespread poverty as the regime has not been providing enough supplies of basic goods like bread. There is an increasing gap between few rich cronies and the majority of people in regime-controlled areas. This has led to a state of frustration and anger manifested in several protests by residents of regime-held areas about living conditions, especially regime supporters in coastal areas who feel their children who were killed in the course of army service sacrificed their lives for the sake of regime survival. The economic crisis in Lebanon is also having an impact on the financial situation in Syria, with assets of Syrian regime-allied figures stuck in Lebanese banks, thereby reducing the flow of hard currency into regime-held Syrian areas.

The above dynamics are mainly the result of the regime’s own behavior and to war dynamics. The regime uses its revenue streams to support its crackdowns and infringements, not to benefit the Syrian people. **Syria’s economic crisis must not be simplistically attributed to the impact of US-imposed sanctions, which have increased pressure on the Syrian regime and its cronies.** It must be noted, however, that **the regime and its allies have been able to partially redirect the negative impact of the sanctions to hit ordinary Syrians instead,** as regime cronies control smuggling routes and engage in illicit trade activities to circumvent sanctions. **The United States needs to maintain sanctions on the regime but mitigate the regime’s ability to cope with them and to redirect their impact towards ordinary Syrians.**

Sanctions as well as war dynamics have also left the regime less able to restore the capacity of state institutions like the Syrian army. The regime’s imposed new laws and fines on citizens as mentioned above aim to acquire resources from them to compensate for the regime’s own losses. This vividly shows that the regime’s priority is maintaining its own wealth as opposed to addressing the needs of Syrian citizens. **The Assad regime’s behavior during ten years of conflict has illustrated that it is neither capable of nor willing to reform.**

Russia

US disengagement on Syria has meant that Russia has been the largest beneficiary of the Syrian conflict. Russia intervened militarily in Syria mainly to use the conflict as a platform from which to assert itself vis-à-vis the West in general and the United States in specific. Russia’s military intervention has been essential for the survival of the Assad regime, and the regime has become a client of Russia’s.

Bashar al-Assad responded to the economic and military pressures faced by his regime partly through tightening the circle of loyalists around him, including a public falling out with his

cousin Rami Makhlouf—once one of Syria’s leading cronies—whose assets Assad seized. Economic and other pressures coupled with Assad’s handling of loyalists like Makhlouf have weakened his regime despite his survival in power. **A weakened Assad is more useful for Russia than a strong Assad, as his weakness gives Russia greater clout over Syrian state institutions and politics. Russia has huge influence over security and military entities, which control all Syrian state institutions.**

Russia has proven adept at taking advantage of such opportunities in Syria to bolster its own position and to present itself as the power broker in the Syrian conflict. In March 2021, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Saudi Arabia and UAE and brokered a joint statement with Qatar and Turkey in which the two countries, alongside Russia, announced their commitment to a political solution in Syria that preserves Syria’s territorial integrity. In this way, **Russia is presenting itself as the actor who can prevail over competing regional powers in the Middle East.**

Russia’s courting of competing actors is also seen in northeast Syria. Russia’s military involvement in Syria relies mainly on the use of its air force with minimal presence of Russian officers on the ground. Russian armed forces do, however, patrol some border areas in the northeast jointly with Turkish forces, while Russia also cooperates with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in other areas in the northeast. **This illustrates the pragmatic military approach that Russia is taking in the Syrian context.**

Russia is also benefitting economically from the Syrian crisis. Its intervention in Syria has come at a relatively low cost and it has made it clear that it does not intend to invest in reconstruction in Syria. Quite the opposite, Russia sees in Syria an economic opportunity. It has pressured the Syrian state to sign several contracts with Russian companies in lucrative fields like gas and oil and phosphates mining and is trying to position itself as the broker for reconstruction funds whenever they begin to flow into Syria. This ambition partly explains why **Russia has been pushing for other countries to normalize relations with the Syrian regime—normalization would mean the lifting of sanctions, with funds directed into Syria and therefore into Russia’s hands.** Russia has also strengthened its military presence in the Mediterranean through having a naval base in Syria and has been leading an effort to reshape the Syrian military including through the appointment of figures loyal to Russia in key roles in the Syrian Arab Army. Syria has therefore come under a de facto Russian mandate.

Iran

Iran has made great gains in Syria but the situation today presents the United States with an opportunity to roll back Iran’s intervention in Syria and in the Middle East as a whole.

Russia’s air operations in Syria are complemented by on-the-ground presence of Iran-backed groups, from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) to Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Pakistani, Afghan and other mercenaries and Syrian militias. Iran’s influence in Syria predates the current conflict, but before 2011, Iran’s presence in Syria was mainly through soft power and the use of Syrian territory by Hezbollah to train members and transport weapons. **The Syrian crisis provided Iran with an opportunity to extend its soft and hard influence in Syria.** Iran has signed several economic contracts with the Syrian state; it has purchased land inside Syria, attempting to do so in areas that are strategic geographically; it has expanded some Shia religious sites; and it has increased the presence and military and economic activities of its proxy groups inside Syria. Iran is also investing in long-

term efforts to convert Syrians to Shiism through building religious schools, cultural centers and health facilities, which would give it greater support at the grassroots level.

Iran-backed groups exert significant control over the Syrian borders with Lebanon and Iraq, which facilitates smuggling operations by those groups, such as of fuel, arms, and drugs. Hezbollah uses the profits from such operations to partly fund its military activities in Syria. Such illicit trade is frequently conducted by Hezbollah in coordination with Syrian military groups such as the Fourth Division led by Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher. However, there have been a number of clashes between the Fourth Division and some Iran-backed militias in Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus. Clashes among regime-backed Syrian militias have also taken place in regime-controlled coastal areas.

Clashes among militias demonstrate the weakened grip of the Syrian government over its loyalists. Syrian government weakness is also illustrated through the rise of warlords and profiteers in Syria and the increased de facto autonomy of parts of the security services, all of which put the pursuit of their own interests ahead of the interests of the regime. These dynamics are suitable for Iran because it benefits from the presence of a weak state in Syria possessing little capacity and oversight, which is somewhat similar to Hezbollah's taking advantage of the weak state in Lebanon to increase its own de facto control over the country.

Iran is unlikely to give up on Syria because first, Syria is essential as a supply route for Hezbollah, and second, it borders Iraq, which Iran regards as the priority country for its regional influence. But **Iran's intervention in Syria presents it with challenges.** Although Iran has been part of the Russian-led Astana process alongside Turkey, Iran's partnership with Russia is a pragmatic one where Russia has the upper hand rather than being an equitable alliance: Russia has on more than one occasion not stepped in to shield Iranian sites and officers from being targeted by Israeli air strikes inside Syria. Iran and Russia sometimes compete over military strategy and plans. Israeli and American air strikes have limited Iran's consolidation of military presence in Syria though they have not significantly damaged it. Unlike Russia, Iran has committed significant funds to its intervention in Syria, while international sanctions imposed on Iran have increased the extent of this financial burden. Although Iran has signed some economic contracts with the Syrian state, Russia has on a number of occasions pressured the Syrian regime to shift those contracts to Russian companies instead of Iranian ones. All this presents an opportunity for the United States to roll back Iran's influence in Syria and in the Middle East.

Turkey

Turkey has always approached the Syrian file through the prism of the Kurdish issue. It found in the uprising in Syria an opportunity to intervene to try to prevent a Kurdish autonomous region from being formed at its doorstep. The Kurdish issue remains Turkey's main concern in Syria, and it has felt uncomfortable with the United States' support for the Kurdish-led SDF as a key ally in the fight against ISIS. Turkey has therefore been trying to consolidate direct control in northern Syria by occupying Syrian territory and implementing administrative oversight in three main areas (Euphrates Shield; Olive Branch; and Peace Spring). Turkey has also been supporting varied anti-regime factions, from Syrian opposition factions to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in Idlib. In addition to the Kurdish issue, Turkey sees its presence in Syria as preventing a further influx of refugees onto its soil and as providing it with military leverage that it can use vis-à-vis Russia and the Syrian regime. As Turkey is concerned about a joint attack on Idlib by Russia and the Assad regime, and as such an attack would also not be in the interests of Europe, the United

States or Syria's neighboring countries, **there is an opportunity for US-Turkish collaboration on Idlib that might make Turkey more open to a deal on the Kurdish issue in northeast Syria that would ensure equitable participation of Arabs and Kurds in governing north-eastern Syria and see the US empower the Syrian opposition in Idlib.**

Terrorism

The Syrian conflict sustains terrorism not just in Syria but also regionally and globally. Although ISIS has been largely militarily defeated, it continues to exist in pockets in central and eastern Syria, where it has been conducting operations against the United States' allies, the SDF. ISIS also continues to be influential inside camps in northeast Syria in which its members or families of its fighters are detained, while no long-term solution for the camps is being presented by the international community. Tension within local communities in the area also sometimes leads to ISIS taking advantage of grievances to recruit people under the pretext of conducting operations to settle scores, including Arab-Kurdish tensions caused by lack of inclusivity and participation in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration.

ISIS is also surviving as an underground, mafia-like organization engaging in a wide range of economic activities to keep its income flowing. Despite their overt antagonism, there have been economic transactions conducted between ISIS and the Syrian regime and between ISIS and Iran-backed militias on the Iraqi-Syrian border. This underlines that Russia and the Assad regime's claims to be a counter presence to ISIS are false—**Russia and the Assad regime benefit from the existence of ISIS to make a claim to legitimacy for themselves. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has focused its campaign on military objectives, but the larger social, economic and political drivers behind the rise of ISIS have not been sufficiently addressed by the international community. This risks a resurgence of international Islamist extremism in the future emanating from Syria, increasing the threat of instability to Syria's neighbors and the world at large.**

In the northwest, HTS as well as jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda operate. HTS has been trying to rebrand itself as a political group driven by a governance objective, in a bid to play a role in a post-Assad Syria or at least in a local administration in northwest Syria. However, although HTS does not have global terrorist aims like ISIS, Syrian residents in areas of Idlib where HTS has established what it calls its "Salvation Government" largely prefer to be governed by an administration that is not affiliated with an extremist group, and several protests against HTS have been staged in the area. Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the northwest are small in size but they pose a threat to stability and to those international organizations working in the area to support civil society and provide humanitarian aid. **Both HTS and groups linked with al-Qaeda have contributed to weakening the Syrian opposition in Idlib militarily and administratively, while Western support for the Syrian opposition there has reduced.**

Iran-backed militias continue to attack targets belonging to Syrian opposition factions on the borders of north-western areas as well as to the SDF in the east. **Iran is also trying to recruit local Syrians in the east into its militias, increasing their presence in areas held by the Global Coalition and the SDF, thereby risking undermining the international effort to fight ISIS. The presence of Iran-backed militias in Syria, including on the Syrian-Iraqi border, presents a stability risk to Iraq and Israel as well.**

Options for US policy

Though the landscape of the conflict in Syria is complicated and challenging, it is only the United States that has the ability to draw this conflict to a close so that the US achieves its own stated objectives regarding the Syrian conflict and maintains US national security interests. There are several policy paths that the United States must pursue simultaneously.

1. **The United States must not repeat the mistakes of previous administrations of decoupling rhetoric from action.** Saying all the right things without having a clear, comprehensive strategy to achieve them and without actually implementing such a strategy only serves to hurt US credibility not only in the eyes of its enemies but also in the eyes of its allies. This includes European allies who have been bearing a huge part of the burden of the Syrian refugee crisis.
2. **The only way for the Syrian conflict to end is through the United States having bilateral talks with Russia as a first step.** Russia's intervention in Syria has been driven by a desire for international and American recognition and Russia is likely to accept sacrificing Bashar al-Assad's presidency in return for maintaining a degree of influence for itself in Syria, both political and military. As such, Russia is likely to accept the formation of a transitional government in Syria composed of elements of the current regime from outside the Assad family and elements of various opposition groups and civil society. This acceptance is not likely to occur as an outcome of the UN-led peace process but as the outcome of bilateral negotiations with the United States.
3. **While the US should ensure that the UN-led peace process continues to exist, this process must be reformulated to become the mechanism for implementation of a US-Russian brokered peace deal on Syria.** Any such deal must be based on supporting the formation of legitimate political, military, and economic alternatives to the Assad regime.
4. **The United States must pursue a comprehensive strategy regarding limiting Iran's intervention in the Middle East.** Negotiations over the nuclear deal with Iran must not be separated from negotiations over Iran's regional role—both need to run simultaneously. Syria must be a key component of negotiations about Iran's regional role.
5. **The United States must maintain a military presence in the northeast.** Withdrawing troops from the northeast not only endangers the SDF but also leaves the area wide open for takeover by Iran-backed groups, who would then acquire resources like oil fields and make the border with Iraq porous, which would in turn threaten US assets and allies in Iraq. Parallel to this, **the US must use its influence over the Autonomous Administration to make the latter more inclusive, transparent, and effective in terms of governing areas under its control.** This would also present a good example of how Syria could be governed in the future.
6. As ISIS poses a national security threat to the United States and a global terrorism risk, **the United States must continue to lead the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, but the anti-ISIS campaign must be widened to be based on a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond military action.** It must also encompass social, economic, and political components addressing the grievances that drive people to join groups like ISIS and community tensions such as between Arabs and Kurds.

7. **The US must engage Turkey to jointly support the Syrian opposition in Idlib.** The US must also ensure that any governance model implemented in northern Syria has significant participation by all ethnic groups in the resident communities. This would help lessen current tension with Turkey regarding Kurdish-controlled governance.
8. **The United States must support growing efforts by Syrian civil society in the diaspora to push for accountability for war crimes conducted in Syria.** Such accountability not only brings justice to victims and their families but also creates a barrier for those convicted of crimes against humanity to ascending to power once a resolution to the conflict happens.
9. **The United States must hold the United Nations accountable regarding the distribution of aid inside Syria to prevent the Syrian regime from diverting this aid to suit its interests. The US must also work on opening direct channels with civil society inside regime-controlled areas.** This would not only capitalize on frustration with the regime in those areas but also counter the regime's anti-West propaganda and Iran's strategy of grassroots-level control.
10. **The United States must maintain sanctions against the Assad regime and anyone associated with it, whether Syrian or non-Syrian,** including the Caesar Act and the No Assistance for Assad Act. This must apply to US allies such as any Arab or European countries contemplating normalizing relations with Assad. **The US must also find ways to tighten sanctions on the regime and its cronies while mitigating sanctions' indirect impact on people** (for example by supporting micro-level businesses that are of no interest to the regime). It must be noted that sanctions are necessary but not sufficient to push the Syrian conflict to a close as achieving peace in Syria requires a comprehensive strategy encompassing all the recommendations presented in this statement.