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SYRIA STUDY GROUP: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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SYRIA STUDY GROUP: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Wednesday, October 16, 2019

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:51 p.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

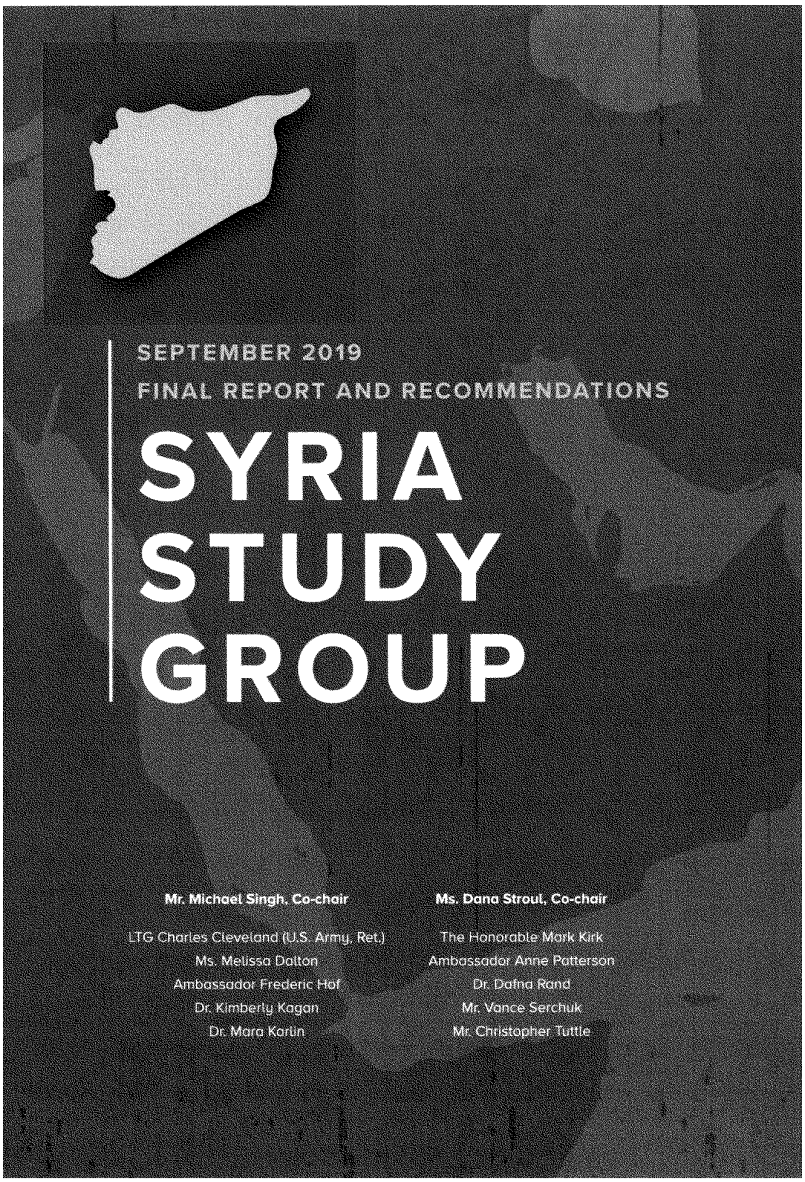
Mr. DEUTCH. This hearing will come to order. We welcome everyone.

The subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on the findings and recommendations in the Syria Study Group's final report.

Given the timing of this hearing, we will have the opportunity to discuss the ramifications of recent U.S. policy changes in Syria and how the study group recommendations can still address our challenges there.

I thank our witnesses for appearing today and without objection I move to enter the full Syria Study Group report into the record.

[The information referred to follows:]


SEPTEMBER 2019
FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
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Dr. Kimberly Kagan
Dr. Mara Karlin
Ms. Dana Stroul, Co-chair
The Honorable Mark Kirk
Ambassador Anne Patterson
Dr. Dafna Rand
Mr. Vance Serchuk
Mr. Christopher Tuttle

This report represents the consensus of the bipartisan Syria Study Group. No member may be satisfied with every formulation and argument in isolation. The findings of this report are solely those of the Syria Study Group. They do not represent the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which was directed by Congress to facilitate the Syria Study Group.

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Letter from the Co-chairs

In this report, the members of the Syria Study Group make the case for why Syria matters for U.S. security and why the American public should care. While some argue that it is too late for a reinvigorated U.S. approach to Syria, we conclude that the United States can still influence the outcome of the Syrian war in a manner that protects U.S. interests. We argue that the United States has meaningful tools of leverage to prevent the reemergence of ISIS and counter other terrorist groups, stop Iran from turning Syria into a forward operating base, provide relief to displaced Syrians and Syria's hard-pressed neighbors, and advance a political outcome that stops Syrian territory from serving as a net exporter of terrorism and instability.

Achieving these outcomes will require a long-term commitment to a sound strategy, the careful balancing of ends and means, and—most importantly—political support at the highest levels. The United States will not be able to rally allies and partners, or achieve unity of purpose within the U.S. government, if we continue to project uncertainty about our commitment to Syria. Although the Syria Study Group believes our proposals offer a viable way forward to secure U.S. interests, we would not counsel engaging in this effort unless it has the support of the President and the Congress, and unless they are willing to make the case for it to the American people. Our troops, diplomats, and aid workers deserve no less.

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group, we would like to thank all of those who made our work possible. We received numerous briefings in Washington, DC, and in the region from a wide and diverse range of current and former U.S. officials, foreign government officials, nongovernmental organizations and civil society representatives, scholars and experts, and concerned Americans. The U.S. administration was fully cooperative with our effort, for which we particularly thank our designated agency representatives: Ambassador James Jeffrey of the U.S. Department of State, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Kathryn Wheelbarger, National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East Alan Pino, and Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Michael Harvey of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

We also would like to express our gratitude to the Members of Congress who appointed the Group's twelve members during the 115th Congress: in the Senate, Majority Leader

McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Corker and Ranking Member Menendez, and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Inhofe and Ranking Member Reed; in the House, Speaker Ryan and Minority Leader Pelosi, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith. We reserve special gratitude for Senator Shaheen, without whose efforts the Syria Study Group would not have been convened.

Finally, we are especially grateful to our fellow Group members and the staff of the United States Institute of Peace for the time, energy, and diligence they contributed to this effort.

We urge Congress and the Administration to consider this report carefully and implement its recommendations fully. This was truly a bipartisan effort and a demonstration that there is more that unites than divides us when it comes to advancing the security and prosperity of the United States. This is a consensus document, endorsed unanimously by the Group's members. Although it should not be read to represent each Group member's views in their entirety, it represents a bipartisan blueprint that we hope will win wide support. The report is strictly forward-looking; we did not interpret our mandate to include examining past policy choices. It is unclassified in its entirety.

We are humbled to dedicate this report to the American civilians and uniformed personnel who have served inside Syria or in support of U.S. efforts in Syria, especially those who have lost their lives. We also remember the Americans missing in Syria and hope for their freedom. And we are sobered by the memory of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have perished in eight years of conflict and the millions whose lives will never be the same.

Michael Singh

Dana Stroul

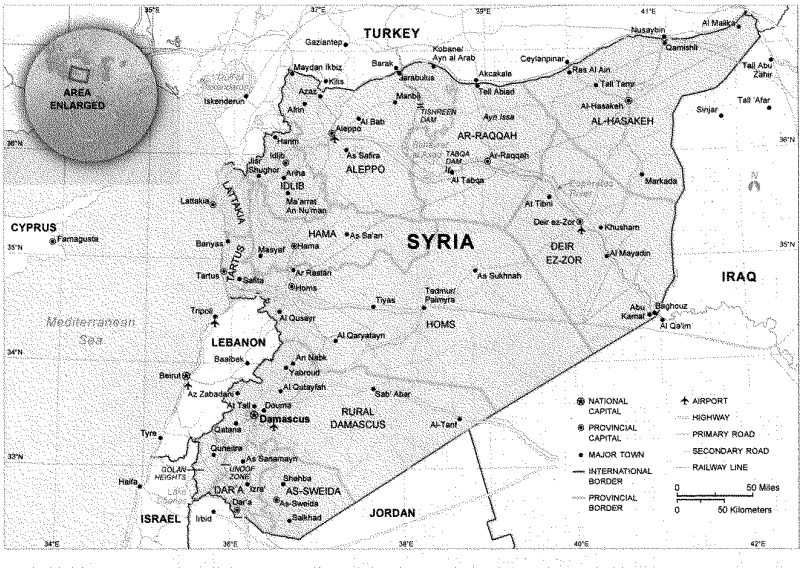
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States cannot avoid or ignore the conflict in Syria. From the outset of hostilities, minimizing American involvement in the war and safeguarding U.S. national security interests have proven to be incompatible goals. This will remain the case for the foreseeable future. The essential question before American policymakers is not whether the United States should keep or withdraw its forces in Syria, but what strategy and mix of tools will best protect the United States from the conflict's reverberations and advance American interests. This report sets out such a strategy.

The Syrian Conflict and American Interests

From the conflict's beginning in 2011 as a peaceful domestic uprising, experts warned that President Bashar al-Assad's brutal response was likely to have serious, negative impacts on U.S. interests. Given Syria's central location in the Middle East, its ruling regime's ties to terrorist groups and to Iran, and the incompatibility of Assad's authoritarian rule with the aspirations of the Syrian people, many worried about the conflict spilling over Syria's borders. These concerns are now a reality. The Syrian conflict spawned a refugee crisis that has encumbered Syria's neighbors and roiled European politics, strained U.S.-Turkish relations to the point of crisis, led to direct hostilities between Iran and Israel, provided a vector for Russia's resurgence in the Middle East, and challenged international norms around weapons of mass destruction and the protection of civilians. Areas of Syria have become safe havens for al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers and home to the largest concentration of foreign terrorist fighters since Afghanistan in the 1990s. The conflict also fueled the rise of ISIS, prompting an ongoing U.S.-led military intervention. Eight years in, the conflict has not been meaningfully contained, nor has the United States been sheltered from its effects.

Events on the ground disprove the narrative that the conflict has been won by the Assad regime. The Syrian war, far from ending, is entering a new phase. As of this writing, the Assad regime and its patron Russia are pressing an offensive against Idlib that could spur a new humanitarian catastrophe and outflow of refugees. Tensions are simmering between the Kurdish element that dominates the U.S.-trained Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria and the Arab populace of some of the areas under SDF control. Turkey is positioning troops to invade northeastern Syria, which would divert the SDF away from the essential task of preventing ISIS's resurgence ISIS itself, down but not defeated, is already resurfacing as an insurgency and may yet attempt to

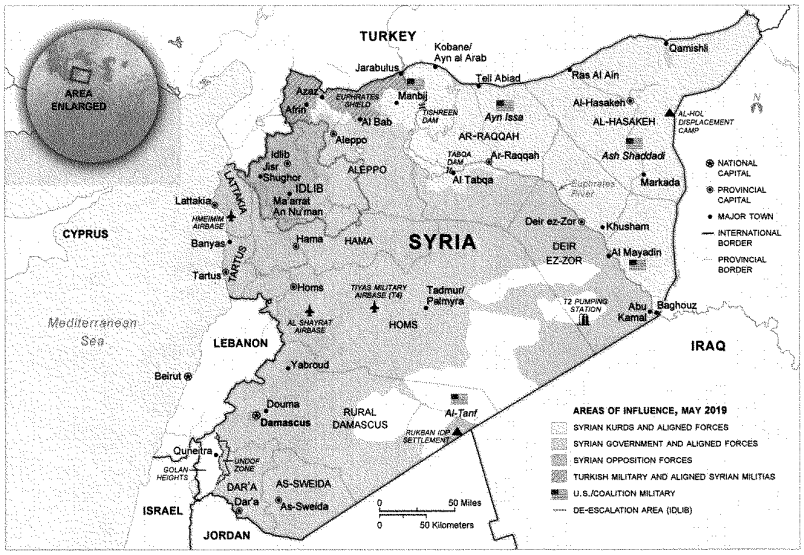


MAP 1: SYRIA.

Source: Based on United Nations map no. 4202 rev. 4, April 2012, http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

retake territory in both Syria and Iraq. Iran and Israel, already locked in a low-level conflict in Syria, may escalate to open conflict, especially in the Golan Heights. The Assad regime and its partners may seek to cross the Euphrates River, which could in turn breathe life into the ISIS insurgency and allow Iran to consolidate its land routes from Iraq to Lebanon. All of these scenarios become more likely without U.S. forces in Syria and without committed U.S. leadership to avert these scenarios.

The Syria Study Group uncovered no easy solutions in Syria; optimal outcomes were left behind long ago. Yet the Group determined that the threats the conflict in Syria poses—of terrorism directed against the United States and its allies and partners; of an empowered Iran; of an aggrandized Russia; of large numbers of refugees, displaced persons, and other forms of humanitarian catastrophe; and of the erosion of international norms of war and the Western commitment to them—are sufficiently serious to merit a determined response from the United States. The United States and its allies retain tools to address those threats and the leverage



MAP 2: SYRIA, AREAS OF INFLUENCE, MAY 2019.

Source: Based on a map that first appeared in "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," CRS Report RL33487, Congressional Research Service, updated March 25, 2019, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487, which used data from IHS Conflict Monitor, Jane's by IHS Markit. The map was updated in an unpublished version in May 2019. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

to promote outcomes that are better for American interests than those that would prevail in the absence of U.S. engagement. Using those tools effectively, however, will require better alignment of ends and means—the former must be more realistic and the U.S. investment of the latter increased—as well as clear, consistent, and high-level political leadership. Sharp shifts and reversals in American policy, and the failure of senior U.S. government officials to prioritize the issue with their counterparts, have undermined American credibility and the effectiveness of U.S. policy.

Assessment of the Current Situation in Syria

While the conflict in Syria is often characterized as winding down, it is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that this is incorrect; in fact, the conflict remains dynamic and dangerous. In particular:

- The liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States. ISIS no longer holds significant territory in Syria or Iraq, but it is not defeated. The group has morphed into an insurgency with the will, capability, and resources to carry out attacks against the United States. ISIS will seek to take advantage of any opening, whether a reduction in U.S. counterterrorism pressure or discontent among eastern Syria's Arab population, to recruit new fighters and mount attacks. ISIS's terrorist ideology, or "brand," continues to hold global appeal.
- The ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed. Although ISIS has suffered significant casualties, many of its fighters—including thousands of foreign fighters—remain in detention under SDF management. If released, they will form the core of a new iteration of ISIS or a similar group. In addition, tens of thousands of family members of ISIS fighters are residing in camps in eastern Syria. The SDF has custody of both groups but lacks the resources and outside support to hold them indefinitely. U.S. and allied efforts to deal with this problem have suffered from a lack of political will.
- Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups remain active in Syria and threaten the United States. Although ISIS has received far more attention, other terrorist groups are active and control territory, especially in Idlib. Al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has formed a government in Idlib, which is home to numerous other groups, including al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Hurras ad-Din, and a large number of foreign terrorist fighters. The United States lacks freedom of action to conduct a full-fledged counterterrorism campaign in these areas.
- Despite Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions, Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria; Russia and Iran show few serious signs of divergence. Iran appears to be pursuing a two-track policy of military entrenchment and political and economic activity designed to enhance its power and influence in Syria for the long term. Iran's activities have reportedly caused discontent among Syria's population, but the Assad regime is heavily dependent on Iranian support. Israeli officials believe that Israel's air strikes have disrupted Iran's attempts to move sophisticated weapons systems into Syria, but Iran's overall objectives appear unchanged and the risk of broader Iran-Israel conflict remains high. Although Russia has acquiesced to the Israeli campaign against Iran, there are few signs of a wider divergence between Moscow and Tehran regarding aims or tactics in Syria.
- Assad has not won the conflict in Syria. The regime has recaptured large swaths of territory and now holds 60 percent of the country. However, its control outside Damascus is tenuous, in part because it lacks the forces to secure the areas it retakes, but also because it pursues punitive policies against local populations. In much of regime-held areas, civilians are subject to conscription as well as arbitrary arrest, torture, and execution at the hands of the regime. Crime and warlordism are rampant. The Assad regime is determined to retake Idlib and is receiving Russian assistance to do so, but so far it has struggled to recapture territory without the help of Iranian ground forces.
- Progress toward a political settlement to the Syria conflict has stalled, and Assad shows no willingness to compromise with his opponents. Neither the UN-led "Geneva process" based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 nor the ad hoc "Astana process"

comprising Russia, Iran, and Turkey has yielded progress toward a political settlement to the conflict. While the United States is leading a new effort to break the stalemate, the fundamental obstacle remains the Assad regime's unwillingness to countenance meaningful reform. Presidential elections in 2021 are unlikely to produce a legitimate electoral outcome, because there is little chance that the regime will permit free and fair elections or the credible participation of the Syrian diaspora.

- The United States underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence. Russia's intervention, beginning in 2015, accomplished its proximate aim—the preservation of the regime in defiance of U.S. calls for Assad to "go"—at a relatively low cost. Russia has enhanced its profile and prestige more broadly in the Middle East. The extent of Russia's success in Syria is debatable—it has yet to translate Assad's military gains into the political victory Moscow seemingly seeks—but Russia has nevertheless reestablished itself as a crucial player in the region's politics for the first time in decades.
- U.S.-Turkey relations are strained in Syria by starkly diverging views of the SDF. A Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkish relationship. The United States regards its decision to partner with the SDF to fight ISIS as having been necessitated by the lack of a credible and timely Turkish alternative; Turkey regards the SDF as a grave security threat due to its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a threat made more dangerous by U.S. training and equipping of the SDF. This dispute has played a significant role in the erosion of U.S.-Turkish relations and may yet prompt a third Turkish incursion into Syria, which would severely complicate the U.S. military campaign against ISIS. There is little sign that Turkey intends to relinquish control of the two Syrian areas it currently controls—Afrin and the "Euphrates Shield" area.
- Although the SDF has been a highly effective partner in the fight against ISIS, it must undergo a transition to ensure stability in northeastern Syria. The SDF is regarded by the U.S. military as a highly effective partner in the conventional military campaign against ISIS. That partnership faces new challenges with the shift from fighting to governing. The SDF remains dominated by Syrian Kurds—specifically by the People's Protection Units (YPG)—despite its control over large stretches of predominantly Arab territory. This disparity, and the YPG's heavy-handed approach to governing and resource allocation, has led to unrest in Arab tribal areas. Minimal U.S. civilian engagement and the halt in U.S. stabilization funding in northeastern Syria have diminished American influence.
- The Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes and demands accountability, as well as enhanced efforts to protect civilians. The Assad regime and its patrons, including Russia, have systematically targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure. A UN commission found the regime guilty of crimes against humanity. Syrians have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, and execution at the hands of the regime. Although prospects for accountability are dim in the near term, efforts to document the regime's atrocities are under way.

A U.S. military convoy drives on a highway from Kobane to Ain Issa in northern Syria on September 29, 2017 (Photo by Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images)

- Syria's humanitarian crisis, not least the challenges posed by internally displaced people and refugees, will reverberate for decades. Most refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily given current conditions in Syria. The Syrian conflict has provoked the most serious human displacement since World War II; 6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and nearly 6 million more are registered as refugees outside the country. Refugees have placed a heavy economic burden on host countries, especially Syria's neighbors; pressure is increasing, particularly within Lebanon and Turkey, for nonvoluntary returns. Inside Syria, a large proportion of the population relies on humanitarian aid, over which the regime seeks to exercise control in order to enhance its power.
- Despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests. The Group identified several key points of leverage held by the United States, particularly if used in coordination with allies and partners: influence over northeastern Syria; sanctions against the Assad regime and its backers; the withholding of reconstruction assistance desired by Assad and Russia; and the ongoing diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Despite its daunting assessment of the situation in Syria, the Group believes that the United States is still able to exercise influence over the conflict's trajectory, and that it must do so given the threats the conflict poses to American interests. The Group believes that the best end state in Syria is one in which a Syrian government is viewed as legitimate by its own population and has the will and capability to end Syria's dependence on foreign forces and to prevent terrorist groups from thriving on Syrian territory. This in turn requires conditions in which Syrian citizens live free from fear of the Assad regime and of Russian, Iranian, and ISIS brutality and within an updated political and social compact based on decentralized governance and equitable resource allocation.

Recognizing that such an outcome is a distant prospect, the Group recommends a strategy that makes a negotiated political settlement in Syria more likely yet also allows the United States to defend its interests even if a political solution is not found. None of those consulted by the Group believe that withdrawing U.S. forces would make ISIS less likely to regroup, Iran less likely to entrench itself, or a negotiated settlement more likely. Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the "forever war" category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model. A small U.S. military footprint, supported by U.S. air power and other high-end capabilities, reinforced by a global coalition of like-minded allies and partners, rallied a local partner force many times its size to liberate territory from a terrorist group. What U.S. forces and their partners have gained in Syria should not be discarded with a premature withdrawal.

To that end, the Group recommends that the United States, working in concert with allies and partners, continue its military mission in order to maintain pressure on ISIS and other terrorist groups while maintaining and strengthening pressure on the Assad regime and its backers until conditions are conducive for a political settlement that ends the Syria war. In particular, the Group recommends that the United States:

- Halt the U.S. military withdrawal; consolidate gains following the territorial defeat of ISIS; and support communities liberated from ISIS in forming an alternative model for governance, resource allocation, and security in Syria. The Group recommends that the United States (1) update its military mission to head off an ISIS insurgency; (2) adequately prepare for various contingencies and escalation scenarios; (3) return a U.S. civilian presence and stabilization funding to northeastern Syria; (4) press the SDF to govern more inclusively; (5) elevate the ISIS detainee problem set; and (6) prioritize diplomatic and military engagement in Iraq.
- Until conditions inside Syria improve, deny the Assad regime and its backers all avenues for normalization by enforcing the regime's diplomatic isolation and a rigorous sanctions architecture. Among other steps, the United States should continue to press allies and partners to refrain from reestablishing diplomatic ties with the Assad regime, to withhold reconstruction assistance, and to strictly enforce sanctions and seek to expand them. In addition, the international community should begin preparing the ground now for

the eventual accountability of those responsible for war crimes in Syria, without imposing accountability as a precondition for a political settlement.

- Test and verify Russian willingness to support political settlements acceptable to the United States but continue activities that increase the costs to Russia for its actions in Syria. Many observers believe that agreement between the United States and Russia is a prerequisite for progress toward a political settlement, yet Russia has consistently failed to deliver on its commitments in Syria. The United States should require concrete actions of Russia pursuant to any discussions of a political settlement and, absent such actions, should avoid making concessions to Moscow or legitimizing its positions. Concurrently, the United States should pressure Moscow, in part by highlighting Russian complicity in war crimes.
- Remain focused on expelling Iranian forces and proxies from Syria but recognize that this is best accomplished in phases. The key near-term goal should be to prevent further entrenchment of Iran and its many partners and proxies while raising the cost to Iran for its actions in Syria. To this end, the United States should continue its support of Israeli air strikes; enforce sanctions aimed at undermining Iran's ability to fund its proxies and partners in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq; maintain the U.S. military presence at the al-Tanf military base; and support efforts to expose Iranian influence efforts in Syria. The United States should insist that any political settlement require the withdrawal of Iranian forces and proxies from Syria.
- Seek areas for cooperation with Turkey and address legitimate Turkish security concerns while pressing Turkey to avoid any incursion into northeastern Syria and to improve conditions in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas. U.S. efforts to reach agreement on a security zone or security mechanism along Turkey's border with northeastern Syria should continue, and every attempt should be made to isolate Syria from other problems in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. The United States should encourage the resumption of Turkey-PKK peace talks, which hold the best possibility of leading to a détente between Turkey and the SDF. The United States should press Turkey to improve conditions and access in the areas of Syria it controls.
- Seek to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib while addressing the presence there of terrorist groups. The United States should explore avenues to increase the pressure on terrorist groups in Idlib that may be plotting external attacks. At the same time, the United States should seek to deter the Assad regime and its partners from continuing to target civilians in the territory. In preparation for a renewed humanitarian and refugee crisis in Idlib, the United States should press Turkey to facilitate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) serving the population.
- Energize efforts to address the humanitarian crisis inside Syria while taking steps to shore up countries hosting Syrian refugees. The United States should work to ensure the continued provision of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations inside and outside Syria. The United States should press for the renewal of the UN "cross-border resolution," rally other states to fund humanitarian appeals for Syria, and work with international financial institutions to support refugee-hosting countries. The United States should stand firmly against efforts to forcibly repatriate Syrian refugees and should resume accepting Syrian refugees in the United States.

WHY SYRIA MATTERS

The conflict in Syria, now in its ninth year, started as a peaceful domestic uprising against an autocratic dictator. Over the course of the war, the Syrian theater has evolved into the crucible for a complex series of intersecting conflicts that have distracted and diminished U.S. allies and partners, positioned adversaries and competitors to shape the future of the Middle East, victimized millions of Syrians, and fast-tracked a race to the bottom for the conduct of future wars. (For a detailed timeline of the conflict, visit https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad.)

Syria under the Assad regime has long posed a threat to U.S. national security interests. In 1979, the United States designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The Assad family has survived in power by operating at the intersection of criminal webs and terrorist networks. Before the 2011 uprising, Bashar al-Assad's Syria provided a permissive environment for both al-Qaeda and Iran, another State Sponsor of Terrorism. Assad facilitated and encouraged the movement of al-Qaeda operatives to Iraq to conduct attacks against U.S. forces.[1] At the same time, Assad allowed Iran to extend its Shia militant network across Syria and into Lebanon in order to threaten Israel.

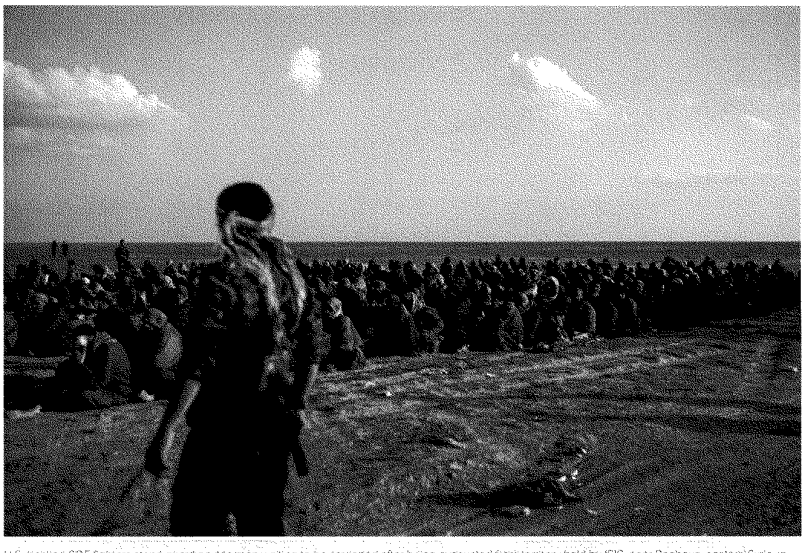
Syria is now a breeding ground for terrorist organizations committed to attacking the United States, the front line for Iranian power projection, and the main stage for Russia's return to the region. Each of these actors is now better positioned to influence Syria's future than the United States and its allies and partners. Meanwhile, massive refugee outflows from Syria—whether fleeing the Assad regime's brutality or ISIS's depravity—are exacerbating the economic fragility of Syria's neighbors and influencing electoral outcomes in Europe.

And yet, despite presenting these dangers, the war in Syria is increasingly on the margins of public attention. Some observers may assume that the arc of the Syria crisis is trending downward: ISIS no longer controls territory, Assad is on the cusp of victory, and U.S. military forces can soon withdraw, having achieved their principal counterterrorism mission. Unfortunately, while many Americans consistently hoped that the conflict in Syria could simply be contained, over the years the most dire predictions for the conflict have in hindsight proven conservative.

Syrians walk through the destruction of the Salaheddine neighborhood in eastern Aleppo, northwestern Syria, January 18, 2018. (Photo by Hassan Ammar/AP/ Shutterstock.)

From the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Americans have consistently underestimated its longevity, severity, and impact on core U.S. national interests. It is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that they continue to do so now.

Five principal threats to the United States emanate from Syria. First, despite the liberation of Syrian territory from ISIS's grip, the danger of terrorist attacks from Syria remains. Second, Iran has effectively exploited Syria's implosion to advance its bid for regional hegemony and open a new front in its campaign against Israel, increasing the risk of igniting a broader regional conflict. Third, Syria has been a strategic windfall for Russia, which has likewise taken advantage of the war to insert itself as a credible rival powerbroker to the United States in the Middle East. Fourth, Assad's brutal ongoing campaign of violence against the Syrian people has unleashed vast numbers of refugees—a humanitarian tragedy that has had destabilizing political and social effects in multiple countries, including within the NATO alliance. Fifth, the ongoing violation of fundamental international norms that the United States has historically championed has eroded perceptions of American power and credibility worldwide while setting alarming precedents for future conflicts.



U.S.-backed SDF fighters stand guard next to men waiting to be screened after being evacuated from territory held by ISIS, near Baghouz, eastern Syria, in February 2019. (Photo by Felipe Dana/ AP/ Shutterstock.)

These threats, moreover, are both intertwined and mutually reinforcing. U.S. policy, however, has sought to disaggregate the Syrian problem set—with the lion's share of American attention focused on the terrorist threat given the unique danger it has posed to the U.S. homeland and American citizens.

ISIS and al-Qaeda

ISIS is on the run, but it is not yet defeated. Over the past five years, the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has liberated ISIS-occupied territory in Iraq and Syria. Yet ISIS has already transitioned to an insurgency and, in the absence of effective pressure against it, will utilize its Syrian sanctuary for organizing, instructing, and inspiring external attacks. The group has made clear—in both statements and continued attacks—that it will continue to fight. Ad hoc prisons housing thousands of ISIS fighters could strengthen the group in the event of prison breaks, just as they did during ISIS's initial rise in 2014.[2]

ISIS is not the only terrorist threat based in Syria. Hezbollah—Iran's proxy in Lebanon and present militarily in Syria since 2012—is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In northwestern Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, previously known as the Nusra Front, another FTO, is in effective control of Idlib Governorate. Other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Hurras ad-Din, are also present in Idlib and committed to external operations. Many analysts describe Idlib as containing the largest concentration of foreign fighters since Afghanistan in the 1990s.[3]

Iran

Over the course of the Syrian war, Iran's deployment of its own forces and proxy militias recruited from other countries has been decisive in the Assad regime's reversal of territorial losses to the Syrian opposition. As a result, Iran now has wide latitude to pursue its own geopolitical agenda on Syrian territory, including the introduction of sophisticated weapons systems that will enable Iran to open a new front against Israel and threaten freedom of navigation in the eastern Mediterranean.[4] Should Iran ever acquire nuclear weapons, Israel worries it could find itself facing a predicament not unlike that confronting South Korea: threatened by a foe with both a massive conventional arsenal and a nuclear capability that could deter outside partners such as the United States from coming to its aid in the event of conflict.

An overt war between Iran and Israel is just one of the secondary conflicts that could be spawned by the conflict in Syria. The threat to Israel posed by Iran in Syrian territory has motivated Israeli leaders to seek accommodation with Russia. Jordan and Lebanon are likewise now courting closer relations with Moscow, worried by Iran's presence, by growing instability in Syria's southwest, and by increasing uncertainty over U.S. policy.

Russia

Prior to Russia's intervention in Syria, most countries in the Middle East maintained productive relations with Moscow while looking to Washington for leadership, economic ties, and security partnerships. Now, governments in the Middle East are deepening ties to Russia across multiple sectors—military, diplomatic, economic, and energy—to hedge against perceptions of U.S. retrenchment and unreliability. Russia is working to consolidate its role as not only the key arbiter of the Syrian conflict but also the power center shaping outcomes for issues ranging from the Israel-Palestinian conflict to global energy prices. Even among Assad's opponents, Moscow's steadfast commitment to the Assad regime's survival is often portrayed in flattering contrast to Washington's perceived inconstancy.

Russia's perceived success and growing influence across the greater Middle East, moreover, is likely to have consequences far beyond the region. Moscow will seek to leverage its great

Syrian refugee children attend a class at a makeshift school at an informal (tented) settlement near the Syrian border on the outskirts of Mafraq, Jordan. (Photo by Muhammed Muheisen/ AP, Shutterstock.)

power status across the region in its relations with Europe, intensifying frictions and divisions within the NATO alliance (including Turkey).[5] Globally, Russia will portray itself as a reliable and consistent alternative to the United States.

Refugees

More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 21 million are now either registered refugees (5.6 million) or internally displaced persons (6 million).[6] Syrian refugees have strained their host communities in neighboring countries—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.[7] European countries are also hosting roughly 1 million Syrian refugees, including more than 580,000 in Germany alone.[8] The World Bank estimates that the mean stay for a refugee in a host country is just over ten years, so the burden for host countries will be not only heavy but also enduring.[9]

Indeed, the status quo is already unsustainable for Syria's neighbors. Their governments are struggling to provide services during a time of economic contraction and resource strains,

Forced or premature refugee returns to Syria will fuel more violence in Syria, which may spill over into neighboring countries.

rendering them more insecure and less able to work with the United States on shared goals. Syrian refugees face barriers to services and employment, and conditions in their host communities are becoming increasingly inhospitable. Few of these refugees want to return to Syria unless conditions there improve markedly, but antirefugee rhetoric and policies may soon reach a boiling point. Donor governments have fallen short in providing sufficient aid to refugee-hosting countries shouldering the burden. Forced or premature refugee returns to Syria will fuel more violence in Syria, which may spill over into neighboring countries.

Inside Syria, the al-Hol camp houses thousands of ISIS family members—primarily children. This challenge—if left unaddressed—could sow the seeds for even more extremism in the decades to come.

International Norms

U.S. leadership has been critical in establishing and enforcing a system of international norms that has benefited U.S. security interests and increased American prosperity. Throughout its prosecution of the war, the Assad regime's employment of systematic torture, unlawful detentions and disappearances, and starvation and medical deprivation sieges, as well as its use of mass casualty weapons, including chemical weapons, against civilians, have eroded these norms. Russia, too, has committed war crimes in Syria, including the bombing of humanitarian aid convoys and civilian structures such as hospitals.[10]

Conduct during the war in Syria has established a precedent in which civilians can be targeted and bombed without meaningful international repercussions. Assad has seen and understood this, as have Russia, Iran, and the rest of the world. A world that accepts this precedent would be antagonistic to American values, hostile to U.S. interests, and dangerous to our national security. Such a world would routinize mass civilian homicide as a survival strategy for dictators and raise recruits for extremists around the world.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SYRIA

It is the assessment of the Syria Study Group that the conflict in Syria remains dynamic and dangerous. ISIS no longer controls substantial swaths of territory but is reconstituting inside of Syria and Iraq. The Assad regime remains determined to retake all of Syrian territory, although in the areas it controls, authority is often tenuous and contested, in part due to the regime's cruelty toward residents in recaptured territory. Iran has been tactically deterred by targeted Israeli air strikes but remains strategically committed to entrenching itself in Syria, not only militarily but also economically, culturally, and politically. Russia has failed to transition its military success on behalf of the Assad regime into a political process that ends the conflict. Turkey regards the increased military capabilities of the Syrian Kurdish–dominated SDF to be an existential threat and may intervene militarily in northeastern Syria to push the SDF out. Meanwhile, both in areas retaken by the regime and in areas liberated from ISIS, humanitarian conditions remain dire and stabilization and reconstruction work has largely yet to begin. Lack of services and governance, large concentrations of displaced persons and detained fighters in camps across Syria, and premature refugee returns may instigate new rounds of conflict.

The Syria Study Group offers the following observations regarding the situation on the ground in Syria as of August 1, 2019.

ISIS and al-Qaeda

The liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States. Although the United States announced the defeat of ISIS in March 2019, ISIS is reemerging as a powerful insurgency and continues to plan attacks within Syria as well as externally.[11] The group's leadership is largely intact, maintains "excellent command and control capability" in Syria, and is regrouping across the border in Iraq.[12] Thousands of fighters—estimates range from a few thousand to more than fifteen thousand—remain at large in the country.[13] The group, which at one point was among the richest terrorist organizations in the world, also has substantial financial resources remaining with which to bankroll its operations both locally and internationally.

Within Syria, ISIS's resilient network puts it in a position to take advantage of any pause or reduction in counterterrorism operations.

Within Syria, ISIS's resilient network puts it in a position to take advantage of any pause or reduction in counterterrorism operations. In December 2018, the commander of U.S. Central Command, General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., stated, "I assess that, even after the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory, ISIS probably is still more capable than al-Qaeda in Iraq at its peak, suggesting it is well positioned to reemerge if pressure on the group is relieved."[14] Already, the group is waging an insurgent campaign of suicide and IED attacks, as well as targeted assassinations, in areas it once controlled.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS, outlined the group's strategy in an April 2019 video.[15] He framed a new campaign of attrition against ISIS's enemies globally. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS is waging a multifront insurgency to degrade anti-ISIS forces and undermine alternative forms of governance. In this new phase, ISIS increasingly seeks both to prevent the formation of alternative forms of governance in northeastern Syria and to exploit Arab Sunni grievances, which are rooted in a growing sense of disempowerment under Kurdish rule. Disaffected Arab communities in ISIS-liberated areas offer a conducive operating environment and an attractive pool of new recruits.

Finally, ISIS ideology remains attractive to groups and individuals far beyond Syria, underscoring the assessment of some U.S. officials that ISIS presents a greater threat to the homeland now than it did when it held territory in Iraq and Syria.[16] On April 21, ISIS took credit for coordinated suicide attacks in Sri Lanka. The group has announced the formation of new "provinces" in, among other places, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Turkey. Not all of these affiliates present the same level of threat, but taken together they illustrate the continuing appeal of ISIS's brand.

The ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed. Some ten thousand ISIS fighters are currently being held by the SDF in a handful of temporary detention centers and "pop-up" prisons across northeastern Syria.[17] The vast majority of these detainees—nearly eight thousand, according to U.S. officials—are Iraqis and Syrians.[18]

In addition to the fighters, thousands of ISIS family members, women and children, are held in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northeastern Syria. U.S. and SDF officials were surprised by the number of people they found in Baghouz, the final area of ISIS-controlled territory. These civilians quickly swelled camp populations, overwhelming capacity. The most overburdened of these camps is located outside the town of al-Hol, near the Iraqi border, and holds roughly seventy thousand individuals, two-thirds of whom are children.[19] The al-Hol camp is at more than twice its capacity, and although the camp managers and NGO partners are providing basic humanitarian relief, there are insufficient

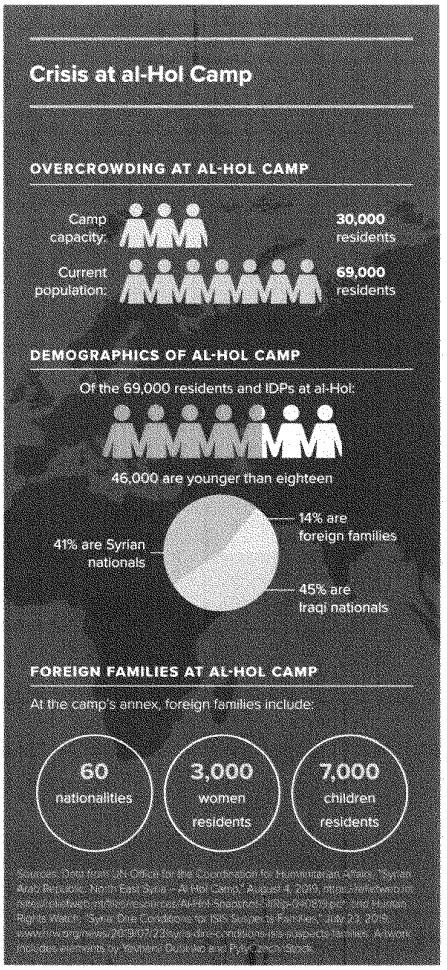
Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the children of ISIS fighters, many of whom spent formative years living under ISIS's rule, are nonexistent.

resources and capacity to address the health, education, and social services these women and children need.[20] Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the children of ISIS fighters, many of whom spent formative years living under ISIS's rule, are nonexistent. The SDF is responding to requests from tribes in eastern Syria for the release of specific detainees; as of April 2019, the SDF had discharged more than one thousand Syrians into tribal custody.[21] The SDF has also transferred hundreds of Iraqis as well as some third-country nationals into Iraqi government custody.[22] Iraq's courts, however, have significant shortcomings, including low evidentiary standards, allegations of torture to coerce confessions, and hastily conducted trials.[23]

The more than two thousand ISIS foreign fighters currently under SDF custody pose a major challenge.[24] Several countries, including U.S. allies in Europe, either refuse to repatriate their citizens, in some cases stripping them of citizenship, or are willing to repatriate only select family members. Many of these countries lack the necessary evidence to charge ISIS fighters in domestic courts; others worry that the fighters could be convicted only on lesser charges and would serve short sentences before being released.[25]

Offices across the U.S. government address distinct subsets of the ISIS detainee challenge in Syria, but no senior U.S. official holds the mandate to coordinate and implement all U.S. policy on this issue. Coalition military and international humanitarian implementers have equally important but potentially competing priorities, with no honest broker to coordinate them. The U.S. government continues to repatriate American citizens who fought for ISIS and, where possible, facilitates the return of foreign fighters to their country of citizenship. Countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Italy have undertaken laudable efforts to repatriate ISIS fighters from Syria.[26]

The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS is working to address the challenges of ISIS detainees and their families, but it is constrained by differences among members regarding repatriation. It did not highlight this issue set in its June 25, 2019, Joint Statement by Political Directors.[27] The SDF has neither the capacity nor the willingness to hold these detainees indefinitely. Security conditions are tenuous inside both IDP camps and pop-up prisons. ISIS exploited multiple prison breaks in Iraq to fuel its rise to power in 2012 and 2013 and is likely contemplating a similar strategy in Syria. Should the Assad regime regain control of northeastern Syria and the detainee population, it could "weaponize" these individuals in the same way it utilized al-Qaeda fighters against the United States during the war in Iraq.


Crisis at al-Hol Camp
OVERCROWDING AT AL-HOL CAMP
Camp capacity:
30,000 residents
Current population:
69,000 residents
DEMOGRAPHICS OF AL-HOL CAMP
Of the 69,000 residents and IDPs at al-Hol:
46,000 are younger than eighteen
14% are foreign families
41% are Syrian nationals
45% are Iraqi nationals
FOREIGN FAMILIES AT AL-HOL CAMP
At the camp's annex, foreign families include:
60 nationalities
3,000 women residents
7,000 children residents

Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups remain active in Syria and a threat to the United States. Since the start of the Syrian war, al-Qaeda has commanded and supported a variety of groups that share its ideology and commitment to global jihad.[28] Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri dispatched senior al-Qaeda operatives to Syria who failed to unify these disparate groups.[29] The strongest such groups are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hurras ad-Din, and Hezb Islami al-Turkistani (TIP). Their forces are concentrated in Idlib, which senior U.S. officials have described as "the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11."[30]

HTS is the largest non-ISIS extremist group in Syria, with an estimated twenty thousand fighters, according to the United Nations.[31] It has effective, although not complete, control over Idlib and formed a "Salvation Government," which is slowly exerting control over all governance structures.[32] Hurras ad-Din formed in February 2018 as a splinter from HTS[33] and has an estimated seven hundred fighters with the capacity and the desire to conduct external attacks.[34] Hurras ad-Din and HTS have had serious leadership disputes over strategy in Syria and occasionally compete locally, but they continue to cooperate despite this friction.[35] Compared with HTS, Hurras ad-Din has a larger proportion of foreign fighters and focuses more on external attacks than on operations inside Syria.[36]

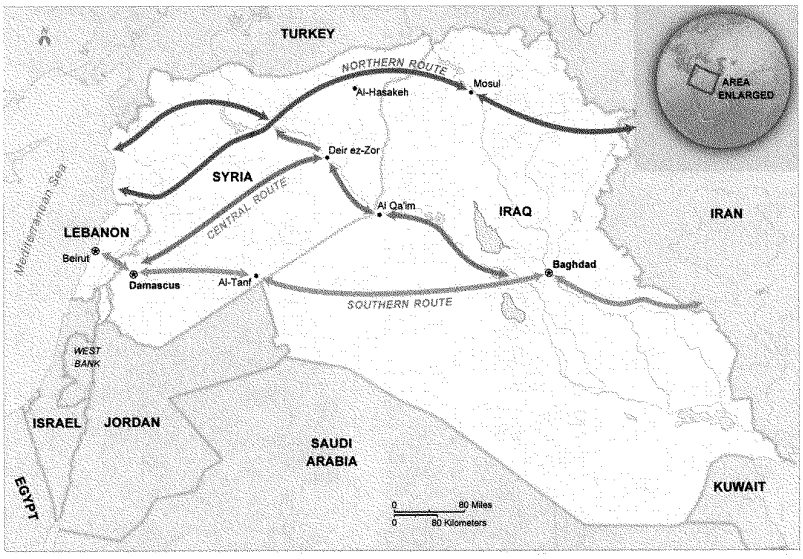
On June 30, 2019, U.S. Central Command carried out an airstrike against al-Qaeda operatives "responsible for plotting external attacks" in western Aleppo.[37] The U.S. attack was notable given Russian control of the airspace in northwestern Syria.

Iran

Despite Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions, Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria. Syria is Iran's only state ally and key to Tehran's purported "forward defense" strategy.[38] Iran is pursuing a two-track policy of military entrenchment and economic and political expansion that is designed to ensure a permanent presence and influence in Syria. For Iran, Syria is a theater for the projection of power and influence in the Middle East, a land bridge to the Levant and Mediterranean, and a third front—in addition to Lebanon and Gaza—against Israel.

Iran intervened early in the Syrian conflict. In 2012, it reinforced Assad's troops with members of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; Shia recruits from Afghanistan and Pakistan; Iraqi Shia militia members; and fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah.[39] Along with Russia, which intervened in September 2015, providing the regime with critical air power, Iran was instrumental first in reversing the momentum of anti-Assad armed opposition groups and then in helping the regime begin to recapture lost territory.

Iran's military entrenchment in Syria takes at least three forms: the introduction of advanced weapon systems; the establishment of military command centers, often within existing regime



MAP 3: IRAN'S POTENTIAL LAND BRIDGE.

Source: Based on a map in Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019, http://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

bases; and the insertion of troops. Iran supplies the regime with a wide range of munitions, including short-range ballistic missiles, drones, and antitank missiles.[40] In addition to its own weapons systems in Syria, which remain under Iranian command, Iran also continues to attempt to transfer sophisticated weaponry, including precision guided missiles, to Hezbollah.[41] Iranian forces are present, according to one estimate, at nearly forty locations in the country.[42] The Iranian troop presence peaked in 2015 and has since tapered off. Recent estimates suggest that the number of Iranian military personnel in Syria ranges from the "high hundreds to the low thousands."[43] The total number of Hezbollah and Shia militia fighters in Syria ranges from ten thousand to twenty thousand.[44]

Israeli airstrikes have constrained, but not deterred, Iranian actions in Syria. To date, Israel has largely targeted weapons systems and military infrastructure, not leadership or other personnel. Israeli officials believe, however, that absent their air campaign, Iran would have assembled a much larger force in Syria.[45] Israel's objectives are to push Iranian forces away

Iran and Russia maintain an alliance of convenience in Syria, and their commitment to preserving their client Assad is stronger than any disagreement.

from Israel's border and prevent Iran from positioning in Syria weapons systems that threaten Israel.[46] From within Syria, Iran or its proxies have targeted Israel on a number of occasions, both with drones and with missiles.[47] Israeli security officials worry that Hezbollah will continue to entrench itself on the Israel-Syria border in the manner it has on the Israel-Lebanon border, heightening the threat of infiltration along that frontier and requiring Israel to increase the defense resources it devotes to monitoring and patrolling it.[48]

Iran is complementing its military strategy with an economic, political, and social campaign focused on securing long-term influence in Syria comparable to what it has in Iraq. Iranian efforts vary across the country. In southern and, increasingly, in eastern Syria, Iran courts local tribes by providing stipends or jobs. Iranian-funded Shia religious centers provide social, religious, and economic programs in impoverished areas. The Iranian Cultural Center in the regime sector of Deir ez-Zor offers scholarships for Syrians to study in Iran and is enrolling students in Farsi courses. Iran has also opened up at least three schools in the Deir ez-Zor countryside near the Iraqi border that are staffed by Iranian teachers. The schools have enrolled over 250 children, each of whom receives a small stipend to attend.[49]

In Damascus and surrounding suburbs, both Hezbollah and Iran are purchasing residential and commercial properties in an attempt to establish a base similar to Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut.[50] Several universities, under regime directives, now offer courses in Farsi.[51]

There are limits, however, to the extent to which Iran can penetrate Syrian society. Syria has only a small Shia population, and many Syrians reportedly have an antipathy toward Iran.[52] Even members of Assad's own Alawite sect—an offshoot of Shia Islam—resent the regime's readiness to prioritize Iranian interests over Syrian concerns, such as seeking the release of Shia militiamen first in prisoner exchanges.[53] Yet Iran will continue its efforts to insert its proxies to fill gaps in services and security in regime-controlled areas.

Iran and Russia maintain an alliance of convenience in Syria, and their commitment to preserving their client Assad is stronger than any disagreement. Tensions may emerge periodically between the two, but there is so far no sign that either will allow tactical or operational differences to undermine their shared short-term goal of regime survival. Iran's partnership with Russia has furthermore allowed it to escape any UN Security Council censure for its actions in Syria.

The Syrian Civil War

Assad has not won the conflict in Syria and the war is not frozen; rather, it is entering a new phase.

By some estimates the regime controls 60 percent of the country, mostly in western and southwestern Syria.[54] The regime is seeking to cement its control through various means. Law No. 10, for example, facilitates regime seizures of property from absent owners. The law requires property owners, many of whom are Sunnis who fled the country, to provide the regime with proof of ownership or risk forfeiting their property. Much of the regime's control, however, particularly in the southwest, is tenuous. Regime forces do not have a monopoly on the use of force and depend on Russian airpower and Iranian and Iran-backed ground

BOX 1

Law No. 10: A Legal Veneer on an Assad Land Grab

- Implemented on April 2, 2018, by the Assad regime.[1]
- Permits the government to designate for "redevelopment" land anywhere in the country.[2]
- Property owners must present (initially, within thirty days) proof of ownership in a Syrian regime court; otherwise, ownership defaults to the regime.[1,3]
- Allows the regime to repossess vast amounts of property and land that have been vacated during the course of the war. The lists of property repossessions are posted in a local newspaper and online, but the owners are not actively sought out and informed.[1,3]
- Few refugees or IDPs have property titles or other proof of ownership in their possession; even fewer are willing to interact with the regime due to fear of reprisals.[3]
- The regime has used this law to punish its opponents and to reward its supporters, including Iran and Hezbollah, both of which are buying tracts of seized real estate.[5]
- Law No. 10 is contributing to significant demographic changes in Syria and is deepening and expanding Shia influence by granting leases of repossessed property to Shia militia fighters and outside investors.[5]
- Amended on November 11, 2018, under Russian pressure to extend to one year the period to present documentation to claim ownership; now formally known as Law No. 42.[4,6]

Sources:

1. Syrian Arab Republic, Prime Ministry, Law No. 10, April 2, 2018, https://bit.ly/2qlRGci.
2. Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, "TIMEP Brief: Law No. 10 of 2018: Housing, Land, and Property," December 10, 2018, https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-law-no-10-of-2018-housing-land-and-property/.
3. Human Rights Watch, "Q&A: Syria's New Property Law," May 29, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law.
4. Sarah Kayyali, "The Syrian Conflict's Next Frontline," Human Rights Watch, November 23, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/23/syrian-conflicts-next-front.
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forces to maintain control. Regime violence, terrorist attacks, and ethno-sectarian tensions will continue to fuel instability. Meanwhile, local economies are struggling to recover in regime-controlled areas, where 83 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.[55] For the foreseeable future, the structure of the Syrian state will remain weak and vulnerable, exporting people and terrorism.

Western Syria

Throughout 2019, Syrians in Damascus struggled with shortages of cooking gas and heating fuel, long lines at gas stations, and repeated electrical outages.[56] In coastal areas, the regime relies on paramilitary forces for security. These groups, which are often little more than criminal gangs, are increasingly operating outside regime control.[57] Kidnappings for ransom and car thefts have both become more common over the past year.[58] Tensions and distrust between the Alawite and Sunni communities have reportedly hardened since the war.[59]

Between February and May 2018, the regime, with substantial Russian and Iranian assistance, managed to retake both eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, and northern Homs governorate on the road to Idlib.[60] The regime has subsequently punished both areas for their rebellion, displacing vast swaths of the population. In particular, eastern Ghouta, a traditionally rich

BOX 2

Syria's Economy at a Glance

- 21 million: Syria's pre-war population[1]
- 18 million: Syria's 2019 population[2]
- 83% live below the poverty line[3]
- 11.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid[3]
- 50% unemployment nationwide
- 78% youth unemployment[5]
- 538,000 jobs lost per year from 2011 to 2015
- 58% inflation[5]
- $388 billion in conflict-related destruction[5]
- $226 billion gross domestic product losses from 2011 to 2016[6]
- 1/10: Syrian pound is at one-tenth of its pre-war value[5]
- $20 billion drop in foreign exchange reserves (down to $1 billion)[5]
- 93% drop in oil production since 2011[5]
- 92% drop in exports between 2011 and 2015[5]

Sources:

1. World Bank, "Syrian Arab Republic, Population Total," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SY.
2. World Food Programme, "Syria Country Brief," June 2019, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-country-brief-june-2019.
3. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Syr_HNO_Full.pdf.
4. Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, 2019, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html.
5. World Bank, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria—Key Facts," July 2017, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/brief/the-toll-of-war-economic-and-social-impact-analysis-esia-of-the-conflict-in-syria-key-facts.
6. World Bank, "The World Bank in the Syrian Arab Republic: Overview," accessed August 2019, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview.
7. UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Experts Discuss Post-Conflict Reconstruction Policies after Political Agreement in Syria," media brief, August 7, 2018,https://www.unescwa.org/news/syrian-experts-discuss-post-conflict-reconstruction-policies-after-political-agreement-syria.

agricultural area, has struggled to recover from years of warfare and the accompanying regime-imposed blockade.

Southwestern Syria

Unrest is spreading in southwestern Syria, where the regime is facing mounting instability. Significant antiregime sentiment roils the province. Recent months have witnessed assassinations, checkpoint attacks, and sporadic clashes between opposition elements and regime soldiers.[61] The regime routinely violates the "reconciliation" agreements negotiated with rebel fighters when it regained control of the area in July 2018, arresting former rebels, who are often tortured if not killed. Others are being conscripted to fight in regime operations elsewhere. In addition, Iran and its proxies are seeking to increase their influence in the area.[62]

Idlib

Idlib is one of the last pockets still held by anti-Assad groups. It poses a major counterterrorism threat and humanitarian challenge. Terrorist groups have consolidated military and political control over the population of Idlib.

Idlib's population has more than doubled since the start of the war, jumping from less than 1.5 million in 2010 to over 3 million today. Much of the increase is attributed to an influx of fighters and IDPs from elsewhere in Syria. The vulnerable civilians rely on humanitarian aid delivered across the border from Turkey. Pro-regime attacks against Idlib displaced more than 400,000 Syrians northward toward the Turkish border from April to late July 2019, two-thirds of whom are living without shelter.[63] An intensification of the regime offensive will impose further heavy casualties on the civilian population, large numbers of whom would likely flee to the borders of Turkey or Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, which are currently closed.

Russia and the Assad regime launched an offensive into Idlib in early 2019 after failing to compel a surrender of anti-Assad groups. Russia is providing air support and enablers to Assad regime ground forces. Together, Russian and Assad airstrikes and artillery barrages are hitting hospitals, schools, markets, and other illegal targets in order to terrorize the population and depopulate areas. During the months of May and June 2019, for example, twenty-two hospitals and four ambulances were bombed in Idlib.[64]

The pro-regime offensive has only made limited gains due to pushback from Turkish-backed opposition groups and al-Qaeda–linked forces.[65] Al-Qaeda–linked forces are digging tunnel networks to fortify the province against Assad and Russian operations.[66] The slow progress of the pro-regime operations indicates that the Assad regime and Russian forces lack the combat power to take Idlib without considerable help from iran, which thus far has not provided it. The regime and Russia may attempt to make up for their failing ground forces with asymmetric tactics such as chemical weapons attacks and other mass casualty operations aimed at terrorizing and scattering civilians.

The Peace Process

Progress toward a political settlement to the Syrian conflict has stalled, and Assad shows no willingness to compromise with his opponents.

No political process to date has delivered meaningful progress toward a resolution of the conflict. The UN-led Geneva process, as laid out in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (see the accompanying text box and appendix 4), has stalled. UN mediation currently centers on forming a constitutional committee with equal representation from the regime, opposition, and civil society. For its part, the regime does not believe compromise is necessary and will not allow genuine reform through the constitutional committee or any other means. In its view, the battlefield trajectory signals an Assad victory.[67] Syrian political opposition groups remain divided and mostly outside of Syria, with little leverage to demand concessions from the regime at the negotiating table.

The Astana process, led by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, started in January 2017 as a dialogue outside of UN auspices and led to the creation of three "de-escalation areas."[68] In practice, however, Astana allowed Russia and the regime to exploit pauses in fighting to brutally retake control in eastern Ghouta (April 2018) and northern Homs (May 2018). Russia and the regime also violated the third de-escalation zone, in southwestern Syria; that zone had been negotiated separately with the United States and Jordan.[69]

The U.S.-led "small group"—including Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom—is attempting to revitalize the Geneva process, but it does not include Russia, Turkey, or Iran, all of whom are key players on the ground. The United States has engaged in a separate diplomatic track with Russia, proposing a "road map" in hopes of testing Russian willingness to make compromises and exercise influence over the Assad regime in order to make progress toward a political settlement acceptable to Washington.[70]

Some observers hope that the 2021 elections will be conducted under UN auspices and fulfill the elections phase of the Geneva process, offering an opportunity for political transition if the Syrian diaspora is able to participate. Given current conditions inside Syria, and with Russia protecting Assad at the UN Security Council, there is no possibility that the 2021 elections will be free, fair, and credible. Instead, Assad will try to use the 2021 elections to bolster his claim to legitimacy. Russia will similarly seize on the election results to argue that countries should reestablish diplomatic relations with Damascus and reinvest in the country.

BOX 3

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254: A Stalled Process

- Passed unanimously in December 2015.
- Resolution 2254 outlines four steps for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition."

STEP 1: POLITICAL PROCESS

- Proposed Action: Talks to begin in mid-January 2016 between the government and the opposition as an initial step toward a political transition.
- What Happened: Direct talks between the regime and the opposition did not happen. The United Nations has convened eight rounds of intra-Syrian talks since 2016—often in the format of "proximity talks," in which a government and an opposition delegation sat in separate rooms—with no significant results.[1]

STEP 2: NATIONWIDE CEASE-FIRE

- Proposed Action: A nationwide cease-fire to begin as soon as the parties take the initial steps toward a political transition.
- What Happened: A nationwide cease-fire went into effect in late February 2016, but it collapsed within two months. Another cease-fire was announced in September 2016, but it, too, collapsed.

STEP 3: DRAFT A NEW CONSTITUTION

- Proposed Action: A new constitution to be drafted starting in June 2016.
- What Happened: A constitutional committee has been proposed with equal representation from the regime, the opposition, and civil society. However, the committee has not been finalized due to disputes over the names proposed for membership. Work is ongoing by the UN Special Envoy for Syria to reach an agreement on committee membership.

STEP 4: ELECTIONS

- Proposed Action: Free and fair elections to be held by June 2017, which would be supervised by the United Nations to ensure the "highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate."
- What Happened: The elections did not take place.

Source:
1. UN News, "Syria," accessed July 28, 2019, https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria

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Russia

U.S. policy underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence. Russia's military intervention in September 2015 (falsely premised on combatting ISIS) accomplished its immediate goal of preserving the Assad regime. It also gave Moscow the opportunity to demonstrate its utility as a partner, and a theater to showcase its weapons and exercise its military capabilities. Regional governments have noted Russia's reinvigorated role first in Syria, and then in the region as a whole, and have increased their own contacts with Moscow.[71]

Since its intervention in Syria, Russia's regional profile has improved markedly; it has not paid a price among U.S. partners for its alliance with Iran in support of Assad. Moscow has signed weapons deals with, among others, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey.[72] During a visit by King Salman of Saudi Arabia to Russia in 2017, the first by a Saudi monarch to Moscow, the two countries agreed to cut oil production, thereby increasing Russian influence in world energy markets.[73] In Iraq, Russia has opened an intelligence-sharing center to facilitate cooperation with the Iraqi military.[74]

In Syria, the presence of Russian forces required the U.S. military to make operational adjustments, interfered with U.S. communications, and provided Russia with an opportunity to test its electronic warfare capabilities against U.S. targets.[75] Through its military deployments, including at an airbase at Hmeimim and at an expanded naval base at Tartus on Syria's western coast for which Russia has secured extended basing rights,[76] Moscow can project power into the eastern Mediterranean. Russia has also deployed in Syria multiple S-400 batteries, a long-range surface-to-air missile defense system. Although the S-400 has never been fired in combat, its presence in Syria threatens U.S. air dominance and has imposed constraints on U.S. forces.[77]

The cost to Russia of rescuing the Assad regime and altering the course of the conflict has been relatively small. The Russian military has shown itself to be both opportunistic and adaptive. It has utilized a light-footprint approach of deploying airpower and relatively few ground troops—between four and six thousand at any one time,[78] supplemented by private military contractors.[79] Russia's military death toll, while not officially announced, has been low, and most estimates suggest that Moscow spends only around $4 million a day in Syria.[80]

However, Russian support has yet to translate battlefield success into a political victory in Syria by securing broad diplomatic acceptance of Assad and overseeing his readmittance to the international community. On its own, Russia lacks the economic strength to rebuild Syria and has failed to compel Assad to change regime behavior, such as taking the measures necessary to promote the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of refugees. Barring significant movement in these two areas—reconstruction aid and refugee return—Russia will be deprived of the international recognition it seeks to consolidate its gains in Syria.

Turkey

U.S.-Turkey relations are strained in Syria by starkly diverging views of the SDF; a Turkish incursion would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

The United States' partnership with the SDF is, in large part, an outgrowth of Turkey's limited ability to support initial U.S.-led efforts against ISIS. The U.S. military regards the SDF as a capable partner force, one that has been operationally successful and responsive to American operational requests.

As valuable as the SDF has been operationally, the U.S.-SDF partnership faces several challenges. Turkey, a close partner and NATO ally of the United States, considers the SDF a grave security threat. In Turkey's view, the YPG— the Syrian Kurdish component of the SDF—is indistinguishable from the Turkey-based PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. In July 2015, a two-and-a-half-year cease-fire between Turkey and the PKK broke down, reigniting a conflict that has been ongoing since 1984.[81] Between July 2015 and July 2017, nearly three thousand people were killed in Turkey in PKK-related violence, including in bombings in Ankara and Istanbul.[82] Turkey fears that U.S. training and equipping of the SDF in Syria is escalating the threat posed by the PKK to Turkey's internal security.

Previous Turkish incursions into Syria provide substantial evidence that additional Turkish military operations are likely to be destabilizing and undermine U.S. objectives in Syria. The August 2016 Euphrates Shield operation resulted in Turkish control of Syrian territory from the city of Azaz in the west to Jarabulus in the east. In March 2018, Turkey occupied a second stretch of territory, in and around the city of Afrin. Although the two areas are contiguous, Turkey has taken a markedly different approach to each. The Euphrates Shield area is a predominantly Arab region where Turkey has provided support in governance and service provision.[83] In Afrin, a traditionally Kurdish area, Turkey has been accused by NGOs of complicity in human rights abuses—including arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and the confiscation of property—by Turkish-backed militias.[84]

Ankara has repeatedly underscored its unwillingness to tolerate SDF dominance in northern Syria. Turkey is threatening another incursion, which the United States worries could cause a number of problems: the collapse of the SDF or an SDF deal with the Assad regime made under duress, a move by the Assad regime and its partners across the Euphrates, and a distraction for the SDF from its focus on fighting ISIS. The United States is seeking to forestall additional Turkish military action in Syria by negotiating a "safe zone" along the Turkey-Syria border. An agreement on a safe zone would presumably include joint U.S.-Turkey patrols and the withdrawal of SDF forces from an agreed-upon area.

The Syrian Kurds

While the SDF was a highly effective partner in the fight against ISIS, it must transition to ensure stability in northeastern Syria.

The United States implemented a model of fighting ISIS "by, with, and through" the SDF.[85] Over the course of four and a half years, from August 2014 to March 2019, the United States and the SDF partnered to clear more than twenty thousand square miles of ISIS-held territory in Syria.[86] U.S. government officials estimate that the SDF numbers roughly sixty thousand, split more or less evenly between Kurdish and Arab forces.[87] When the Arabs and Kurds within the SDF were fighting a common enemy in ISIS, they largely downplayed their ethnic differences and divisions. In the aftermath of ISIS's loss of Syrian territory, these fault lines are resurfacing in Arab-dominated areas.

Although U.S. officials describe the relationship as "tactical, temporary, and transactional," there is no publicly articulated policy for transitioning the nature of the U.S.-SDF relationship following the liberation of Syrian territory from ISIS.[88] The United States never explicitly pledged support for Kurdish autonomy or self-rule in Syria. However, the YPG has leveraged the strategic and tactical support it received from the United States to establish civilian governance led by its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), across areas liberated from ISIS. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the civilian counterpart to the SDF, has sporadically explored a settlement with the Assad regime, but the announced U.S. withdrawal in December 2018, while temporarily accelerating these efforts, simultaneously undercut the SDF's negotiating position.[89] Following U.S. reassurances of maintaining a military presence in Syria, the negotiations stalled. Absent U.S. support and troops on the ground, the SDF would likely fracture along ethnic and sectarian lines while Assad, Russia, and Iran would initiate military operations to recapture SDF-held areas. SDF leader General Mazloum has stated that the SDF is still willing to negotiate a deal with the regime on the condition that it recognizes the SDF's "self-administration" authority and preserves the autonomy of the SDF.[90] But Assad is unlikely to agree to even limited autonomy for the SDF in the current environment.

Inside the post-ISIS territory of Syria, tensions are already surfacing that challenge the viability of the SDF's staying power. The SDC highlights its commitment to inclusive, representative, and decentralized rule. However, it has not meaningfully devolved authority to local populations in Arab-concentrated areas, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. Arab leaders in eastern Syria complain that the Kurdish leadership of the SDF is unwilling to equitably share resources.[91] Arab communities complain of heavy-handed treatment by Kurdish SDF units, including forced recruitment. In April 2019, Arab protesters in Deir ez-Zor chanted "No to Kurdish occupation!" and complained that the SDF was benefitting from local oil deposits, which it subsequently sells to the Assad regime.[92]

BOX 4

Key Kurdish Groups

PKK: KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY

- Founded in 1978. The United States designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in October 1997. It upheld the designation following a review in March 2019.[1]

PYD: DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

- The Syrian branch of the PKK, founded in 2003.[2]

YPG: PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS

- Emerged in 2012 as the military arm of the PYD.[3] The United States began cooperating with the YPG in late 2014.

SDF: SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

- Created in 2015 as the United States' local partner in the war to defeat ISIS.[4] The SDF's leadership is largely drawn from the YPG, but it is a "multi-ethnic force comprising Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnic groups."[5] Primary command and control is held by Kurdish elements.

SDC: SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL

- Created in 2015 as the "political wing of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)."[6] The SDC is Kurdish-dominated and provides governance to much of northeast Syria, including predominantly Arab areas.

KNC: KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL

- Founded in 2011 as an umbrella group for various Syrian Kurdish parties, members of different civil society organizations, and independent personalities. As of mid-2019, the KNC consisted of fourteen parties.[7]

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Civilian Protection

The Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes and demands accountability.

The Assad regime has deliberately and repeatedly targeted civilians in Syria with both conventional and chemical weapons. At the same time, it has systematically used rape, torture, disappearances, and unlawful detentions as weapons of war. An independent UN commission of inquiry reported in 2016 that the regime's actions amounted to "crimes against humanity" and "extermination."[93]

The regime, with Russian complicity and assistance, has not only bombed hospitals and humanitarian convoys but also arrested and tortured medical staff.[94] The use of barrel bombs (unguided bombs filled with shrapnel designed to cause extensive casualties) remains a hallmark of the regime's brutal war on civilians. Former prisoners have detailed the horrors of life inside Assad's prisons.[95] Detainees are not allowed to sleep or speak without permission, cells are overcrowded, dead bodies are left to rot, and torture is routine. Although multiple countries, including the United States, have stressed the importance of civilian protection in their public statements and through diplomatic efforts with Russia and the United Nations, none has been willing to take sustained military action in response to regime or Russian targeting of civilians.

Twice, in 2017 and 2018, the United States responded militarily to the regime's use of Sarin, a deadly nerve agent. There have been no alleged or confirmed Sarin attacks by the regime since the U.S. strikes, although there are allegations (but no confirmation) that the regime has since used other chemical weapons.[96] The regime has continued to use conventional weapons to target and kill civilians, including in the current attacks against Idlib.

In the short term, it is highly unlikely that the regime will be held to account for its crimes. Assad will not appear in front of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Syria never joined the ICC, so the court's chief prosecutor cannot initiate an investigation. Referrals from the UN Security Council, which could initiate one, have been vetoed by Russia.[97] Other options to pursue justice, particularly through the use of "universal jurisdiction" and high-level prosecutions in Europe, have yielded limited results. A joint German and French investigation resulted in the arrest of three former regime officials, two in Germany and one in France, in February 2019.[98] French authorities have also issued international arrest warrants for Assad's former Air Force intelligence director, Jamil Hassan,[99] and for the regime's national security chief, Ali Mamlouk, for collusion in war crimes.[100]

Despite the unlikely prospect of securing accountability in the near term, documentation efforts are ongoing in hopes of supporting eventual prosecutions and the United States continues to provide funding in support of them. Dozens of outside reports, internal regime documents, and the testimonies of regime defectors corroborate the grim picture of the regime's

The regime has consistently used humanitarian access and aid as a means of punishing opponents and rewarding loyalists.

crimes painted by former prisoners. For example, in 2014 a former regime military police officer (with the pseudonym "Caesar") fled Syria with thousands of photographs of the bodies of people who had been tortured before being killed. The Federal Bureau of Investigation subsequently verified the authenticity of the photographs.[101] The International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) was formed by the UN General Assembly, bypassing the Security Council, in 2016. The IIIM is tasked with assisting investigations and prosecutions for war crimes committed in Syria. The IIIM, however, has no enforcement powers or arrest authorities.

The Humanitarian Challenge

Dire humanitarian conditions and widespread destruction, along with the challenges posed by IDPs and refugees in and beyond the region, will likely reverberate for decades. Most refugees are unlikely to voluntarily return to Syria in the near term.
The conflict in Syria has led to the largest displacement crisis since the end of World War II. Six million Syrians are internally displaced. More than 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees outside the country, including more than 1 million in Europe.[102] Tens of thousands are illegally detained by the regime. Syrians form the largest asylum-seeking population in the world.

Inside the country, more than 11 million people are in need of humanitarian aid.[103] In 2018, the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria—a UN-led effort involving multiple UN agencies, NGOs, and other actors to address Syrian-conflict related humanitarian needs both inside and outside Syria—received only two-thirds of its requested funding.[104] As of May 2019, the 2019 HRP had received only 16 percent of its requested $3.3 billion.[105]

Earlier this year, concerns emerged that the United Nations intended to phase out the Amman-based UN regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria and consolidate its humanitarian operations in Damascus. In the view of some humanitarian organizations, the United Nations appears to be choosing to work primarily through Damascus as a concession both to the regime and to Russia, which has been lobbying strongly for a Damascus-only approach to humanitarian assistance.[106]

The regime has consistently used humanitarian access and aid as a means of punishing opponents and rewarding loyalists. The regime has placed "regular restrictions on the access of humanitarian organizations to communities in need" and has made sure that "the humanitarian response is siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the abusive state apparatus."[107]

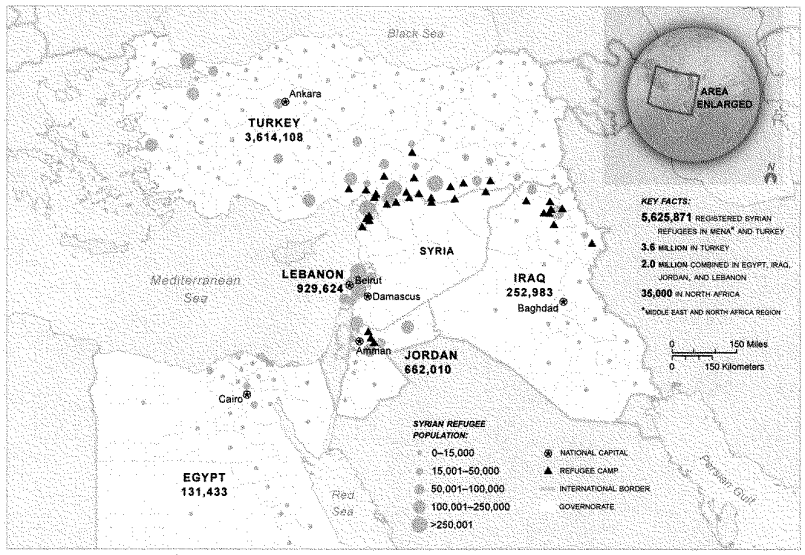
UNSCR 2449 (see appendix 5), which authorizes cross-border aid delivery into Idlib and other parts of Syria, is due for renewal in December 2019. In 2018, for the first time in four years, Russia abstained from the vote on renewal, saying the resolution was "divorced from reality," which has raised concerns among humanitarians and others that the resolution will not be renewed.[108] If the cross-border delivery of aid is not renewed for 2020, the humanitarian responders working in Idlib would find themselves in a much more precarious position—and the overall humanitarian aid flows to the area most in need in Syria are likely to shrink.

Fewer than 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned to Syria.[109] The regime continues to conscript, arrest, torture, and kill some of those who do return. Some returnees find that their property and homes have been destroyed or seized; others have reported being forced to inform on family members.[110] There does not appear to be consistent international attention to missing persons and detainees or land reform under UN—or any other—auspices. Processes to address these issues will be critical for refugee decision making about returning to Syria. Given the poor security and humanitarian conditions in regime-held areas of Syria, most refugees and IDPs are not willing to return to their homes.

The situation in camps such as Rukban, which is located on the Syria-Jordan border and is effectively cut off from both countries, is dire. Although the Rukban population has dropped to around twenty-five thousand from a high of between seventy thousand and eighty thousand in 2016, serious problems persist.[111] Within the camp, services, including basic health care, are virtually nonexistent. Access to clean, potable water is limited. Food prices have risen. Women and girls live in fear of sexual assault.[112] The population at Rukban can be accessed from Damascus if the regime and Russia permit transit, as demonstrated by two previous successful UN aid deliveries to Rukban spearheaded by the United States, most recently in February 2019. The regime has refused the past two UN requests to deliver aid and, as of late July 2019, had yet to authorize the current UN request.

Hosting millions of refugees has placed substantial political and economic pressure on Syria's neighbors: Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees (3.6 million); Lebanon hosts the most refugees per capita in the world.[113] No country in the region has a long-term plan to deal with Syria's refugees. The influx has engendered a significant backlash against the refugees, particularly in Lebanon.[114] Throughout Lebanon, hate speech is on the rise, refugee tents have been burned down, and there have been multiple cases of forced returns.[115] Syrian refugees in Turkey have also faced harassment; the Turkish government is reported to have initiated forced returns to Syria since July 2019.[116]

Jordan's ability to shelter Syrian refugees depends on the provision of significant additional outside support; such support, however, has been limited. The Jordan Response Plan, for instance, was funded at 62 percent of its budget in 2016, at 65 percent in 2017, and at just 34 percent in 2018.[117]



MAP 4: SYRIAN REFUGEES IN NEIGHBORING STATES, JULY 2019.

Source: Based on "Syria Situation Map in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region and Turkey (as of 04 July 2019)," originally published in Amman, Jordan, by the UNHCR MENA Director's Office. This version of the map drawn by Lucidity Information Design.

U.S. Points of Leverage

Despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests.

In northeastern Syria, the United States, through its control of the air space and partnership with the SDF, insulates a significant part of Syria and its population from regime, Russian, and Iranian operations. The area is of particular importance, given its strategic location, agricultural output, and rich natural resources, such as water and oil reserves. Two-thirds (66 percent) of Syria's hydrocarbons are not under the regime's control, and most of that two-thirds lies in northeastern Syria.[118] This area accounts for roughly one-third of the country east of the Euphrates River and is the United States' greatest single point of leverage in Syria.

A poster of President Bashar al-Assad with "Yes" in Arabic hangs in the Hamadiyah market in the Old City of Damascus. (Photo by Hassan Ammar/AP/Shutterstock.)

The United States also has imposed extensive sanctions on the Assad regime and its supporters. The stated purpose of U.S. sanctions on Assad and his network of support is "to deprive the regime of the resources it needs to continue violence against civilians and to pressure the Syrian regime to allow for a democratic transition as the Syrian people demand."[119] These goals have yet to be achieved, but the U.S.-led sanctions architecture has been a success in terms of preventing the regime from benefitting economically and making it more difficult for members of Assad's family and the regime's elite to travel abroad. U.S. sanctions on Syria predate the current conflict but have expanded significantly since 2011. Sanctions on Syria are effectively a "full embargo," with the exception of humanitarian aid.[120] Through executive orders and Congressional statutes, the United States has established a multilayered sanctions architecture that targets individuals, companies, and institutions associated with the regime; outside financial networks that aid the regime; and third-country nationals, companies, and institutions that provide material support to the regime. The United States has also imposed sanctions on multiple Russian banks, the Russian state-owned arms exporter Rosoboronexport, and a number of individuals for providing material support and services to the Assad regime.[121]

Absent concerted U.S. pressure, other states are likely to move to reestablish normal ties with Damascus.

Along with European and international financial institutions, the United States leads efforts to deny assistance for reconstruction in Syria until the regime fundamentally changes its behavior. The United States has also signaled its intent to use the full weight of its diplomatic influence to discourage other countries from providing reconstruction aid to the regime.[122] The economic damage from the war in Syria is estimated at nearly $400 billion, with $120 billion in material destruction and $268 billion in lost production.[123]

The United States is central to maintaining the current diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime. Although the United States and its allies have struggled to come together around a strategy for Syria, the major states of North America, Europe, and Asia are relatively unified in their opposition to the actions of the Assad regime and its backers and largely supportive of U.S. efforts. Assad, in contrast, is backed enthusiastically only by a handful of states, such as Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, in part due to the pervasive narrative that Assad has "won," some states are making ongoing efforts to reestablish influence with Assad in an attempt to modify his behavior or, in the case of the United States' Arab partners, to counteract Iranian influence. For instance, in December 2018, the United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus and Bahrain resumed operations at its embassy in Damascus.[124] Absent concerted U.S. pressure, other states are likely to move to reestablish normal ties with Damascus. There is no evidence, however, that Assad is willing to modify his behavior in exchange for normalization or that he is prepared to break with Iran, with which he and his family have been closely entwined for decades and which has proven a stalwart ally to the regime, though not to the Syrian people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Syria Study Group believes that sound U.S. policy toward Syria demands sustained political commitment by the senior leaders of the U.S. government, as well as a strategy that aligns means and ends. The first problem is by far the easier to address. The President and U.S. national security officials must deliver a consistent message in support of America's Syria policy and use all opportunities to advance that policy. Congress must also prioritize the Syrian challenge by ensuring vigorous oversight of U.S. policy in Syria, conducting hearings on the topic, and using travel and legislative opportunities to signal that America's elected representatives believe that the unresolved Syrian conflict affects U.S. national security interests. Few things have undermined American influence in Syria more than the impression of uncertainty. The United States has stepped back wherever it has had leverage—military forces, foreign assistance, diplomatic engagement—thus ceding that leverage to adversaries and giving our allies and partners little option but to adjust accordingly.

The latter problem—that of mismatched ends and means—is more difficult to address. The United States is unlikely to dramatically elevate the priority it places on Syria. The Syria Study Group acknowledges that there is little domestic appetite for a heavy increase in U.S. resources—whether military investments or economic assistance. Without a substantial increase in resources, it will be even more important to deploy limited U.S. levers to achieve strategic ends, whether ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS, protecting civilians, or rallying stakeholders for a negotiated end to the war.

America should not stand idly by or back away. Russia now seeks to translate its battlefield successes on behalf of the Assad regime into a political victory and reassert itself as a great power on the international stage. Iran is working to entrench its influence in the Assad regime's security architecture; integrate its political, economic, and cultural influence across Syrian society; and cement a permanent base from which to project power into the Mediterranean and threaten Israel. ISIS, al-Qaeda and its offshoots, and other violent extremist organizations retain military capabilities and the intent to plot external attacks. This is not a frozen conflict but rather a dynamic and evolving one, which continues to endanger the Syrian people, destabilize Syria's neighbors, and threaten U.S. interests in the region and beyond.

Absent changes in the behavior of the Assad regime—something Russia has conspicuously failed to accomplish—and associated improvements in conditions within the country, Syria will remain the leading source of instability in the Middle East: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and successor entities will find fertile ground for their activities; Iranian influence will deepen; the humanitarian crisis will expand; and new waves of refugees will seek safety abroad.

Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the "forever war" category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model.

Removing U.S. military forces from Syria would exacerbate and accelerate these trends. Throughout the Syria Study Group's briefings and interviews, no one argued that withdrawing U.S. troops would make ISIS less likely to regroup or Iran less likely to entrench itself. Although the U.S. military mission in Syria is often lumped together with the Iraq and Afghanistan missions in the "forever war" category, the Syria case offers a different—and far less costly—model. A small U.S. military footprint, supported by U.S. air power and other high-end capabilities, reinforced by a global coalition of like-minded allies and partners, rallied a partner force many times its size to liberate territory from a terrorist group. What U.S. forces and their partners have gained in Syria should not be discarded with a premature withdrawal.

U.S. security would be best served by an end state in which a Syrian government is viewed as legitimate by its own population and has the will and capability to end Syrian dependence on foreign forces and prevent terrorist groups from thriving on Syrian territory. Such an end state, in this Group's estimation, requires conditions in which Syrian citizens live free from fear of the Assad regime and of Russian, Iranian, and ISIS brutality and within an updated political and social compact based on empowered local governance and equitable resource allocation. We are skeptical, however, that this end state will be achieved in the near future.

Therefore, the Syria Study Group recommends a strategy that makes a negotiated political settlement in Syria more likely yet also allows the United States to defend its interests even if a political solution is not found. To that end, the Group recommends that the United States, working in close concert with allies and partners, continue its military mission in order to maintain pressure on ISIS and other terrorist groups while strengthening pressure on the Assad regime and its backers until conditions are conducive for a political settlement that ends the Syrian conflict.

This strategy will require supporting local governance in areas where the United States and its allies and partners have territorial control and reliable relationships that can, at a minimum, improve short- to medium-term conditions and stability for Syrian civilians. If a political settlement is reached by all parties to the conflict, these areas of local governance can be reconnected to Syria's center. Assad is unlikely to readily concede changes to his governance model, so this strategy buys time while pressure builds on his regime, with the aim of compelling governance changes over the long term. It will require sustained U.S. leadership and commitment, but given the stakes for U.S. interests, it is the Group's assessment that this is a worthwhile investment.

Women line up for aid supplies at the al-Hol camp in al-Hasakeh Province, Syria. The camp's population is more than twice its capacity, with 69,000 residents from former ISIS-held areas in Syria. (Photo by Maya Alleruzzo/AP/ Shutterstock.)

This strategy is grounded in the conclusion outlined in the previous section of this report: that the United States has interests at stake in Syria and retains meaningful tools of leverage to defend those interests, particularly if that leverage is exercised in cooperation with allies and partners. This approach also aims to subvert a geopolitical win for Russia.

Consolidate gains in northeastern Syria following the territorial defeat of ISIS and offer an alternative vision for governance, resource allocation, and security in Syria. The United States should halt its military withdrawal from northeastern Syria and update the U.S. force mix to address the current range of threats to security and stability. ISIS has not been decisively defeated in Syria; it has transitioned to an insurgency. The U.S. counter-ISIS strategy in Syria, however, has not transitioned to address the changed nature of the ISIS threat. In order to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, the United States must put in place a targeted civil-military campaign that integrates political, informational, military, and economic lines of operation.

This campaign should focus on:

- Prioritizing stabilization activities and working with the SDF to ensure inclusive governance, including equitable access to resources for Arab communities and opportunities to credibly participate in local governance.
- Conducting counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations to disrupt ISIS and al-Qaeda cells, including by training, advising, and assisting local partners.
- Buttressing information operations and subverting disinformation to bolster credible, local Syrian governance and to highlight the predatory and corrupt nature of Assad, Russia, Iran, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and violent extremist organizations.
- Enabling local partners to secure and process ISIS detainees, and provide services to noncombatant women and children, in accordance with international legal and humanitarian standards.
- Serving as the enabling backbone for allied and partner contributions for stabilization (e.g., command and control; close air support and airspace coverage; logistics, lift, and intelligence; surveillance; and reconnaissance).

U.S. planning should also include contingencies that account for escalation scenarios such as:

- An ISIS resurgence and/or significant deterioration in the security situation in northeastern Syria.
- Pressure on U.S. forces at al-Tanf.
- U.S. forces engaging Iranian-backed proxies or Russian-backed mercenary forces.
- A Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria.
- A breach of the Euphrates de-confliction line by the regime, by Iranian-backed proxies, or by Russian-backed mercenary forces.

The Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) Forward team should be returned to Syria and U.S. stabilization assistance should be restored. Spending U.S. funds for limited stabilization activities will send a necessary signal of U.S. commitment and allow for U.S. officials to do effective planning and programming based on availability of funds. As part of the restoration of stabilization assistance:

- State Department leadership and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security should demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to assume some risk in order for U.S. civilians to effectively work in northeastern Syria.
- U.S. political advisors should accompany U.S. forces during all civil engagement.
- Partners should be asked to increase contributions not just to the military force, but also to these civilian stabilization efforts.
- Unspent funds designated for Syria in the Relief and Recovery Fund should be obligated to demonstrate U.S. commitment in an effort to promote greater burden sharing for stabilization in northeastern Syria.
- U.S. civilian and military actors should engage key tribal leaders in the lower Middle Euphrates Valley by involving them more directly in local security and stabilization efforts.

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The United States should utilize the considerable leverage it holds with the SDF to encourage more inclusive governance in northeastern Syria—particularly given the success it has had to date in shaping the SDF's military approach. This will require more assertive engagement with the SDF on these issues by both U.S. civilian and U.S. military leadership. In particular, U.S. officials should ask the SDF to:

- Sever its links with the PKK leadership and remove any PKK figures from positions of responsibility in Syria.
- Allow civil society actors and journalists to work freely.
- Ensure that local governance structures represent their populations' demographics and political diversity.
- Cease any efforts to promote PKK ideology among the population of northeastern Syria.
- Share resources more equitably with local Arab populations.
- Enable freedom of movement for the civilian population, particularly to and from IDP camps where restrictions have reportedly been imposed. This is an opportunity for the SDF to demonstrate how it will be a responsible security provider, enabling international humanitarian and stabilization access to the northeastern Syrian population.

Focus greater attention within the United States and partner governments in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on addressing the challenges posed by detained ISIS fighters and their families. To this end, the United States should:

- Develop an internationally coordinated strategy for addressing the ISIS detainee problem set and designate one senior U.S. official charged with implementing a coherent strategy to address all ISIS detainee populations, including foreign fighters, Syrian ISIS fighters, Iraqi ISIS fighters, women, and children.
- Work with European governments on the repatriation or third-country prosecution of their citizens who are being held as ISIS detainees and find permanent solutions for the detainees' families.
- Press the SDF administering the al-Hol camp to reduce the gap in services; increase transparency with regard to which NGOs are granted access to the camp; and provide more information about what services are currently provided in the camps, about family members in SDF detention, and about potential returns of family members to their country of citizenship.
- Increase Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) funding and update authorized activities for Syria. Additional funds should be used to improve infrastructure in SDF-managed camps for ISIS detainees and noncombatant IDPs. CTEF funding should prioritize the need for U.S.-supported SDF to ensure that conditions at camps meet international standards, including for humanitarian access.
- Improve strategic communications on U.S. willingness to repatriate U.S. citizens, and publicize successful U.S. prosecutions of repatriated ISIS fighters.

ISIS in Syria will not be defeated if the group reconstitutes in Iraq. Therefore, the United States should prioritize the Iraqi partnership in order to maintain a U.S. military presence to assist the Iraqi Security Forces in preventing ISIS's resurgence, and partner with nonmilitary Iraqi institutions to assist in Iraq's post-ISIS recovery. In particular, the United States should:

- Press Iraqi officials to prioritize stabilization activities in ISIS-liberated communities.
- Continue military support to the legitimate Iraqi Security Forces to reinforce their counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency operations.
- Utilize U.S. assistance supporting the Iraqi government's repatriation efforts of detained ISIS fighters and their families.

Until conditions inside Syria improve, deny the Assad regime and its backers all avenues for normalization by enforcing the regime's diplomatic isolation and maintaining a rigorous sanctions architecture. The United States should:

- Make clear that any steps toward normalization require, at a minimum, changes in regime behavior.
- Prioritize and invest in Syria sanctions, as a policy matter and a resource matter across the U.S. government.
- Demand the release of detained U.S. citizens prior to easing sanctions or diplomatic isolation.
- Continue to deny reconstruction funding to areas controlled by the regime absent meaningful reform.
- Refuse to accept the legitimacy of the 2021 presidential elections if they occur absent meaningful reform by the Assad regime and are not conducted according to international standards.
- Continue to support the development of civil society inside Syria and among the refugee communities while acknowledging that civil society actors face significant risks to their personal safety from the regime and its allies.
- Discourage foreign governments, particularly in the Middle East, from reengaging with Assad and make clear that returning embassies to Damascus or accepting reconstruction contracts will expose them to U.S. sanctions.
- Sign into law the Caesar Civilian Support Act—mandating additional sanctions for persons supporting the Assad regime—in order to signal U.S. resolve against normalization of the Assad regime.
- Explore new areas for increasing economic pressure on the Assad regime. Such areas include further curtailing Iranian oil shipments to Syria, including via regional partners and third parties; pressuring the United Nations to improve its transparency and accountability of all funds, in order to ensure that its operations in Damascus do not funnel revenue to Assad cronies; and urging European and Arab governments to tighten sanctions.

Comrades of SDF soldiers attend the funeral in Kobane in July 2017 of five comrades killed during fighting with ISIS. (Photo by Morukc Umnaber/Picture Alliance via Getty Images.)

Even if a mutually acceptable political compromise between the Assad regime and the opposition can be found, Syria's long-term stability requires accountability for war crimes. As long as conflict is ongoing, accountability for war crimes committed by the regime and ISIS is unlikely. In the interim, the United States should:

- Robustly fund documentation efforts and support organizations focused on building evidence for third-country prosecutions.
- Congress should signal its commitment to eventual war crimes prosecutions and to accountability for victims by confirming the nominee for Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice at the State Department. This office should focus on consolidating international efforts to protect and support whistle-blowers willing to testify or to provide evidence of war crimes committed in Syria; improving information sharing with governments with prosecutorial power; and ensuring that crimes in Syria are documented for future prosecution efforts and to preserve the historical record.

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Test and verify Russian willingness to support political settlements acceptable to the United States, but continue activities that increase the costs to Russia for its actions in Syria. Russian officials are working aggressively to position Moscow as the regional power within the Middle East. The best way to counter this is for the United States to:

- Maintain consistency in advancing U.S. objectives, and rally allies and partners by taking their concerns into account and ensuring that, going forward, they are never surprised or undermined by U.S. policy actions or announcements.
- Underscore that Russia is a cobelligerent alongside the Assad regime by exposing Russian hybrid operations, information operations, and actors within Syria.
- Require concrete actions of Russia pursuant to any discussions of a political settlement; absent such action, avoid concessions to Moscow or legitimization of its positions.
- Confront Russian pretensions—and hold Russia to account for its diplomatic representations—through messaging that underscores Moscow's failure to deliver on any of its commitments in Syria or in the region.
- Develop an information operations strategy that leverages tools from the State Department's Global Engagement Center, the Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community to subvert Russian disinformation efforts and to reinforce messaging on areas of Russian vulnerability, including:
  - Russia's indiscriminate targeting of Syrian civilians and civilian targets.
  - Russia's support for predatory and corrupt behavior in Syria and globally.
  - Iran's infiltration of Syrian state and cultural structures that may undermine Russian influence over Syria.
- Commission a study on Russian war crimes in Syria. Such a study will demonstrate patterns of complicity and intentionality in crimes committed both by the Assad regime and by Russia itself. Release the study publicly, targeting public opinion within Russia and the Arab world.

The United States should remain focused on expelling Iranian forces from Syria but recognize that this is best accomplished in phases. The key near-term goal should be to prevent further entrenchment of Iran and its many partners and proxies while raising the cost to Iran for its support of the Assad regime. More specifically, the United States should:

- Continue to support Israeli strikes on Iranian assets inside Syria. These strikes have arguably prevented Iran from accomplishing more expansive goals in Syria but are unlikely to deter Iran in its strategic campaign to increase its presence there.
- Enforce and, where possible, expand sanctions targeting Iranian support for the Assad regime and proxies engaged in the Syrian conflict, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Shia militias. Further actions by European countries—such as the seizure in early July by the British Royal Navy of a Syria-bound tanker carrying Iranian oil—should be encouraged, as should the enforcement by the European Union of its own sanctions.
- Maintain its presence at al-Tanf to prevent consolidation of Iran's land bridge across Syria. Avoid conceding that territory absent significant concessions by Russia and Iran.

- Develop a multilateral strategy to disrupt Iran's soft power activities in Syria. That strategy should involve:
  - Supporting international and NGO efforts to map Iranian political, economic, cultural, and religious activities in Syria.
  - Channeling assistance to those unarmed actors inside and outside Syria postured to counter Iran's efforts.
  - Using overt and covert information sources to spread messaging reflecting the negative impact and consequences of Iran's activities in Syria.
- Make clear that any U.S.-supported political settlement to the Syria conflict requires the evacuation of Iranian and Iranian proxy forces from Syria.

Seek areas for cooperation with Turkey and address legitimate Turkish security concerns while pressing Turkey to avoid any incursion into northeastern Syria and to improve conditions in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas. The United States should:

- Continue negotiations with Turkey on a security mechanism along Turkey's border with northeastern Syria. If a zone is established, it should preserve safe and secure conditions for the local population, allow for legitimate local governance, and deprive extremist groups of a safe haven. The United States should be willing to commit additional troops to patrol any security zone and should also seek to recruit Coalition partners to participate.
- Encourage and offer to facilitate renewed Turkey-PKK peace talks, which present the best path to resolution of Turkish concerns with the SDF.
- Seek to isolate the Syria issue from broader tensions in the U.S.-Turkey relationship, in part by fostering more regular dialogue between the Turkish military and U.S. military combatant commands (in particular, the U.S. European Commmand and U.S. Central Command). This mechanism could explore the Turkish proposal for providing security and continuing anti-ISIS military operations in northeastern Syria.
- In concert with efforts to address Turkish security concerns, press Turkey to commit to expelling extremist groups from the areas of Syria it controls, end any repression of the local population, and commit to representative local governance in those areas. Turkey should offer full transparency to U.S. and UN officials and others assessing conditions in these areas. Concurrently, the United States should press the SDF to end attacks by its affiliates in these areas.

Seek to address the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and counter the presence of terrorist groups there. The United States should:

- Seek to deter the Assad regime by warning that the use of chemical weapons or other forms of civilian targeting could bring a military response. Retaliatory strikes for regime mass civilian casualty operations in Idlib and elsewhere should be approached as a last resort, best conducted with allies. Still, the credible threat of military force and its exercise buttresses diplomatic efforts to deter and counter Assad regime state terror; neglecting such deterrence feeds the regime's sense of impunity, with devastating effects in Syria and beyond.

- Prioritize diplomacy to end the assault on Idlib by the regime and Russia while working to restore U.S. air access to conduct surveillance and targeted counterterrorism operations. Idlib is an area where Russian willingness and ability to deliver on concrete steps can be tested.
- Urge Turkey to open its borders, as well as the Euphrates Shield area, to persons displaced from Idlib.
- Urge the Turkish government to allow NGOs to use cross-border assistance modalities in order to respond to the humanitarian needs of those in Idlib.
- Continue to support moderate civil society groups providing information and humanitarian assistance.

Energize efforts to address the humanitarian crisis inside Syria, while taking steps to shore up countries hosting Syrian refugees. In particular, the United States should:

- Insist publicly that conditions inside Syria are not conducive for refugee returns that are safe, voluntary, and dignified. Most Syrian refugees are unlikely to return given fears for their safety.
- Coordinate with European partners to privately discourage officials from governments neighboring Syria from employing rhetoric that associates Syrian refugees with economic and security threats.
- Increase diplomatic efforts at the UN Security Council and through a public campaign to renew UNSCR Resolution 2449 to ensure cross-border humanitarian access. Failing to renew this resolution would effectively grant the Assad regime a veto over the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria.
- Press the United Nations and humanitarian NGOs to ensure greater accountability and transparency of all Damascus-based aid operations, thereby making sure that no aid is benefitting the regime. The United States should oppose relocation of the UN whole-of-Syria operations currently based in both Amman and Damascus to Damascus alone.
- Pair efforts to encourage inclusive policies toward refugees with increased levels of assistance and coordination to fully fund assistance pledges to Lebanon and Jordan. Specifically, the United States should:
  - Establish pooled funding mechanisms, and multiyear financing, for development assistance in consultation and coordination with refugee-hosting countries.
  - Improve education opportunities, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, for Syrian refugees in the region.
  - Encourage and support host countries to offer legal pathways to employment for refugees.
  - Support efforts by the World Bank and other international financial institutions to offer levers beyond aid to support refugee-hosting governments.
- Shoulder part of the refugee burden by accepting and resettling an increased number of Syrian refugees in the United States in 2020. This would send an important signal to both European allies and regional host countries.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Syria Study Group Enabling Legislation

PUBLIC LAW 115-254, DIVISION G,

SEC. 1501. SYRIA STUDY GROUP.

(a) ESTABLISHMENT.—There is established a working group to be known as the "Syria Study Group" (in this section referred to as the "Group").

(b) PURPOSE.—The purpose of the Group is to examine and make recommendations on the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria.

(c) COMPOSITION.—

(1) MEMBERSHIP.—The Group shall be composed of 12 members, none of whom may be members of Congress, who shall be appointed as follows:

(A) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate.

(B) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate.

(C) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

(D) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

(E) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives.

(F) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives.

(G) One member appointed by the chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives.

(H) One member appointed by the ranking minority member of the Committee on

Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives.

(I) One member appointed by the majority leader of the Senate.

(J) One member appointed by the minority leader of the Senate.

(K) One member appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

(L) One member appointed by the minority leader of the House of Representatives.

(2) CO-CHAIRS.—

(A) Of the members of the Group, one co-chair shall be jointly designated by—

(i) the chairs of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(ii) the chairs of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(iii) the majority leader of the Senate; and

(iv) the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

(B) Of the members of the Group, one co-chair shall be jointly designated by—

(i) the ranking minority members of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(ii) the ranking minority members of the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(iii) the minority leader of the Senate; and

(iv) the minority leader of the House of Representatives.

(3) PERIOD OF APPOINTMENT.—A member shall be appointed for the life of the Group.

(4) VACANCIES.—Any vacancy in the Group shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment.

(d) DUTIES.—

(1) REVIEW.—The Group shall conduct a review on the current United States military and diplomatic strategy with respect to the conflict in Syria that includes a review of current United States objectives in Syria and the desired end state in Syria.

(2) ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS.—The Group shall—

(A) conduct a comprehensive assessment of the current situation in Syria, the impact of such situation on neighboring countries, the resulting regional and geopolitical threats to the United States, and current military, diplomatic, and political efforts to achieve a stable Syria; and

(B) develop recommendations on the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria.

(e) COOPERATION OF UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—The Group shall receive the full and timely cooperation of the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence in providing the Group with analyses, briefings, and other information necessary for the discharge of the duties of the Group under subsection (d).

(2) LIAISON.—The Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence shall each designate at least one officer or employee of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, respectively, to serve as a liaison to the Group.

(3) FACILITATION.—The United States Institute of Peace shall take appropriate actions to facilitate the Group in the discharge of the duties of the Group under this section.

(f) REPORTS.—

(1) FINAL REPORT.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the date of enactment of this section, the Group shall submit to the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, the majority and minority leaders of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the minority leader of the House of Representatives a report that sets forth the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the Group under this section.

(B) ELEMENTS.—The report required by subparagraph (A) shall include each of the following:

(i) An assessment of the current security, political, humanitarian, and economic situations in Syria.

(ii) An assessment of the current participation and objectives of the various external actors in Syria.

(iii) An assessment of the consequences of continued conflict in Syria.

(iv) Recommendations for a resolution to the conflict in Syria, including—

(I) options for a gradual political transition to a post-Assad Syria; and

(II) actions necessary for reconciliation.

(v) A roadmap for a United States and coalition strategy to reestablish security and governance in Syria, including recommendations for the synchronization of stabilization, development, counterterrorism, and reconstruction efforts.

(vi) Any other matter with respect to the conflict in Syria that the Group considers to be appropriate.

(2) INTERIM REPORT.—Not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of this section, the Group shall submit to the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, the majority and minority leaders of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the minority leader of the House of Representatives a report that describes the status of the review and assessment under subsection (d) and any interim recommendations developed by the Group as of the date of the briefing.

(3) FORM OF REPORT.—The report submitted to Congress under paragraph (1) shall be submitted in unclassified form, but may include a classified annex.

(g) TERMINATION.—The Group shall terminate on the date that is 180 days after the date on which the Group submits the report required by subsection (f)(1).

APPENDIX 2

Members of the Syria Study Group

CO-CHAIRS

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Johns Hopkins School of Advanced
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Nonresident Senior Fellow,
The Brookings Institution

The Honorable Mark Kirk
Former U.S. Senator, Illinois

Ambassador Anne Patterson
Former Assistant Secretary of Near East Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

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APPENDIX 3

Consultations

The Syria Study Group consulted with individual representatives of the following U.S. government agencies and related agencies and programs; foreign governments; U.S. Congressional offices; international and regional organizations; academic institutions; nongovernmental organizations; and Syrian American and Syrian nongovernmental organizations.

U.S. GOVERNMENT AGENCIES & RELATED AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS

Congressional Research Service
National Counterterrorism Center
National Defense University
National Intelligence Council
National Security Council
United States Agency for International Development
- Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance
- Bureau for the Middle East
- Office of Food for Peace
- Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance-Middle East Crisis Humanitarian Response
- Office of Transition Initiatives

United States Army
United States Central Command
United States Consulate, Istanbul
United States Department of Defense
- D-ISIS Task Force
- Office of Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

United States Department of State
- Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism
- Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
- Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration
- The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS
- Office of the Secretary's Special Representative for Iran
- Office of the Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement
- Southern Syria Assistance Platform (SSAP)
- Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START)

United States Embassy, Jordan
United States Embassy, Lebanon
United States Embassy, Turkey
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
United States Institute of Peace

United States Special Operations Command
United States Treasury
Office of Foreign Assets Control

FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS

France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Germany, Federal Foreign Office
Israel, Department of Intelligence
Israel, Israel Defense Forces
Israel, Ministry of Defense
Israel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Jordan, General Intelligence Directorate
Jordan, Jordanian Armed Forces (Jordanian Army)
Jordan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates
Jordan, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
Jordan, Ministry of State for Economic Affairs
Jordan, Jordanian Royal Court
Lebanon, General Directorate of General Security
Lebanon, Lebanese Armed Forces/Lebanese Army
Lebanon, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants
Lebanon, Office of the President
Lebanon, Office of the Prime Minister
Lebanon, Office of the Speaker of the Parliament
Lebanon, Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations
Turkey, Ministry of Defense
Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Turkey, Ministry of Interior, Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD)
Turkey, National Intelligence Organization
United Kingdom, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

U.S. CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

House Armed Services Committee
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Office of the House Minority Leader
Office of the Senate Majority Leader
Office of the Senate Minority Leader
Office of the Speaker of the House
Office of Senator Jeanne Shaheen
Senate Armed Services Committee
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- Middle East and North Africa Bureau
- Jordan Regional Office
- Lebanon Regional Office

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria
World Bank Group

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

American University of Beirut
George Mason University
Princeton University
Stanford University
Smith College
University of Lyon
University of Oklahoma
Yale University

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Amnesty International USA
Atlantic Council
CARE USA
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Carnegie Middle East Center
Center for Global Policy
Center for New American Security
Center for Strategic and International Studies
The Century Foundation
Crisis Action
Geneva Center for Security Policy
The Global Strategy Network
Foreign Policy Research Institute
Foundation for the Defense of Democracies
Human Rights Watch
iMMAP
Institut Montaigne
Institute for the Study of War
InterAction

International Committee of the Red Cross
International Rescue Committee
IREX
Mercy Corps
Middle East Institute
Norwegian Refugee Council USA
Oxfam America
Pax for Peace
RAND Corporation
Refugees International
The Shaikh Group
Solidarités International
Synaps
Washington Institute for Near East Policy
World Vision USA

SYRIAN AMERICAN AND SYRIAN NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Americans for a Free Syria
American Relief Coalition for Syria
Citizens for a Secure and Safe America
Etana
Kayla's List PAC
Omran Center for Strategic Studies
Orient Policy Center
People Demand Change
Radio Al Kul
Radio Watan and Radio Bissan
The Syria Campaign
Syria Emergency Task Force
Syria Justice and Accountability Center
Syrian American Council
Syrian American Medical Society
Syrian Center for Policy Research
Syrian Network for Human Rights
Syrian Network for Printed Media
The Day After
Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)
Syrian Negotiations Commission
Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC)
White Helmets

APPENDIX 4

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015

The Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 2042 (2012), 2043 (2012), 2118 (2013), 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2170 (2014), 2175 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2199 (2015), 2235 (2015), and 2249 (2015) and Presidential Statements of 3 August 2011 (S/PRST/2011/16), 21 March 2012 (S/PRST/2012/6), 5 April 2012 (S/PRST/2012/10), 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15), 24 April 2015 (S/PRST/2015/10) and 17 August 2015 (S/PRST/2015/15), Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, Expressing its gravest concern at the continued suffering of the Syrian people, the dire and deteriorating humanitarian situation, the ongoing conflict and its persistent and brutal violence, the negative impact of terrorism and violent extremist ideology in support of terrorism, the destabilizing effect of the crisis on the region and beyond, including the resulting increase in terrorists drawn to the fighting in Syria, the physical destruction in the country, and increasing sectarianism, and underscoring that the situation will continue to deteriorate in the absence of a political solution, Recalling its demand that all parties take all appropriate steps to protect civilians, including members of ethnic, religious and confessional communities, and stresses that, in this regard, the primary responsibility to protect its population lies with the Syrian authorities,

Reiterating that the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, with a view to full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 as endorsed by resolution 2118 (2013), including through the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent while ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, Encouraging, in this regard, the diplomatic efforts of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to help bring an end to the conflict in Syria,

Commending the commitment of the ISSG, as set forth in the Joint Statement on the outcome of the multilateral talks on Syria in Vienna of 30 October 2015 and the Statement of the ISSG of 14 November 2015 (hereinafter the "Vienna Statements"), to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué in its entirety, and emphasizing the urgency for all parties in Syria to work diligently and constructively towards this goal,

Urging all parties to the UN-facilitated political process to adhere to the principles identified by the ISSG, including commitments to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character, to ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, to protecting the

rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, and to ensuring humanitarian access throughout the country,

Encouraging the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria,

Bearing in mind the goal to bring together the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians, who will decide their negotiation representatives and define their negotiation positions so as to enable the political process to begin, taking note of the meetings in Moscow and Cairo and other initiatives to this end, and noting in particular the usefulness of the meeting in Riyadh on 9-11 December 2015, whose outcomes contribute to the preparation of negotiations under UN auspices on a political settlement of the conflict, in accordance with the Geneva Communique and the "Vienna Statements", and looking forward to the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria finalizing efforts to this end,

1. Reconfirms its endorsement of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, endorses the "Vienna Statements" in pursuit of the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;

2. Requests the Secretary-General, through his good offices and the efforts of his Special Envoy for Syria, to convene representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process on an urgent basis, with a target of early January 2016 for the initiation of talks, pursuant to the Geneva Communiqué, consistent with the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, with a view to a lasting political settlement of the crisis;

3. Acknowledges the role of the ISSG as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations' efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria;

4. Expresses its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;

5. Acknowledges the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process, pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and that both initiatives should move ahead expeditiously, and in this regard expresses its support for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria, which the ISSG has committed to support and assist in implementing, to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards a political transition under UN auspices, on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, and to do so on an urgent basis;

6. Requests the Secretary-General to lead the effort, through the office of his Special Envoy and in consultation with relevant parties, to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire as well as continue planning for the support of ceasefire implementation, and urges Member States, in particular members of the ISSG, to support and accelerate all efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including through pressing all relevant parties to agree and adhere to such a ceasefire;

7. Emphasizes the need for a ceasefire monitoring, verification and reporting mechanism, requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on options for such a mechanism that it can support, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, and encourages Member States, including members of the Security Council, to provide assistance, including through expertise and in-kind contributions, to support such a mechanism;

8. Reiterates its call in resolution 2249 (2015) for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh), Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda or ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the ISSG and determined by the Security Council, pursuant to the Statement of the ISSG of 14 November 2015, and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Syria, and notes that the aforementioned ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against these individuals, groups, undertakings and entities, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;

9. Welcomes the effort that was conducted by the government of Jordan to help develop a common understanding within the ISSG of individuals and groups for possible determination as terrorists and will consider expeditiously the recommendation of the ISSG for the purpose of determining terrorist groups;

10. Emphasizes the need for all parties in Syria to take confidence building measures to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire, and calls on all states to use their influence with the government of Syria and the Syrian opposition to advance the peace process, confidence building measures and steps towards a ceasefire;

11. Requests the Secretary-General to report to the Council, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, on options for further confidence building measures;

12. Calls on the parties to immediately allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes, allow immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, calls on ISSG states to use their influence immediately to these ends, and demands the full implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and any other applicable resolutions;

13. Demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment, welcomes the commitment by the iSSG to press the parties in this regard, and further demands that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable;

14. Underscores the critical need to build conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas, in accordance with international law, including applicable provisions of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and taking into account the interests of those countries hosting refugees, urges Member States to provide assistance in this regard, looks forward to the London Conference on Syria in February 2016, hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations, as an important contribution to this endeavor, and further expresses its support to the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Syria;

15. Requests that the Secretary-General report back to the Security Council on the implementation of this resolution, including on progress of the UN-facilitated political process, within 60 days;

16. Decides to remain actively seized of the matter.

APPENDIX 5

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2449 (2018)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 8423rd meeting, on 13 December 2018

The Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 2042 (2012), 2043 (2012), 2118 (2013), 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2175 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2209 (2015), 2235 (2015), 2254 (2015), 2258 (2015), 2268 (2016), 2286 (2016), 2332 (2016), 2336 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and its Presidential Statements of 3 August 2011 (S/PRST/2011/16), 21 March 2012 (S/PRST/2012/6), 5 April 2012 (S/PRST/2012/10), 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15), 24 April 2015 (S/PRST/2015/10) and 17 August 2015 (S/PRST/2015/15),

Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations,

Expressing outrage at the unacceptable level of violence and the killing of hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of child casualties, as a result of the Syrian conflict,

Reiterating its grave distress at the continued devastating humanitarian situation in Syria and at the fact that urgent humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance, is required by more than 13 million people in Syria, of whom 6.2 million are internally displaced, including Palestine refugees, and more than 1 million people are still living in hard-to-reach areas,

Gravely concerned at the insufficient implementation of its resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) , 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and recalling in this regard the legal obligations of all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as well as all the relevant decisions of the Security Council, including by ceasing all attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including those involving attacks on schools and medical facilities, the indiscriminate use of weapons, including artillery, barrel bombs and air strikes, indiscriminate shelling by mortars, car bombs, suicide attacks and tunnel bombs, as well as the widespread use of torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary executions, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as all grave violations and abuses committed against children,

Noting the progress made in taking back areas of Syria from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Daesh) and Al-Nusrah Front (ANF) but expressing its grave concern that areas remain under their control and about the negative impact of their presence, violent extremist ideology and actions on stability in Syria and the region, including the devastating humanitarian impact on the civilian populations which has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, reaffirming its resolve to address all aspects of the threat posed by ISIL (also known as Daesh), ANF and all other

individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, as determined by the United Nations Security Council and as may further be agreed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and endorsed by the UN Security Council and calling for the full implementation of Security Council resolutions 2170 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2199 (2015), 2249 (2015), 2253 (2015), 2347 (2017), 2354 (2017), 2368 (2017) and 2370 (2017),

Expressing grave concern also at the movement of foreign terrorist fighters and other terrorists and terrorist groups into and out of Syria and reiterating its call on all States to take steps, consistent with international law, to prevent and suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with ISIL or Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, as determined by the United Nations Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and endorsed by the UN Security Council,

Reaffirming that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law,

Reaffirming the primary responsibility of the Syrian authorities to protect the population in Syria and reiterating that parties to armed conflict must take all feasible steps to protect civilians and recalling in this regard its demand that all parties to armed conflict comply fully with the obligations applicable to them under international law related to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including journalists, media professionals and associated personnel,

Reiterating its strong condemnation of all forms of violence and intimidation to which those participating in humanitarian operations are continue to be exposed, as well as attacks on humanitarian convoys and acts of destruction and looting of their assets and its urging of all parties involved in an armed conflict to promote the safety, security and freedom of movement of humanitarian personnel, including medical personnel and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in medical duties and United Nations and its associated personnel and their assets, expressing its ongoing admiration at the dedication and commitment of the Syrian Red Crescent volunteers and other humanitarian workers operating in deeply challenging conditions and urging all parties to take all appropriate steps to ensure the safety and security of United Nations and associated personnel, those of its specialised agencies and all other personnel engaged in humanitarian relief activities,

Noting that the United Nations and their implementing partners reached on average 5.4 million people with humanitarian aid each month in 2018 and that life-saving assistance delivered across borders represented a vital part of this, including the delivery of food assistance for on average 1 million people every month in 2018; and since the start of operations in 2014, non-food items for 6 million people; health assistance through 25 million treatments and water and sanitation supplies for over 5 million people,

Reiterating its grave concern at all instances of hindrances to the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, noting that ISIL (also known as Daesh), ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, are hindering the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance and are responsible for preventing aid delivery through deliberate interference and obstruction,

Reiterating further its grave concern at the continuing impediments to the delivery of sustained, needs-based humanitarian assistance across the country through the most direct routes, including to hard-to-reach areas and across conflict lines,

Expressing grave concern that access to medical care continues to be severely restricted and reiterating the need to respect the principle of medical neutrality, facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment, transport and supplies, including surgical items,

Reaffirming the need to support the United Nations and their implementing partners in their efforts to expand the delivery of humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need in Syria and further reaffirming its decision in resolution 2165 (2014) that all Syrian parties to the conflict shall enable the immediate and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance directly to people throughout Syria, by the United Nations and their implementing partners, on the basis of United Nations assessments of need and devoid of any political prejudices and aims, including by immediately removing all impediments to the provision of humanitarian assistance,

Taking note of the report of the Secretary-General of 19 June 2018 (S/2018/617) on the Review of the United Nations Cross-Border Operations and further taking note of ongoing efforts to implement the recommendations contained therein, and stressing the need to ensure that the delivery of humanitarian aid and services, including at the stage of distribution, is impartial, non-discriminatory and needs-based and that those most in need are beneficiaries of such aid and services, without misappropriation,

Expressing its appreciation for the work of the United Nations monitoring mechanism in monitoring shipments and confirming their humanitarian nature, in accordance with resolutions 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017) and commending the mechanism's efforts in facilitating cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid by the United Nations and their implementing partners, emphasising the importance to further robust monitoring of the humanitarian nature of UN relief consignments and their delivery inside Syria and encouraging the United Nations and their implementing partners to continue to take steps to scale up humanitarian deliveries throughout the country, notably into hard-to-reach areas,

Reiterating the need for all parties to respect and uphold the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law and the United Nations guiding principles of humanitarian emergency assistance, emphasising the importance of upholding the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, in the provision of humanitarian assistance and recalling also the importance of humanitarian deliveries reaching their intended beneficiaries,

Noting the role that ceasefire agreements which are consistent with humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law can play in facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance in order to help save civilian lives, reiterating its call upon all parties to respect and fulfil their commitments to existing ceasefire agreements, as well as the full implementation of resolution 2268 (2016) and 2401 (2018), as a step towards a comprehensive nation-wide ceasefire and emphasising that humanitarian access must be part of these efforts in accordance with international humanitarian law,

Expressing grave concern at the more than 5.6 million refugees, including more than 4.2 million women and children, who have fled Syria as a result of ongoing violence,

Reiterating its deep appreciation for the significant and admirable efforts that have been made by the countries of the region, notably Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, to accommodate Syrian refugees and mindful of the immense costs and social challenges incurred by these countries as a consequence of the crisis,

Recalling the need to create conditions throughout the country and facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas in Syria, in accordance with international law, including applicable provisions of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, taking into account the interests of those countries hosting refugees,

Calling upon the International community to increase their assistance to Syria by providing additional humanitarian aid, noting with concern that the international response to the Syrian and regional crisis continues to fall short of meeting the needs as assessed by host governments and the United Nations, therefore urging once again all Member States, based on burden-sharing principles, to support the United Nations and the countries of the region, including by adopting medium and long-term responses to alleviate the impact on communities, providing increased, flexible and predictable funding as well as increasing resettlement efforts and noting the second conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region held in Brussels in April 2018, co-chaired by the European Union and the United Nations,

Calling for humanitarian mine action to be accelerated as a matter of urgency throughout Syria,

Strongly condemning the arbitrary detention and torture of individuals in Syria, notably in prisons and detention facilities, as well as the kidnappings, abductions, hostage-taking and forced disappearances and demanding the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons starting with women and children, as well as sick, wounded, persons with disabilities and elderly persons and United Nations and humanitarian personnel and journalists,

Noting with grave concern that impunity in Syria contributes to widespread violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, stressing the need to end impunity for these violations and abuses and re-emphasising in this regard that those who have committed or are otherwise responsible for such violations and abuses in Syria must be brought to justice,

Emphasising that the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate further in the absence of a political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and calling upon all parties to make progress in this regard and to undertake confidence-building measures and recognising the efforts by the Office of the UN Special Envoy and the international community, including within the Astana framework, to advance the early release of any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, and handover of the bodies as well as the identification of missing persons,

Determining that the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria continues to constitute a threat to peace and security in the region,

Underscoring that Member States are obligated under Article 25 of the Charter of the United Nations to accept and carry out the Council's decisions,

1. Calls upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2019;

2. Reiterates its demand that all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable and further demands the full and immediate implementation of all provisions of all relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) and recalls that some of the violations and abuses committed in Syria may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity;

3. Decides to renew the decisions in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Security Council resolution 2165 (2014) for a further period of twelve months, that is, until 10 January 2020;

4. Further demands that all parties allow safe, unimpeded and sustained access for United Nations' and their implementing partners' humanitarian convoys, including medical and surgical supplies, to all requested areas and populations according to United Nations' assessment of need in all parts of Syria;

5. Reiterates that the situation will continue to deteriorate further in the absence of a political solution to the Syrian conflict and recalls its demand for the full and immediate implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) to facilitate a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué as set forth in the ISSG Statements, in order to end the conflict in Syria and stresses again that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;

6. Requests the Secretary-General to brief the Council monthly and to provide a report on a regular basis, at least every 60 days, on the implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and this resolution and on compliance by all relevant parties in Syria and further requests the Secretary-General to continue to include in his reports overall trends in UN cross-line and cross-border humanitarian access and detailed information on the humanitarian assistance delivered through UN humanitarian

cross-border operations as authorised by resolution 2165 (2014), including on the number of beneficiaries, locations of aid deliveries at district-level and the volume and nature of items delivered;

7. Reaffirms that it will take further measures under the Charter of the United Nations in the event of non-compliance with this resolution or resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018);

8. Decides to remain actively seized of the matter.

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SYRIA STUDY GROUP

In October 2018, the Syria Study Group was established by law to examine and make recommendations to Congress on the United States' military and diplomatic strategy in Syria. Specifically, Members of Congress sought a bipartisan review and assessment of U.S. objectives and a strategy going forward. Congress designated the United States Institute of Peace to facilitate the Group based on the Institute's demonstrated expertise in convening Congressionally directed study groups. Over the course of several months, the Syria Study Group met with current and former U.S. government officials, foreign governments, Congressional offices, international and regional organizations, academic institutions and think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and Syrian American and Syrian nongovernmental organizations. Members of the Group met in Washington, DC, traveled to the Middle East, and engaged the U.S. military in Tampa during their review of U.S. objectives and the desired end state in Syria.

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Mr. DEUTCH. I now recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

[Pause.]

Mr. DEUTCH. Ms. Stroul and Mr. Singh, thanks very much for testifying today and for your work on the final report of the Syria Study Group.

Your report is a thoughtful, informed overview of the Syrian conflict and provides pragmatic recommendations for how American policymakers can protect U.S. interests and stabilize Syria.

Now, it is well known that President Trump does not like to read, but I wish that he had skimmed the executive summary of your report before his recent phone call with Turkish President Erdogan.

Your assessment notes the liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States. It also notes the ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed, that Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria, Russia and Iran show few serious signs of divergence, that the United States underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence, and that Turkish insurgence into northeastern Syria would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

And despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests.

In the 10 days since President Trump's decision to hastily withdraw U.S. forces in northeastern Syria and consent to Turkey's invasion of the region, your assessment has in fact, sadly, borne out.

Rarely has a foreign policy decision by a United States president yielded this many disastrous consequences this quickly.

Most importantly, President Trump's irresponsible choice makes the American people less safe. The chaos in Syria has allowed hundreds and likely thousands of ISIS fighters and supporters to break out of prison.

Yesterday, senior U.S. officials told Foreign Policy that Turkish-backed forces are deliberately releasing ISIS detainees previously held by Kurdish fighters, and as your report notes, ISIS has already transitioned to an insurgency and in the absence of effective pressure against it, will utilize its Syrian sanctuary for organizing, instructing, and inspiring external attacks.

Tragically, like other aspects of your assessment, I expect this prediction to ring true in the coming weeks and months. The President also forced Kurdish forces to reach an agreement with Bashar al-Assad, allowing his soldiers and Russian troops to expand their presence in northeastern Syria.

Yesterday, Russian media circulated videos showing Russian soldiers and their proxies taking over recently abandoned U.S. bases in the region.

This outcome will also benefit Iran by reinforcing the position of its ally, Assad. It is unclear how allowing Tehran to fortify a land bridge to the Mediterranean, enabling it to threaten our ally, Israel, is consistent with the President's maximum pressure policy on Iran.

It is also unclear how ceding the field to Putin in Syria supports the Administration's great power competition strategy.

The President's rash decision also put American soldiers in danger. On Friday, Turkish troops fired artillery at an American base. A day later, Turkish-backed forces cut the main highway in northeastern Syria, effectively isolating U.S. soldiers in the region.

And while I am thankful no Americans were hurt in either case, both incidents placed American troops directly in harm's way and were a direct result of President Trump's shortsighted choice.

The President justified his decision by claiming that he is reducing our presence in the Middle East and terminating America's endless wars.

But the Administration just sent an additional 1,800 troops to Saudi Arabia. Secretary of Defense Esper noted on Friday that an additional 14,000 American personnel have been deployed in the Middle East since May.

These deployments include airborne early warning aircraft squadrons, maritime patrol squadrons, Patriot air and missile defense batteries, B–52 bombers and an aircraft carrier strike group.

I support the objective of this increased troop presence—to deter Iran. But the President's claim that he is reducing the U.S. role in the Middle East is simply a lie and the American people see right through it.

The situation in Syria is tragic because it could have been avoided with real strategic diplomacy. The American presence in Syria was not an endless war but a limited sustainable efficient deployment, one of the notable successes of recent U.S. policy in the Middle East.

But President Trump threw it all away, yielding U.S. leverage, putting American troops and civilians in danger, undermining our credibility, dividing NATO, removing pressure on ISIS, giving a strategic victory to our adversaries, and betraying our Kurdish partners who fought valiantly in recent years to counter ISIS with American support.

This is not just my opinion but one that most Republicans share. Senator Graham labeled President Trump's decision the biggest blunder of his presidency and noted, "We are witnessing ethnic cleansing in Syria by Turkey, the destruction of a reliable ally in the Kurds, and the reemergence of ISIS."

Representative Cheney said the President's choice was impossible to understand. Senator Rubio claimed, "The damage to our reputation and national interests will be extraordinary and long lasting," and President Trump's former Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, argued, "The Kurds were instrumental in our successful fight against ISIS in Syria. Leaving them to die is a big mistake."

I could go on. That one decision could unite both Democrats and Republicans on Syria policy and yield this many calamitous results says a lot about President Trump's capabilities as commander in chief.

The current unrest in Syria, sadly, epitomizes the strategically confused and morally bankrupt approach to the world, and I finally would just urge my Republican colleagues to remember that Syria

is not the only example of the president abandoning a partner in the face of an aggressor.

President Trump withheld $391 million in congressionally appropriated security assistance to Ukraine, a State that is at war with Russia in a conflict that has killed more than 13,000 people, as part of an effort to compel the Ukrainian government to dig up dirt on his political opponent.

That behavior should unite us all—Republican, Democrat, independent—in rejecting a foreign policy that has put personal ambition over national interest and sullied our Nation's honor and credibility.

I look forward to our witnesses' testimony and suggestions on how the U.S. can salvage our policy and achieve our national interests in Syria, end the conflict that has led to the deaths of over 600,000 people, and help the Syrian people build a better future, one that is not dictated by Bashar al-Assad, by Russia, and by Iran.

And with that, I yield to Mr. Wilson for his opening statement.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Chairman Ted Deutch, for calling this important and timely hearing.

Tragically, the United States' Syria policy has been a failure from the very start. It has been an example of America's strategic failure at every point, from the notorious red line by President Barack Obama that was never enforced to the reckless betrayal of the Kurds in the recent days.

But I believe that our failure in Syria is far greater than a strategic misstep. Our Syria policy over the last 8 years represents a deep moral challenge to all of us.

How could we stand by while a brutal authoritarian regime massacres its people indiscriminately? How can we talk of red lines?

We sit here over 8 years after Bashar Assad began butchering the Syrian people using poison gas and barrel bombs, still trying to figure out what our policy should be.

But it is not just us. It is the entire international community that is complicit in the privations of the Assad regime and its backers in Iran and Russia.

The international system as we know it was founded in the aftermath of the humanitarian horror and catastrophe of the Holocaust.

But it has failed as well to prevent the very tragedy that it was supposed to act as a bulwark against. The enemies of freedom and democracy have hijacked our multilateral institutions. Instead of promoting liberty, they are exploited to cement tyranny and oppression.

Developments over the past week have only underscored the importance of the work that our esteemed witnesses here today have spent so much time.

I was deeply disappointed by the Administration's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria and effectively green light a Turkish incursion, putting our Kurdish allies at great peril.

The Syria Study Group, presciently, warned against such a withdrawal and outlined the potential negative consequences that we are, unfortunately, witnessing today.

Like Chairman Deutch, I am increasingly concerned about the resurgence of ISIS on the heels of the U.S. withdrawal. Our with-

drawal from Syria creates dangerous breathing room for ISIS elements in the region, which can ultimately endanger American families back home from terrorist safe havens overseas.

In order to prevent them from coming here, we must fight them over there. Our force of about a thousand American soldiers in Syria was a minuscule percentage of all American military forces in uniform today.

But the role of this small contingent was outsized. They helped protect the world from the dangers of ISIS establishing safe havens to threaten American families. This was extremely cost effective military investment.

It seems to me the only real winners of our withdrawal are Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Assad regime, in addition to the ISIS terrorists.

But the bigger problem is that our withdrawal from Syria could have consequences in virtually every other arena of U.S. foreign policy.

In a single stroke, we have, sadly, undermined U.S. credibility everywhere. The move solidifies a concern and fear that America is receding from the world's stage, inspiring and enabling the forces of tyranny everywhere, which has not been the President's policy of peace through strength.

Furthermore, the Assad regime, backed by Russia and Iran, continues its barbaric assault on Idlib, Syria as we speak. Reports over the past few days indicate that Russia has intentionally bombed over a dozen hospitals in the province.

Russia, clearly is not a partner in Syria but an adversary. How many Syrians must be killed until we take action to stop this killing machine?

There is simply no solution for Syria with Assad in power. As the chairman has indicated, I would like to conclude by saying that we know America has been the moral actor on the world stage. We have always aimed to do the right thing and the people of the world know that. They know the values America has stood for.

We believe that we still can return to that ideal. In my opinion, there is simply no substitute for American leadership to preserve peace through strength.

I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

I now will recognize members of the subcommittee for a 1-minute opening statement should they choose to make one.

Mr. Lieu, you are recognized.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ranking Member Wilson, for your opening statement.

I do not object to withdrawing U.S. troops in Syria. I object in how that was done. Because of Donald Trump's impulsive decision with no planning and no coordination, we now have ISIS terrorists that have been set free in Syria. We have Turkish forces slaughtering our allies, the Kurds, and then we have Russian military forces gleefully taking over U.S. military facilities.

If you look at Donald Trump's foreign policy, many of his actions have principally benefited Russia, from attacking NATO to blocking military aide to Ukraine to now his decision in Syria.

So I think it is appropriate for the American people to ask the question of when it comes to Vladimir Putin, why does it always seem like Donald Trump bends the knee?

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Lieu.

Mr. Chabot, you are recognized for 1 minute.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As a former chairman of this subcommittee, let me just say that the situation in Syria has been truly a tragedy to watch unfold.

Over the past now 8 years, we have witnessed just how brutal Bashar al-Assad truly is and the barbaric lengths He is willing to go to hold on to power.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions forced to flee, creating one of the world's worst refugee crises today.

The civil war also created a vacuum for groups like ISIS and al-Qaida to flourish, while opening a doorway for Iran to advance its goal of regional hegemony and further enabling it to threaten our key ally in the region, Israel.

Defeating ISIS, al-Qaida, and Iran as well as supporting Israel remain critical national security priorities that I believe most Americans support.

So I look forward to discussing the report, especially in light of the changes in our Syria policy since it was released and how we can move forward to accomplish our objectives.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Mr. Sherman, you are recognized.

Mr. SHERMAN. it is not surprising that huge bipartisan majorities rejected this action by the president in a vote just half an hour ago on the floor.

This is an unforced error. We saw northeast Syria stable, our costs and our casualties contained, ISIS in prison camps, and the Kurds who guarded them in prison camps and who are allies safe.

Now the Kurds are subject to slaughter and ISIS may very well be liberated. This is a mistake of such magnitude it is hard to imagine that it is a mistake made in good faith.

One possibility—is it an intentional gift to Putin? The other possibility is that Turkey threatened to wage war against the United States, and rather than level with the American people the president decided to pretend that this was sort of voluntary withdrawal.

This cutting and running will not only imperil our policy in the Middle East, it will undercut our alliances everywhere in the world.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Cicilline, you are recognized.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and the ranking member, for holding this important and timely hearing.

Ten days ago, President Trump sealed the fates of our Kurdish partners in Syria when he gave President Erdogan of Turkey the green light to invade, setting off a humanitarian disaster and reigniting chaos in northern Syria.

I believe this callous and reckless decision will go down in history not only for its disregard for human life but for the strategic

malpractice of placing American troops in harm's way, allowing thousands of ISIS prisoners to go free and ceding influence over the region to Russia and the Assad regime.

Like many, I have been mystified by the Administration's decision to allow this invasion to go forward in their ham-fisted attempts to clean up the colossal mess they have made.

No matter what they do, the Administration cannot bring back murdered Kurdish children. They cannot reclaim our American military positions and equipment seized by the Russians, and they cannot bring back our credibility, which has been squandered as we betray the trust of our Kurdish allies.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your views on what efforts we can make as a Congress and what actions you would recommend to the Administration to try to salvage this horrific situation.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Do any other members of the subcommittee wish to make an opening statement?

Seeing none, without objection all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

And it is now my pleasure to introduce our witnesses.

Ms. Dana Stroul is co-chair of the Syria Study Group. She is a senior fellow in the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Program on Arab Politics and previously served for 5 years as a Senior Professional Staff Member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where she covered the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey.

Before Capitol Hill, she worked on Middle East policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo on economic political affairs, at the U.S. Institute of Peace on civilian-military relations in Iraq, and at the National Democratic Institute on Gulf Affairs.

Mr. Michael Singh is also co-chair of the Syria Study Group. He is the managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and previously served as senior director for Near East and North African affairs at the White House, from 2007 to 2008, and director for several Middle Eastern countries including Iran and Syria, on the NSC staff from 2005 to 2007. He also served as special assistant to Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice as well as staff aide to the U.S. Ambassador to Israel.

Thank you both for being here today. Let me remind the witnesses to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes. Without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the hearing record.

I thank you both sincerely for being here at this timely moment, in particular, and we will now start with Ms. Stroul. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF DANA STROUL, CO-CHAIR, SYRIA STUDY GROUP

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity

to present the final report of the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group.

It was an honor to co-chair this bipartisan group of experts along with my colleague, Mike Singh.

When the Syria Study Group released its final report last month, we intentionally started by articulating why Syria still matters. Making this case is not something that our group took for granted, especially at a time of heightened public debate about the U.S. role in the world and what we should invest to achieve U.S. objectives.

The group was unanimous in its conclusion that what happens in Syria does not stay in Syria. Moreover, we argue that if sufficiently resourced and prioritized, the United States retained compelling forms of leverage to influence an outcome in Syria that protects U.S. interests.

Decisions made in Washington over the last 10 days have enormous implications for the future trajectory of the conflict in Syria and for U.S. interests.

Mr. Singh will discuss the Study Group's specific assessments and recommendations, but needless to say, Syria still matters.

The fundamental drivers of conflict and violence in Syria are unchanged today. Notably, there is bipartisan acknowledgment of these points here in Congress.

The conflict in Syria was largely relegated to the margins of public attention before last week. Now it is front and center of international headlines and has captured domestic attention.

As the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Government work to articulate what U.S. policy can realistically achieve when the majority of U.S. forces in Syria are withdrawn, our report proposes a series of specific nonmilitary recommendations.

But it is also important to take a step back and remind ourselves of the origins of this conflict and situate Syria within the broader strategic landscape of U.S. national security.

Syria poses five strategic challenges: international terrorism, Iran, Russia, refugees, and international norms. The current conflict began as peaceful protests against an autocratic dictator, one of the many uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011.

Though many hoped that protests in Syria might open the door to positive change, those hopes were quickly dashed as Syria rapidly devolved into a crucible of intersection conflicts that have reverberated well beyond the Middle East.

The Assad regime survived in power for decades by operating at the intersection of criminality and terrorism. The United States designated Syria as a State sponsor of terrorism in 1979. We know the nature of this regime.

Assad facilitated the movement of al-Qaida operatives during the Iraq War to attack U.S. forces and he will seek to leverage al-Qaida and ISIS fighters in Syria again when it suits his needs.

Syria today provides safe haven to the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. Idlib, for example, is home to the greatest concentration of foreign fighters since Afghanistan in the 1980's.

ISIS no longer holds territory but was already reconstituting as an insurgent force. It will replenish its ranks with fighters breaking out of detention facilities today and will prey on vulnerable communities as the humanitarian situation deteriorates.

Iran seeks to turn Syria into a forward base for its missiles and advanced weapons, and has exploited the conflict to entrench itself in Syria's economic and social fabric.

Israeli strikes and U.S. sanctions prevented Iran from consolidating these gains, but come at the increased risk of war between Iran and Israel. That risk is now increased today.

Russia, too, has exploited the conflict. Through its intervention in Syria, Moscow established itself as a major player in the Middle East for the first time in decades.

U.S. partners across the region have expanded ties and look to Moscow, not Washington, for mediation. Russia is positioning itself to broker an agreement between Assad and Turkey and also played a role in the agreement reached between the Syrian Democratic Forces and Assad.

The arc of crisis and xenophobic discourse from the Middle East to Europe follows Syrian refugees who fled a deliberate campaign of violence against civilians by Assad, Russia, and ISIS.

Refugees have strained the economies of Syria's neighbors and roiled politics in Europe. Yet, conditions in Syria are not suitable for safe, voluntary, or dignified return.

Finally, the Assad regime and its partners have smashed every norm of conflict by targeting hospitals and schools, deploying chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and using starvation and mass murder as weapons of war.

To date, there have been no meaningful consequences for these actions. We should expect that future authoritarians, when faced with peaceful protests, may look to the Syrian case and assume that mass civilian homicide will not be challenged in any credible way, setting new precedents for conduct in war.

I only have a few seconds left. Syria is a conflict where the two great U.S. concerns—international terrorism and great power rivals—come together. It is not a conflict that can be contained or ignored.

The rapid development shaping both the battlefield and political realignments in Syria will not end this conflict. They will only set conditions for the next phase of war.

The Study Group's final report remains relevant today, which my colleague will now detail.

Thank you.

[The prepared statements of Ms. Stroul and Mr. Singh follows:]

Joint Statement of the Co-Chairs of the Syria Study Group

Dana Stroul and Michael Singh

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

October 16, 2019

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism, we are pleased to present the final report of the Syria Study Group, which represents a bipartisan, consensus assessment of the conflict in Syria and recommendations for U.S. policy.

In our report published last month, the Syria Study Group warned that the conflict in Syria was not over, but was entering a new phase – likely a more dynamic and dangerous one. Unfortunately, events since then have borne out this warning. In recent days, the United States has made momentous and troubling decisions that have contributed to a new round of fighting and a new wave of atrocities, civilian flight, and human suffering. In the Syria Study Group's view, these developments will hamper the ability of the United States to achieve critical national security objectives in the Middle East.

The Syria Study Group was unanimous in its view that the conflict in Syria is not simply a far-off tragedy. The United States has compelling interests at stake, and events there will reverberate far into the future, in the Middle East and beyond. Indeed, Syria is a conflict where the two great U.S. strategic concerns – the aggression of revisionist powers and the threat of international terrorism – come together.

The members of the Syria Study Group were also in agreement that the United States has the tools necessary to influence the direction of the conflict in Syria and advance U.S. interests, and that our efforts can protect not only American national security but also alleviate the suffering of those caught up in this conflict and deter those abetting it.

Unfortunately, the withdrawal of American forces from Syria means that we are relinquishing perhaps the most important of those tools – one third of Syrian territory not under Assad's control and a capable local partner – and thus forgoing an important source of leverage. Moreover, the Syria Study Group noted that the sharp shifts and reversals in U.S. policy undermined U.S. credibility. The latest U.S. decision only further erodes any remaining standing. It is imperative now that U.S. policymakers focus on devising a strategy that can mitigate the consequences of these setbacks. The report of the Syria Study Group offers a bipartisan roadmap for doing so.

The group recognized the limited appetite of the American public for an increase in U.S. military or financial investment in Syria. Therefore, we recommended that the United States strengthen key elements of the current approach to Syria by investing appropriate levels of resources, while elevating resolution of the broader conflict as a U.S. national security priority. Some tools remain in use: a coalition of partners who largely share U.S. objectives, sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and diplomacy. Others have been set aside but remain available: U.S. forces enabling local partners and civilians, and stabilization and reconstruction assistance. We are calling for the Administration and Congress to deploy the full range of U.S. policy tools and to appropriately resource them.

The Syria Study Group recommended that the U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria be reversed. This was necessary prior to last week's developments; it remains necessary but far more complicated today. In addition, we recommended that U.S. sanctions on Assad and his backers be strengthened and be made multilateral to the extent possible, that diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime continue, that U.S. stabilization assistance already authorized and appropriated by Congress for post-ISIS communities in Syria be spent, and that reconstruction aid to the parts of Syria under regime control continue to be withheld. The U.S. must concurrently continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside of Syria, while shoring up vulnerable, refugee-hosting partner countries and host communities on Syria's borders.

In its final report, the Syria Study Group warned of crisis in the U.S.-Turkey relationship in the event of a Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria. The group recommended that work on the security mechanism in northeastern Syria continue in order to address legitimate Turkish security concerns and prevent Turkish military operations, while encouraging the resumption of Turkey-PKK peace talks as the best path forward for addressing Turkey's concerns with the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The group did not call for ending U.S. support to the SDF following the territorial defeat of ISIS, but rather transitioning the relationship so that the SDF could wage a counter-insurgency campaign while improving stability and governance in the areas of Syria under their control.

Our group acknowledges that, given recent developments, even a more realistic and effectively resourced strategy faces long odds. The obstacles to influencing an outcome in Syria conducive to U.S. interests were formidable before the U.S. military withdrawal and are even more so now. Assad remains adamantly opposed to any compromise requiring changes in his regime's behavior, and he stands to consolidate gains from the U.S. military withdrawal by forging a deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces, reentering northeastern Syria, and bringing the population there to heel. Russia is unable to unilaterally deliver a political win for Assad but remained invested in his survival before the U.S. military withdrawal and will capitalize on recent developments by positioning Moscow as mediator of Syria's disputes while sidelining the United States. Iran has suffered setbacks in the form of sanctions and Israeli strikes but remains determined to entrench itself in Syria for the long term and will now look to link its proxies in Syria and Iraq – a goal previously blocked by the presence of U.S. forces. Turkey and our local partner the SDF are at war with one another, and the result is likely to be the collapse of the SDF, the forced resettlement of Syrian refugees that intentionally alters the demography of northeastern Syria, minimal political or economic gains by Syrian Kurds as their communities look to Damascus for protection, and a new wave of civilian flight setting conditions for the next phase of conflict and instability. ISIS, already reemerging as an insurgency prior to the Turkish incursion, was never fully defeated and will gain new strength and purpose as a result of recent events.

Beyond these challenges, the scale and scope of human suffering over the course of nine years of conflict have set a depraved new standard for 21st century conflict – hundreds of thousands dead, millions missing or displaced, and waves of refugees straining Syria's neighbors and Europe. The parties responsible – the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia - have faced no meaningful consequences for their use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, torture, starvation, and intentional destruction of civilian infrastructure. The United Nations Security Council has been rendered ineffectual in galvanizing international action in response to Assad's atrocities by Russian and Chinese protection. These issues are rarely elevated or prioritized in diplomatic discourse or multilateral gatherings on Syria but remain profoundly important to the stakeholders in the conflict who have suffered the most: the Syrian people. Without meaningful attention paid to those issues most important to civilians – protection, accountability, justice -- Syrian refugees will not voluntarily return home, Syrians remaining in their country will lack the security to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and no political process will be sustainable.

The Syria Study Group's report, which provides our full and detailed assessments and policy recommendations, is attached to this statement. We believe that the strategy we outline there not only remains relevant, but more necessary than ever in light of recent events. We hope that the report can serve as a bipartisan roadmap for action to those ends.

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group, we wish to thank Congress for supporting the creation of this Group, and special thanks to Senator Shaheen for her leadership in ensuring that the Syria Study Group legislation became law. We also thank the U.S. Institute of Peace for its facilitating role – USIP plays a unique role at the nexus of U.S. thinking and doing across many of the most complex global challenges. Finally, we express our appreciation to the members of the SSG for their collegiality, contributions, and willingness to engage thoughtfully and critically with each other and with our USG and expert briefers on this vital topic.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ms. Stroul.

Mr. Singh, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SINGH, CO-CHAIR, SYRIA STUDY GROUP

Mr. SINGH. Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the committee, thanks so much for this opportunity to testify and thank you to Congress for the opportunity to serve as chairman—co-chair, I should say—of the Syria Study Group and it was an honor to serve alongside Ms. Stroul as my co-chair.

As Dana noted, Syria does matter and Syria has resisted all of our efforts over the years to ignore it, to contain the conflict, to cauterize the conflict, as some used to say, and it still matters.

The report that we put out just a couple of weeks ago offers what I think is a pretty sobering assessment of the conflict there.

I would not want to give the impression that everything was hunky dory before recent decisions. It was not. But in the last few days, things have gotten much worse, I would say.

The report at its core is a strategy of consolidating our gains in northeastern Syria, of working toward a political settlement to the conflict, which is, ultimately, what is necessary to address all of those problems that Ms. Stroul was talking about, and taking steps to protect American interests if such a settlement could not be reached—if it proved elusive.

At the time we put out our report, our view was the U.S. had such a strategy but that, essentially, that strategy was undermined by a couple of big things.

One was inadequate resourcing. A good example of this was the Administration's decision not to spend the stabilization funding in northeastern Syria that Congress had appropriated.

And it was also undermined by the perception around the world that the high-level leadership in the U.S. Government simply was not committed to this strategy we are talking about.

You know, when our officials were going around the world trying to recruit other countries to contribute militarily to the conflict, the question that they had in their minds was is the United States really going to be committed to this mission, and I think that that question has, unfortunately, been answered in the negative in recent days.

Fast forwarding to today, now the United States, I think, lacks a strategy for Syria, if I can put it bluntly, and U.S. officials are going to need to scramble to reverse engineer a strategy to conform with the decisions that have been made by the White House in recent days.

Rather than consolidating our gains, my fear is those gains that we have made in northeastern Syria are now going to be reversed, and a political settlement on terms favorable to U.S. interests I think is now less likely.

And this is not just the result of a poor decision being made by the White House. I think this is also the result of, frankly, poor planning because, as I think Congressman Lieu said, in many ways this was a long time in coming and yet we have no—we see no evidence that this decision by the Turks was met with any kind of contingency planning by the U.S. Government.

Instead, we have U.S. forces retreating under fire, withdrawing under fire, for maybe the first time since Somalia except that fire is coming from a NATO ally, and I think that if we all stop for a moment and let that sink in, it is really extraordinary.

The consequences of a U.S. withdrawal—I worry that what we are going to see is a cascade effect in Syria and, obviously, the report does not get into this because this is all relatively new but it is based upon what we learned in the course of our briefings.

My concern is now you will see and have seen already Syrian Democratic Forces moving forth to meet the Turkish incursion and U.S. forces moving out of Syria, and this creates a vacuum in most of eastern Syria.

And ISIS will use that vacuum to regroup and, potentially, to not just break out of prison but to conduct attacks in Syrian cities to try to reconsolidate some of its control of territory.

The SDF, as has already been noted, faced with this choice between Assad and the Turks, has chosen to make a deal with the Assad regime, and we have seen regime forces now move into eastern Syria.

With regime forces come the Iranians and Russians. That raises the prospect of Iran linking its Syrian and Iraqi proxies in a way that will also perhaps prompt an expansion of Israeli air strikes and, thus, an increase in the chance of outright conflict between the two.

I think we will also see security conditions deteriorate as the population is brutalized in eastern Syria as it has been elsewhere in areas the regime has retaken.

We may also see a breakout of al-Qaida linked groups from Idlib along that northern border corridor.

There still are problems elsewhere in Syria which are not linked necessarily explicitly to what is happening in the northeast.

Those include things like Idlib, like the security that is deteriorating in other regime-held areas, the entrenchment of Iran in Syrian society, the stalled political process, and the shattering of international norms with no real justice or accountability, as Ms. Stroul was pointing to.

So what does the United States need to do? And I will just take a few seconds more, Mr. Chairman. In the northeast, I think it is vital that we halt and/or limit the Turkish incursion and press the Turks for humanitarian access, to sever their links to terrorist groups, and not to forcibly resettle Arab refugees in Kurdish areas or in areas they are not from or do not want to go back to.

It is important that we try to keep pressure on ISIS. I think that probably means trying to keep American troops in eastern Syria if that is viable and if—and certainly keeping up the air campaign—air strikes against both ISIS and al-Qaida linked groups.

Also, it means ensuring that we hold on to the U.S. presence in Iraq, which has also come under pressure in recent months, both politically and also perhaps here in Washington.

I think it is important we keep pressure on Iran by supporting Israeli air strikes and by maintaining that garrison at al-Tanf, which I anticipate itself may now come under some pressure as Russians, Iranians, others try to sort of complete the withdrawal of American forces from Syria.

And I think we will need to see a diplomatic push to hold our anti-ISIS and our sort of anti-Assad coalition together, maintaining this policy of withholding economic reconstruction funds, imposing sanctions, and diplomatically isolating the Assad regime.

Many of our allies may now be inclined to peel off of that coalition.

Just in closing, our report warned that this was not a conflict that was over—that it remained dynamic. It remained dangerous, and I think that, unfortunately, recent events have borne that out.

I think it is important now that we stop relinquishing our leverage and we start using that leverage. My fear is that we are not going to see an end to the endless wars as a result of recent decisions.

We are going to find that American forces were actually sort of helping to keep the peace and stability there, and what will really contribute to endless conflict is that deterioration of American credibility throughout the region.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Singh. Thank you, Ms. Stroul.

Now I will begin the questioning. We are going to do that subject to the 5-minute rule. I will begin, followed by Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Singh, I want to start with where you left off talking about American leverage, and Ms. Stroul, you laid out the five areas. And I just want to suggest—I want to ask you this question.

If our actions over the past couple weeks in Syria mean that we are at risk of—a greater risk of terrorism, expanded number of refugees, Russia is stronger, Iran is stronger, that when you talk about international norms, which I think is too often left out of this—mass civilian homicide as a policy—barrel bombs, chemical weapons, targeting hospitals and schools, starvation hasn't one of the international norms for decades been American leadership?

And if in all five of these areas we are weaker, not to mention the fact that we have left our partner, the Kurds, to be slaughtered, then isn't that fundamental norm of American leadership and American influence challenged and weakened dramatically?

What leverage do we have, Mr. Singh, is my question, after we take action like this?

Mr. SINGH. Thank you, Congressman.

I think we do have leverage. I mean, we remain, obviously, a very capable and powerful actor on the world stage.

We have, obviously, this coalition that we have put together to conduct air strikes against ISIS. We have sanctions. We have withholding, as I said, of the economic reconstruction funding or diplomatic recognition of any settlement or of the Assad regime itself.

But I do think, Congressman, that you make an important point about the role of American leadership because I think that without the United States to sort of assemble an international coalition to put together these tools, not just our tools but contributions from others, they will not do it themselves.

They will say, look, the writing is on the wall. Assad has won. Russia is calling the shots here. And I think you will see hedging strategies from those allies.

We have, generally, exercised that leadership, I think, for a couple of reasons—one, because we have always found it to be in our interest to do so, to be the ones setting out the initiatives and hav-

ing others, hopefully, sign up to those initiatives, and second, because we have worried about the vacuum that is created in the absence of that leadership and who might step in, and I think those who step in are other States—weaker States, frankly, like Russia, like Iran, who lack the ability to challenge us directly except when we back off.

And then non-State actors who, you know, in certain areas where there, frankly, is no government, no authority, step in and provide some of that themselves in ways which are quite destructive.

Mr. DEUTCH. I agree, and on the issue of weaker States with more power, Ms. Stroul, how does providing Assad and Iran a freer hand in Syria undermine the Administration's maximum pressure policy that had been our policy and apparently continues to be, notwithstanding where we stand?

Ms. STROUL. The Syria Study Group talked about sanctions to some extent being successful in denying Iran the opportunity to consolidate its gains in Syria.

But on its own, a sanctions only policy combined with Israeli target kinetic strikes was not sufficient to remove Iran or eliminate Iranian influence from Syria.

I want to return to just what Mr. Singh was discussing and your first question as well. The reason the Syrian Study Group talked about needing to retain a U.S. military presence in that one-third of Syria was not only about completing the anti-ISIS fight.

It was about the broader leverage of that one-third of Syria which is the resource-rich part of Syria which provided us leverage to influence a political outcome in Syria.

While anything in terms of U.S. leadership is going to be much more difficult, going forward, there are three categories of leverage that still, if properly resourced and the State Department and our diplomats are empowered to lead a coalition, potentially provide some leverage to us.

The first is reconstruction. Russia and Iran simply do not have the financing to reconstruct Syria. So even if Assad regains control of that one-third of Syria, he does not have the resources and his backers do not have the resources to construct and provide economic stability or security for those areas.

That comes through the United States, Europe, and access to international financial institutions. Right now, that remains relevant.

Sanctions—many other governments are at this point contemplating whether or not to go back into Damascus, especially as we see what happens with Assad on the ground.

But the risks of secondary sanctions and what it means to materially support the Assad regime and his backers now remains a possible and potent form of leverage if we apply it smartly now.

And finally, political recognition—we still have leadership with the Europeans and with international organizations to deny political recognition and international legitimacy to Assad and that still remains relevant today.

Mr. DEUTCH. Before I turn it over to Mr. Wilson, I will respectfully suggest—and we will see how the rest of this discussion goes—I acknowledge what you are saying. It feels—though you wrote it only weeks ago, it feels like it is from another time. When

you talk about properly resourced decisions on reconstruction and sanctions and political recognition were all based on American leadership.

When you talk about America being a powerful actor on the world stage, that is true. We are a less powerful actor when we leave our partners open to slaughter, the partners that we have relied upon to help us in this very difficult battle against ISIS.

That is why this feels so, so problematic. But I am sure we will get into this more.

Mr. Wilson, you are recognized.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Indeed, it is a bipartisan concern about everything we are discussing today. it is quite obvious that, in a bipartisan manner, we are all concerned and that is why we appreciate so much both of you leading the effort for the study and providing the study.

And Ms. Stroul and Mr. Singh, for each of you, the events of the past weekend have been really completely upended our counter-ISIS strategy.

What should we do to have the strategy to address what is occurred in the last week? And begin with Ms. Stroul.

Ms. STROUL. We still have not—the U.S. forces presence on the ground in Syria was not—we were not fighting ISIS directly. We were working through a partner.

But we were also collecting intelligence and we had a large air campaign as well. We do not have to abandon the air campaign. Our coalition partners in the defeat ISIS coalition have—the coalition has not collapsed yet.

And I would add that the anti-ISIS coalition has many elements, not just military force on the ground. There also a counter terror financing element. There is humanitarian aid.

There's working on countering ISIS propaganda and its global ideological appeal. These are still things that we can work on.

And at the end of the day, Turkey is still our NATO ally and they have said that they are going to accept responsibility for the rest of the defeat ISIS campaign.

Now, there are a lot of reasons why that is very problematic. But at this point, they are still our partner in the NATO alliance and if they—while we need to right now think about what tools we can compel to shape Turkish actions and prevent destructive Turkish actions that can cause the next cycle of conflict, there may be still areas where we can work with them if we can get to a cease-fire on going forward with the anti-ISIS campaign.

Mr. SINGH. So I agree with that. We have to, to the extent we can, use the tools that we have, whether it is air strikes—you know, frankly, whether it is keeping some forces in Syria, which I think is not something we should take off the table or assume is not possible now. We need to examine whether that is in fact viable in current circumstances.

We need to keep that pressure on, and not just ISIS. But there are groups like HTS, like Huras al—Din, who probably will benefit from this situation as well because now there is this corridor created along the Turkish-Syrian border which might allow them to escape Idlib where they are currently sort of holed up and spread into other areas.

Syria and Huras al-Din in particular is committed to external plotting and so we need to pay attention to that.

There is also, though, this risk—and President Trump has talked about it quite explicitly—of ISIS members now exfiltrating Syria to places like Europe. And so there are intelligence and a CT task that comes along with that as well.

And so I think it is important that we work very closely to the extent, again, we can, given the state of the relationship with the Turks, with other countries along the borders, with Europe on making sure that we are tracking that, finding those folks, arresting them if possible, and countering them as well.

I think all of this is more difficult now in the circumstances we are in because, again, as Dana was saying, part of the reason we had those forces there was to sort of enable other activities in eastern Syria to promote stability and good governance, which really would have been necessary to keep ISIS from reemerging. It already was reemerging before this.

Now it looks like those missions just will not be possible in the current environment and that is going to sort of reduce our CT effectiveness.

Mr. WILSON. I would like to thank both of you because I was really concerned we were in a hopeless situation. But, indeed, we are not, and we should always remember that Turkey is a member of NATO for 70 years—has been such a valued ally, and the Turkish people—their relationship to the American has been so strong. It is just shocking to see whatever divisions are occurring now that I believe will be just temporary.

On another note, the United Nations has different associations with the Assad dictatorship. From each of you, what is your view about the relationship of the Assad regime with the U.N. organizations?

Ms. STROUL. The United Nations and the various organizations that have been providing humanitarian assistance inside Syria have received much criticism for acquiescing to the manner in which the Assad regime would like that assistance to be delivered to communities inside Syria.

Our report highlights a very important Security Council resolution coming up for renewal at the end of the year, the Cross-Border Resolution, which provides the international underpinning for the United Nations to enter into areas of Syria without the Assad regime acquiescing specifically to it.

Without that Cross-Border Resolution, all humanitarian aid delivered by the United Nations inside Syria would be subject to Assad regime approval, which means that delivery of that assistance and provision would be weaponized and politicized to suit Assad's purposes.

Mr. WILSON. And my time is up but thank both of you very much.

Mr. ALLRED [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

I will recognize myself for now for 5 minutes. I just want to thank you both for your work. I am sure it must be frustrating to have finished these recommendations and to immediately thereafter have these events come up.

The Syria Study Group was put together to develop comprehensive and thoughtful policy for the future. But President Trump has instead acted on a whim and in doing so has thrown our allies under the bus, I think has emboldened our enemies, and I am deeply, deeply concerned about this.

And, of course, you have seen today with the vote that we just took how bipartisan that rejection has been. I am most concerned—I want to ask you first about the reputational damage that has been done. You might have seen the same comments I have seen from the SDF saying this is a stab in the back.

Why would anyone ally with us, going forward, and your comments about what we can do and the leverage we may still maintain seems to me that it relies on the fact that anyone would believe our word at all, which I find to be quite suspect right now?

Mr. SINGH. So I think it is a valid concern, Congressman, this question of what will the broader reputational or sort of credibility damage be to the United States, and we have already seen other allies who are not necessarily heavily engaged with this issue suggest that this does raise questions about our reliability.

I think we saw some of that from some commentators from the region. Some British MPs have raised this question of, you know, does Britain now need to sort of play a stronger role in some of these conflicts.

Look, I would say that we want other States, of course, to step up and play greater roles in some of these conflicts and burden sharing is something we can all agree on. But we do not want them to do it——

Mr. ALLRED. I do not think we—I do not think we wanted it to be this way.

Mr. SINGH. Right. We do not want them to do it because they do not think they can rely on the United States or because they view the United States as unpredictable because my worry is that that will not produce sort of strong allied coalitions that are pursuing strategies that advance American interests.

It will produce things like hedging behavior where they reach out to adversaries of the United States, whether that is the Russians in this particular theater, China in other theaters, because they sort of view that as something they need to do for their own national security.

So I think that even if we decide, we are going to intervene less. We are going to try to push others to share burdens.

Still, you want to be doing whatever we are doing around the world in sort of a multilateral way as part of a coalition rather than sort of simply sort of retreating to Fortress America, as it were, and saying to other countries you are on your own.

Mr. ALLRED. Ms. Stroul, before you address the same question, I want you to also specifically note the people in this region and how a message like this will be delivered and heard in this region.

Because we are talking about great powers, our allies, the U.K., the Russians, the Iranians. But how—in your assessment having done this work now for months, how will this affect the Kurds, the SDF, the people on the ground who we may hope to be able to work with?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you for that question.

One of the things the Syria Study Group did over the course of our work was travel throughout the region. We could not go inside Syria but we went to Turkey and Jordan and Israel and Lebanon, and what was striking—I led a delegation to Turkey and Lebanon—was that much of the damage to U.S. credibility and leadership had already been done from last December 2018 when there was the first attempt to withdraw U.S. forces without much of a plan guiding it or much consultation with either our local partners, the SDF, or our neighbors and other partners in the coalition.

So, in general, most of the discussions we had, whether with outside experts in these countries, with government counterparts, with humanitarian activists in the region, generally already doubted whether the United States had the commitment and staying power to follow through on what we said we were going to do.

And when it comes to the Kurds, very much the same thing. I think a lot of the damage had already been done. We were very clear.

If you look at U.S. official talking point that our relationship with the SDF was temporary and transactional, and even though no one expected the relationship to change the way it did over such a short period of time, they understood what temporary and tactical meant, which is why they were always talking to everybody else anyway.

So over the entire course of our relationship with the SDF, they maintained communications with Damascus. They always talked to the Russians. They will talk to whoever can do anything to ensure their survival.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you.

I will yield to Mr. Kinzinger from Illinois.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you guys for both being here and your good work.

And I am sad and I am also—the report is frustrating to me because it is a bad report. it is a good report but—because of how quickly everything has changed.

But I do not want you to think that your work is useless. I think some day it will be a very studied report and you will look at how history went and how it could have gone, recommendations to prevent it as we WTF this whole thing, looking back in history.

You know, a couple things I want to address before I get to the meat of my questions. You know, I was looking—I was being pretty nostalgic about Reagan lately and I remember quote. it is "Let's set the record straight. There's no argument over the choice between peace and war but there's only one guaranteed way you can have peace and you can have it in the next second—surrender."

And I saw a tweet by the president the other day where he talked about peace and creating peace and we are creating peace everywhere, and I will tell you, if you surrender and leave you can create temporary peace for yourself.

But I do not think that is the mission of our country. When you look at the post-World War II order when we finally realized that isolation was not—did not work until we had this strain of weird isolationism that kind of came back into our body politic.

But in that history, you know, when we won the Second World War we inherited the, basically, industrial capacity of Germany

and Japan and we had this massive industrial revolution, which we all, you know, look back on today and we talk about in the economy bringing manufacturing back.

And that was a result not of American isolationalism but of actually America being involved in the world. And when we turn the post-World War II order on its head, I think the consequences are really difficult to see in the short term but we are able to see an immediate result of that in the decision made the other day.

Now, I want to compare that quote of Reagan to one that was just made. "Our soldiers are out of there. Our soldiers are totally safe. Syria may have some help with Russians and that's fine. It's a lot of sand. They've got a lot of sand over there so there's a lot of sand that they could play with."

It is a real difference in leadership styles, to put it quite politely. This idea of war fatigue that I hear people talk about, it really ticks me off, too. Yes, you are tired of seeing it on television. In Congress, we probably are tired of talking about it. It has been happening for a long time.

But if anybody had a right to be war fatigued it was my grandparents after World War II, and what happened is America, instead of leaving Europe and saying it has a lot of destroyed property, America said, we are going to stay, and three generations of Americans staying there.

Finally, the third generation behind the Iron Curtain tore it down because they were desperate for a taste of what we had and there was a whole world that's basically free right now because of that.

Fifty soldiers were preventing an invasion by Turkey, and I want to be very clear. Anybody that believes that 50 soldiers that Turkey would have attacked if the president said we will defend our soldiers with the might of the U.S. military, you are fooling yourself, because Turkey never would have been that stupid.

It would have been a short fight. Nobody wants to fight a NATO ally, me especially. But I do want a president that is going to stand up for American positions and this is weakness, and I think there is no other way to put it.

Instead of turning out away from the world, now, you know, we are spending a lot of time in Congress just fighting each other like we are enemies because we are, like, drama queens and we have to be addicted to drama.

So we got to fight somebody and so we just argue here. We cannot get anything done, and we forget that there is a real enemy out there that wants to destroy us.

So, Mr. Singh, let me just ask you a question, and when it comes to Turkey, I introduced today the United States-Turkey Relations Review Act.

It is a bipartisan bill with Mr. Cicilline and it would require the Administration to review U.S.-Turkish relations and report it to Congress, the feasibility of relocating American personnel and assets from Incirlik because this is going to be a big problem with the airbase there.

Let me ask you, Mr. Singh—the President said that he was going to—his chief campaign promise was to defeat ISIS. It was not end endless wars. That is new. It was defeat ISIS.

He said He is going to stay in Syria as long as Iran is doing their nefarious activity there. Has Iran withdrawn their support of the Assad regime and, if not, what kind of support does Tehran still send Damascus?

Mr. SINGH. Thank you, Congressman.

No, Iran has absolutely not withdrawn its support for the Assad regime. We see the Iranians sending not only their own forces. You do have Revolutionary Guard Corps officers, for example, in Syria.

But we see them cultivating and sometimes sending over proxies. Hezbollah, some Afghani and Pakistani forces have been there as well as Syrian forces who they themselves have recruited and organized and paid.

But we also see Iran really sort of entrenching itself in the economic and social fabric of Syria, which tells you that they are there to stay.

Iran would be turning Syria into sort of a forward operating base for its missiles and other power projection tools if it were not for Israeli air strikes which have effectively stopped them from doing that.

But the Israelis themselves will tell you that those air strikes have stopped Iran from engaging in certain activities but they have not deterred Iran from continuing to sort of focus on Syria as their power projection base.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. Malinowski, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, guys. I want to completely associate myself with Mr. Kinzinger's remarks from start to finish.

First of all, you did a fantastic job and I wish you were here under circumstances that were different. But here we are. We have had maybe two and a half years in which there was such a thing as the Trump Administration that was resisting Trump, and I do not think there is an administration anymore.

We have a President who is acting on his impulses, and the policy of the United States right now is that Syria is not our problem. That is what he said. There is just a bunch of sand and they can all play in their sand.

It is now the official policy of the United States that Russia hates ISIS as much as the U.S. does and that the PKK is a bigger threat than ISIS. These are all things that the President said today.

Anyone who wants to assist Syria in protecting the Kurds is good with me—Russia, China, Napoleon Bonaparte. This is our policy and we know the second, third, fourth order of consequences can be catastrophic.

I am a bit less worried right now about Turkey massacring the Kurds because we know what is happened. The Kurds have struck their alliance with the Assad regime and with the Russians and that will provide some protection.

I am more worried about the Assad regime now moving into eastern and northern Syria, which is populated not just by Kurds.

I am worried about the inevitability, I think, of Turkey now deciding that in order to deal with its security problems it no longer

has any interest in dealing with us because it is not our problem; they are going to be dealing with the Russians and with Iran.

We saw Putin was in the UAE and Saudi Arabia telling them—I am sure we know what he was saying—you cannot trust the United States but I have some things that I will offer to you and you know that I will act in defense of our interests.

And I think, worst of all, He is a step closer to getting the world he wants—a world with no values, no norms, no rules—a world where powerful countries and leaders can do what they want to whomever they want.

America, you go do your thing. Russia can do its thing, and that makes me incredibly sad and I wonder what can we do about it.

And I am struggling with certain things. One question is, do we as a Congress push for maintaining some troops in Syria. I have a bipartisan bill that was relevant a few days ago. I do not know if it is still relevant. It basically says you cannot go below a thousand in Syria unless you can report back to the Congress the answers to certain obvious questions—the questions we have been talking about here.

Is that still a relevant approach? And I would also like to ask you both about our relationship with Turkey. There is a lot of sentiment right now that we need to punish Turkey hard for what it did and I hate what Turkey did. It was despicable.

But I also worry a little bit that we are obsessing right now over punishment of Turkey because we want to absolve ourselves of a decision that President Trump made and, frankly, to be nonpartisan here, to absolve ourselves of mistakes that we made in the Obama Administration as well.

it is very convenient to say that this is all now the fault of one country that did a terrible thing rather than looking at ourselves.

And so I wonder what your advice would be on those two questions. On troops, is there something that Congress can and should do? And on Turkey, is it actually wise to sanction Turkey severely for doing something that the president told them that they could do?

If we are ceding the Middle East to Russia, is it in our interests really to pull out Incirlik now and potentially cede a NATO ally to Russia as well?

What should we do?

Mr. SINGH. So, thank you, Congressman.

I think they are both very relevant questions right now. I would say that, look, had we negotiated a security mechanism or safe zone with Turkey, which Ambassador Jeffrey was in the process of doing right before the decision to end that and to withdraw.

Presumably, we would have taken our troops and perhaps moved them south. We would have continued activity south of that buffer zone or security zone.

And so, in theory, there is not a reason we cannot do that now. My question would be, because security for American forces was largely being provided by the SDF—you know, we had a very small number of troops, as you know, Congressman, working with the SDF.

If the SDF itself has left these areas and the regime has moved in, is there really an environment in which we can work?

I do not know the answer to that question. I think it is a question that Congress has to ask DOD and get a clear answer to, hopefully, in the days to come.

On the question of Turkey, look, I think that we need to recognize, as many of you already have, that the seeds of this crisis were sown when we made this decision to work with the YPG Kurdish militia, knowing that it was considered a great security threat by Turkey.

We apparently, as you said, Congressman, gave Turkey the green light to do this. So the Administration has said that we did not. But it does not seem like there was opposition to the idea.

I think we have to take these things into account in our response to Turkey. My own view is that we should be now trying to shape Turkish actions.

Using sanctions or the threat of sanctions, not to punish Turkey but to try to lay down sort of some conditions or red lines for Turkey, whether it is humanitarian access, whether it is limiting their incursion, whether it is, again, severing their links with some of these extremist proxies that they seem to be using, and if we do need to use sanctions to use them in a way which is sufficiently strong that it will cause Turkey to really reconsider some of these actions.

There is, I think, this overall question now hanging over the U.S.-Turkish relationship, especially because of Turkey's apparent targeting of U.S. troops. That is not behavior which is sort of compatible with this NATO alliance that we have.

And so I think there will be a long-term cost for sure to the U.S.-Turkish relationship. But in the sort of near-term question of sanctions, I would say use them to shape, not punish.

Ms. STROUL. The Syria Study Group spent a long time thinking about the U.S.-Turkey relationship and I would just like to highlight and underscore what we did say. We did not call for severing the relationship with Turkey.

We acknowledge the links between the PKK, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization in Turkey, and the YPG element of the Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria, and we acknowledge that U.S. support for the SDF was a major irritant in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

We did not call for severing the U.S. relationship with the SDF at this time and we also did not say that Turkey offered a viable alternative military force to continue the anti-ISIS fight, if not for the U.S. relationship with the SDF.

So there were very clear things that we said. At this point, could the threat of sanctions shape some Turkish behavior that would otherwise be very destabilizing, for example, the forcible relocation of certain refugees into areas that are not their homes in Syria.

There are reports of atrocities and war crimes being committed by proxies—Turkish-supported proxies. These are things that—well, I do not know the content of the President's phone call with President Erdogan. Clearly, these are things that sanctions may be able to shape.

So I would leave it there.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. Reschenthaler, you are recognized.

Mr. RESCHENTHALER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For the last decade, Syria has been ground zero for a devastating proxy war. The country presents some of the most pressing humanitarian and national security challenges that our Nation faces.

It is essential that the United States maintain a strong footprint abroad. All right. I am not sure what is going on with my mic.

All right. It is essential the United States maintain a strong footprint abroad, and as history has shown, when the United States turns its back, chaos erupts and our enemies fill that power vacuum.

It is refreshing to hear my colleagues across the aisle have concern over Syria and present a position of having a strong U.S. presence abroad.

I wish I would have seen this kind of vigor and these positions when President Obama allowed Assad to ignore a red line and I would hope that this newfound vigor and these new positions transfer when speaking about Venezuela, about defending the Hong Kongers and others that are seeking liberty and freedom from across the world.

But I applaud the new positions that my colleagues across the aisle have found and I also applaud President Trump's continued actions to hold the Syrian regime in check by attacking military targets after its chemical attack on civilians and for imposing sanctions on officials in Assad's authoritarian government.

I also commend the President's swift actions in Turkey, whose irrational actions have endangered a key U.S. ally, empowered Iran and Assad, and set us back in the global fight against ISIS.

There are no—these are not the actions of a NATO ally and I am proud to cosponsor a sweeping sanctions bill introduced by Republican Conference Chairwoman Liz Cheney.

With that said, I have two questions for the witnesses.

First, on August 25th, the Israeli air force acted in Syria to prevent an Iranian drone attack on Israel. What does the report recommend related to U.S. support for allies confronting threats from Syria, in particular, Israel?

Mr. SINGH. Thanks, Congressman.

Well, the Israeli campaign against Iran—I think, if you step back, it is really extraordinary in many ways because they have managed to sort of deter—maybe not deter, they have managed to limit Iran's activities in Syria through these air strikes.

And yet, Iran has not had an effective response against Israel and they have managed to do this in coordination with Russia, which is in this alliance with Iran.

And so I think that the Israeli campaign really sort of deserves accommodation and we should support it however we can, whether that is intelligence sharing, whether that is diplomatic cover if they need it.

And we should also, frankly, use our own tools to counter what Iran is doing, you know, sanctions, tools, and whatever other tools are available to us.

Ms. STROUL. I associate myself with Mr. Singh's comments.

Mr. RESCHENTHALER. All right. You guys are making it easy.

All right. One more question. How do we ensure the situation on the border between northeast Syria and Turkey is not abused by

Iran to expand its presence in the country and solidify what I am seeing as a land bridge between Tehran and Beirut?

Ms. STROUL. So this is where Mr. Singh talked earlier about the U.S. forces that remain at the al-Tanf garrison, which is not in the area of northeastern Syria that Turkey is currently focused on.

So in the view of the Syria Study Group, maintaining those U.S. forces at that garrison is critical for preventing Iran from consolidating those lines of communication through Syria.

And given the movement or redeployment of other U.S. forces, it is highly likely that Assad, Russia, the Iran—Iranians or Iran proxies will challenge our position there.

They have done it before, and that was under former Secretary of Defense Mattis who responded with overwhelming force and sent a clear signal.

So this would—in terms of maintaining that U.S. force presence, our adversaries need to believe that there is a credible threat of military force on the table and that is something that, hopefully, the executive branch will be contemplating of making quite clear.

Mr. RESCHENTHALER. Thank you again. I commend you on your work and I yield the remainder of my time.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Reschenthaler.

Mr. Vargas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and again thank the witnesses here today.

I remember the first time I had the opportunity to meet the Kurds as a group. It was former Congress Members Darryl Issa and John Mica and I. We traveled to Baghdad. Then we traveled there.

We were briefed by our embassy and also military personnel. We went up to Erbil. In Erbil, we met with Kurd leadership there. Then we met with the military arm, the Peshmerga.

And during that time, it was interesting because our military and our Special Forces in particular told us how we were allied with the Kurds there and how in fact they were doing very heavy fighting alongside of us and we could trust them, and how they were our allies and our friends.

From them, of course, I heard of the situation in Syria also. Of course, two different areas but very similar, they said, was the situation.

And so anyway, I came away thinking that we were allies and we could be trusted by them and they could be trusted by us, and what has happened here recently, I think, is a disaster—a terrible disaster—and to listen to some of the military personnel—our military—say how they are ashamed of what we have done is particularly devastating when you think of how our military each and every day put their lives on the line, are out there fighting with those that expect to have their backs and we their backs. It has been sad.

With that being said, I am very nervous about the Kurds now in Syria—in particular, ethnic cleansing. I know that they are trying to cut deals now with Assad and it is like trying to cut a deal with a snake.

You know, what assures them that they will not be wiped out? I say this—that for 2 years we had a family of Kosovars live with us because of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

So I am very familiar with that, and I want to know what can we do—what can be done so these Kurds are not wiped out? As we saw, the atrocities are already happening.

What can we do?

Mr. SINGH. Thank you, Congressman.

I think it is a valid concern. You know, we could be concerned about this on, frankly, both sides of the sort of Turkish line of advance, right, because we have not really had insight into what is been happening in the other Turkish occupied enclaves of Syria—the Afrin and Euphrates Shield pockets.

And so one thing that we will want from the Turks, you know, if we are going to go there and try to talk to them, if we are going to be threatening them with sanctions is we will want transparency and humanitarian access into any zone they occupy to ensure that these things are not happening, whether it is at the hands of Turkish authorities or probably more likely at the hands of some of these extremist proxies who we have seen up to no good in recent days.

On the other side of that line, I think it is even more challenging because, obviously, the Assad regime has brutalized the populations in areas that it has reoccupied, and so too have Russian and Iranian-backed forces.

And I think they will view the SDF fighters and officers as a threat to the Assad regime's reconsolidation of that rule. So I think it is going to take things like not just sanctions, but one of the things we talk about in the report is we should be willing to threaten the Assad regime with the use of force if it is deliberately targeting groups for, you know, war crimes and atrocities and so forth. It should not necessarily be the case that that type of response is only used when, say, chemical weapons are used.

I think the Assad regime, Iran, they need to understand that we are watching and that there are going to be consequences for war crimes, for atrocities, for ethnic cleansing, as you said, Congressman.

Mr. VARGAS. Ms. Stroul.

Ms. STROUL. I agree with what Mr. Singh said and I would only add that when it comes to the Kurdish communities in Syria, they never put all their eggs in the American basket.

For them, this is about survival. Whether that survival is no autonomy and no integration of the force structure that they created into Assad's army, which has been one of their requests, or desire for Kurdish cultural rights and language in schools.

But if Assad, with Russia, can guarantee their survival or provide a security guarantee that the United States will not and face between Turkish operations, which could result in ethnic cleansing or demographic reengineering like we have seen in places like Afrin or the Euphrates Shield area, versus subjugation to Damascus, they are going to pick Damascus.

And then the next level of questions for the United States is what does our policy look like or our approach to Syria look like if our former partner is working with Damascus and Russia.

Mr. VARGAS. Well, my time is up. But I do want to say that I think it is very important then to have this transparency and this humanitarian access because I do not think anything good is going to come from this—anything at all.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Vargas.

Mr. Trone, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The main point of the report is that Russia and Iran, they share many interests when it comes to involvement with Syria. Both are looking for increased regional influence, and they have a willing partner now in Assad.

The withdrawal of U.S. counter terrorism efforts directly enables Russia and Iran to be more enmeshed and exert greater influence.

What concrete steps will the U.S. need to take, given the recent events, to combat the outsized Russian and Iranian influence in the region? Is it even feasible?

Ms. STROUL. We spent a lot of time debating in the Syria Study Group whether or not what unites Russia and Iran in backing Assad could—were there areas of tension or fracture that we could exploit to break that alliance apart and then provide us some opportunities via a political process our own—our own leverage or military operations to then move forward.

Our conclusion is that Russia and Iran have more in common and both have the goal of keeping the United States out and, unfortunately, recent developments probably only solidify for them that their alliance and their backing of Assad is working.

Mr. TRONE. So you found no divisions of interests at all?

Ms. STROUL. There is certainly tensions about Security Force activities, where certain Security Forces operate, whether or not behavior of the Assad regime could be modified, for example.

Russia is a member of the U.N. Security Council and would probably like to enable some sort of political process that could fold Assad back into the international community.

Iran is a pariah State and not in the international community, in that sense, so probably does not share that same objective. But, again, our conclusion at the end of the day was that there was more unifying Russia and Iran specifically in their opposition to the United States and minimizing U.S. leadership in the region.

Mr. TRONE. OK. So what does the Syria Study Group recommend regarding Iran's presence, you know, in Syria? Assuming you believe Iran should not maintain a military presence in Syria, what recommendations do you have to achieve that goal?

Mr. SINGH. Congressman, if you look at the report, we have some recommendations, largely which sort of focus on things like exposing Iran's role in Syria, because a lot of what Iran is doing is not of a kind of overt military nature.

A lot of that is very much in the news because you see the Israeli air strikes, for example, against Iranian missiles and things like that. But there is this economic and sort of social element to it as well, and I think that activity does not get sufficiently exposed.

I think we should have a greater effort to sort of put it into the sunlight, as it were. But what I would also encourage is not to

think of what Iran is doing in Syria as somehow an isolated issue that we have to respond to just there.

One of my concerns is, you know, we now have still a very significant presence across the Middle East. But there are a lot of people who are questioning our commitment to that presence, and I think that is actually a dangerous position to be in.

We have seen the Iranians escalate regionally. You know, their attacks on tankers, reportedly—reportedly, this attack on Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia.

I think this adds even more importance to the idea that we need to respond to those types of Iranian escalations lest they look at this Syria decision and say, hey, where else can we press on the United States to sort of get them out of other places in the region we do not want them, right.

So I think it is important that we look at this from a regional perspective and not just a Syria-specific perspective.

Mr. TRONE. So they look upon us as an easy mark?

Mr. SINGH. OK. I mean, you know, if—we had the Carter Doctrine in 1980 and then the Reagan corollary, right, which said that we had a sort of—we saw a vital interest in the Gulf, for example, and we were willing to defend that interest militarily.

Well, we did not at the time have a heavy presence in the region and now, again, we have the opposite, right. We have basically said that we are not sure we see a vital interest for the United States.

President Trump has said we are not—He is not sure he sees a vital interest for the United States, whether it is with tanker traffic in the Gulf or here in Syria.

And yet, the presence—the U.S. military presence—is much, much larger than it was at the time of, say, the Carter Doctrine. And, again, this kind of asymmetry—heavy presence but maybe receding commitment—I do fear will embolden or encourage adversaries like Iran to try to take shots at us.

Mr. TRONE. Quickly, the Russians have now—force have indicated—entered northeast Syria with our withdrawal. what is Russia's objective there in the region and how will it respond to Turkey's incursion?

Ms. STROUL. Russia's objective in Syria is to take back all of Syrian territory under Assad—to deliver a win for Assad, not just militarily on the ground but politically.

So what the Russians want is not just full consolidation of territorial control but reconstruction, return of refugees, and international legitimacy for the Assad regime.

Mr. SINGH. And I will just say, Congressman, that I think that what they also want is to just deal defeat to the United States. And, you know, I am one who would like to say that we do not need to have a zero sum approach to Russia. Not everything that Russia does is inherently threatening to the United States.

You know, I would like to be able to say that maybe Syria is a place in ideal conditions where you could find room to agree or cooperate with Russia. But I think that is just not the case because I think Moscow does not see it that way.

I think Moscow sort of wants to show the rest of the region, again, that the United States is not reliable. They want to thwart

what they see as kind of a regime change effort by the United States.

They want to paint our policy in those terms and they are not, I think, interested in sort of win-win solutions and so forth.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Trone.

And finally, Ms. Jackson Lee has joined us here today and without objection happy to recognize her for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me acknowledge the chairman and the ranking member for their courtesies. This is a committee that I used to be on and I have a great affection and respect for all of the leadership of the committee.

I happen to serve on the Homeland Security Committee and the Subcommittee of Crime and Terrorism. So it intermingles with what I think is crucial is diplomacy. And the work that you have done let me applaud you for the work.

I went to Syria many years before 2011 and went to Damascus. Spoke to the then new and fresh Assad, which some thought there might be a difference. To my dismay, there was zero difference from his father but in another era.

I want to pose these questions, and as I do so let me just read this statement from an Army officer who formally served.

"I cannot look at the atrocities," an Army officer who served in Syria last year said of videos posted online, of Turkish—backed fighters executing Kurdish civilians. "The ISIS mission is going to stop. ISIS is going to have a resurgence. We are going to have to go back in 5 years and do it all over again."

Now, I want you to comment on that. But I do want you, first of all, you are obviously doing your study. But what is your assessment or maybe people who you met are calling you about the shear violence and loss of life, particularly among—because remember when the conflict first started and there were Doctors Without Borders and the United States was in we were seeing just the shear miserable violence that the Syrian people were going through.

Certainly, the Kurds have taken their share. But help us understand how deep the violence is, how children are impacted, maybe from your discussions that you had or people calling you.

Thank you. Thank you to both of you as co-chairs.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you so much for that question.

We consulted, broadly, with humanitarian and human rights activists and organizations as well as the Syrian-American community and those organizations that are collecting evidence, documenting evidence of atrocities, abuses, and war crimes.

What we heard consistently from all—from all of these communities and individuals was a plea for the United States to prioritize issues of civilian protection and a perception that that has not been a front and center policy priority of the United States.

Many asked us to recommend that the United States make very clear its willingness to use military force in response to civilian casualties and the shear mass homicide tactics of the Assad regime—that it is not just chemical weapons but barrel bombs, medical sieges, starvation, forced disappearances, torture, et cetera—and that these issues are not front and center and not talked about

enough in U.S.-led situations and that gives the perception that we do not care about those issues.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. And you would think that it is now exacerbated in light of where we are today—violence, decapitation, et cetera?

Ms. STROUL. The perception that President Trump greenlit a Turkish operation in which we have seen Turkish-backed forces firing on civilians, ISIS detainees escaping from prisons, and the discussion that there will be involuntary resettlement of Syrian refugees into areas that are not historically where they come from all send the signal that issues of civilian protection are not a priority of the United States.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Let me continue.

You mentioned the fact that at the time the conflict was not winding down and you called it dynamic and dangerous. How dangerous is it now, in light of the actions of the president that allow Turkey to come in without restraint and killing without restraint?

Mr. SINGH. So I think, Congresswoman, that it is in fact quite dangerous now, more dangerous now than it was before in large part because you will now have potentially ISIS breaking out of prisons.

you will have a reduction in the counter terrorism pressure on ISIS as well as some of these other jihadist groups. You may have an expansion of Iran into eastern Syria and, as I said, sort of a linking of the Syrian and Iraqi proxies of Iran and perhaps an expansion of the war that's taken place between Israel and Iran over these issues.

And to the sort of very first part of your question, Congresswoman, about the U.S. military operation, you know, I think that this lumping of Syria into the endless wars category has been incorrect, frankly.

I think that if you were opposed to the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 or if you were skeptical about our military presence in Afghanistan, in a way you should be pleased by the way the intervention in Syria has been conducted because you had a very small American military footprint rallying a 60,000 to 70,000 strong partner force, and that partner force out front really doing the bulk of the work and the fighting and U.S. forces really playing an advisory role.

And I think that the U.S. military has considered that to be a very significant success and perhaps even a model for future interventions, and it is a shame that sort of we have now relinquished a lot of those gains which that model was able to deliver.

You know, I think that, again, to put it together in this kind of endless war category is a big mistake and I do not think that is how folks see it in the government.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. I know my time has expired.

Mr. Chairman, if I could just squeeze in this national security question, if I might.

In the report it says the liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States, which this was in your report.

We now have a circumstance of a free for all—Turkish fighter jets, we have bombing, fleeing, and you already indicated in your

report preceding this how dangerous, and let me just for the record put on my dismay, Mr. Chairman, of 2,000 troops in Saudi Arabia and troops that wanted to stay and were being effective in Syria are now being, and I want to use the term imploded—they are just being scattered—I mean, U.S. troops.

And I think, Mr. Chairman, you mentioned that we might have had a success that we could have modeled after—a few number of soldiers. But they were a powerful statement.

But your assessment now of the level of the national security threat that this region may be in light of where we are in the aftermath of Turkish actions.

Ms. STROUL. So even though ISIS has been pushed out of the territory that it holds, its command and control, its leadership structure, is still in place. It still has the ability to raise funds.

Now those 2,000 foreign fighters that were in detention facilities under SDF control, not to mention the thousands of Syrian and Iraqi fighters that were in detention, are likely not going to remain in detention for much longer, which means the ranks of ISIS will be replenished, access to finances, global brand appeal, plus leadership.

We still have Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, giving speeches that end up on the internet, talking about its plan for waging a long-term war.

So I would say the national security threat is very high and ISIS——

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Very—I did not hear you. Very——

Ms. STROUL. It is high.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Very high.

Ms. STROUL. ISIS still retains the means and the desire to use territory in Syria to plan external attacks.

Mr. SINGH. Congresswoman, I would just add just a couple of specifics to this.

You know, President Trump criticized our European partners a lot for not repatriating their own citizens among the ISIS fighters. There were a couple thousand foreign fighters. And he was right to do so, frankly.

But I think, you know, the irony is that the way things have now developed over the last few days, this process of repatriation, which requires visits to the camps and kind of consular work is now essentially impossible to do.

So even if folks are kind of remaining contained within this area, getting to them to sort of bring them out and sort of put them into a judicial process of some kind or a national security process is going to be impossible.

Another question would be to what extent were we able to have completed the process of, say, cataloging the fighters who were in these camps. Do we know who was there and who now may sort of be on the loose.

My understanding, and we talk about this in the report, is that was ongoing. I do not know if it was finished before this decision was taken or not and that might be—it might be a question to ask the government.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

One military person—as I close—called this a real mess and I think he was being more than delicate or polite. I am appalled at where we are today and I think you have done us a good service but you have also emphasized that the national security threat is heightened and we create this mess.

And I hope that maybe Congress can work together to try to bring some aid, comfort, and redesign of where we are today.

Mr. Chairman, your committee is very important in this and I thank you for allowing me to be here.

Mr. DEUTCH. Ms. Jackson Lee, thank you for being here. Thank you for your contribution to our committee today. Appreciate it.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. And finally, Mr. Sherman, you are recognized for 5 minutes, and I would note to other members who may be on their way that we have a hard stop at 4:30.

So, Mr. Sherman, you have time and you are recognized.

Mr. SHERMAN. The Turks are relying to a significant extent on these Arab tribal militias. To what extent is Turkey relying on them and to what extent are they ideologically simpatico with ISIS?

Mr. SINGH. Thank you, Congressman.

So I am not sure they are tribal militias. I think that——

Mr. SHERMAN. They have been described that way, but OK.

Mr. SINGH. If you look at who they are, they are probably composed of some people who were refugees—displaced persons from other parts of Syria.

Some of them may be former ISIS or other sort of members of other jihadist groups.

Mr. SHERMAN. Or al-Qaida. Yes.

Mr. SINGH. Or other sort of—the rebel groups. I mean, there were over a thousand of these different rebel factions in Syria in the past and so some of them have probably made their way into these groups who are now fighting at Turkey's behest.

I cannot tell you to what extent sort of Turkey's relying on them versus its own forces. I just do not have that information.

But, clearly, if you look at what we see in the open sources, it does seem as though there is a very heavy component of these sort of Arab proxies being used by the Turks.

Mr. SHERMAN. And to how—to what extent are these groups that have similar ideology to either al-Qaida or ISIS?

Ms. STROUL. Over the course of 8 years of conflict in Syria, there are no longer groups that we would describe as moderate. We tried to support moderate forces. We called them the Free Syrian Army.

That support no longer happened and a lot of it was because many of those fighters that we wished to work with would not meet U.S. vetting standards in terms of what their affiliations were.

I would also note that——

Mr. SHERMAN. I would point out the Kurds qualify as moderates.

Ms. STROUL. Congress put in place very serious vetting standards before the U.S. could provide assistance and equipping. So I assume that before U.S. forces provided that support to the SDF those fighters and units met U.S. vetting standards.

And I would also add that a lot of the forces and militias that the Turks appear to be working with there has been some good

work done by other individuals trying to study what their motivations are.

A lot of it at this point is criminality. There is not—there is not much left for your average Syrian to do. There is no economy. There is no economic opportunity.

So some of this is ideological or unsavory types that, certainly, the United States would identify as violent extremist organizations and affiliations. And on the other hand, there are criminals and thugs that are working on behalf of the Turks.

Mr. SHERMAN. Let's see. So how far do you expect Turkey to go into the region? Is it going to limit itself to 70 miles to the—70 kilometers south of their border or is their goal to take over all the territory?

And I realize they may not achieve their goal because of the Russians, Iranians, and the Saud forces. Is their goal 70 kilometers or is their goal something else?

Mr. SINGH. So, Congressman, the real answer is I do not know and I am not sure any of us—I am not sure anyone in the Administration really knows.

The Turks had talked about creating a 30-kilometer deep buffer zone and then sort of, you know, 300 miles across, which would have been both a security zone for the Turks as well as maybe an area in which to resettle some of the Arab refugees—Syrian Arab refugees that had been in Turkey.

We have heard U.S. officials say, as I am sure all of you have, that the Turks have gone farther than they anticipated, and by the Turks I assume they really mean these kind of proxy forces that you were asking about, Congressman.

So I assume they will be guided both by whatever military objectives they have as well as by this now move by the regime plus Iranian plus Russian forces, in a sense, to interpose themselves between the Turks and the areas further south. So there may be a little bit of a competition as well between the Turks and the regime forces.

Mr. SHERMAN. Over the last year or two when the Kurdish forces in Syria had control of territory to what extent was that territory used as an identifiable source of terrorist action inside Turkey?

Ms. STROUL. We asked that question to multiple different briefers both in the U.S. Government and when we traveled throughout the region, and while it is clear to us that there are ideological affiliations between the PKK and the YPG, and our report calls for specific actions for the YPG to differentiate itself from the PKK, we did not find examples where U.S.-provided arms to the YPG in Syria made itself across the border into Turkey.

Mr. SINGH. I will just add, Congressman, though, that you will find plenty of examples, especially from earlier parts of the war, support for ISIS and so forth coming the other direction across the border, which is, again, one thing that we have not been able to successfully address with the Turks.

Mr. SHERMAN. So the—so the Turks did a terrible job of preventing ISIS from going into Syria and the Syrian Kurds have done a excellent job of making sure that malevolent actors do not go from their—the territory they controlled up into Turkey, and yet Turkey begins this terrible conflict.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Sherman.

I thank the witnesses and all members for being here today. Thank you both for your testimony. Thank you for your very thoughtful leadership of this important Syria Study Group and thanks for the report that you produced.

Members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for you. We ask them to please submit those within the next 5 days and we ask that you respond in writing.

And I just want to thank you again for—over the past 9 years we have had many, many hearings on Syria, both here and in the full committee.

We sit here at this moment, with Assad having slaughtered over 600,000 people, and almost 6 million refugees and 6 million people displaced inside the country, and the world's largest State sponsor of terrorists stronger now there than before, the country most dedicated to sowing discord and democratic—fighting democratic norms, stronger there than they were before.

And what you have offered us here, I think, is a really important and useful tool for discussion and I hope—I urge my colleagues all to take this seriously and to read it and that it informs the work that we do, going forward.

Sincere thanks again for being here.

And with that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:26 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chairman

October 16, 2019

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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

DATE: Wednesday, October 16, 2019

TIME: 2:00 pm

SUBJECT: Syria Study Group: Recommendations for U.S. Policy

WITNESSES: Ms. Dana Stroul
Co-Chair
Syria Study Group

Mr. Michael Singh
Co-Chair
Syria Study Group

By Direction of the Chairman

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

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON *Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism* HEARING

Day *Wednesday* **Date** *10/16/19* **Room** *2172*

Starting Time *2:51 PM* **Ending Time** *4:26 PM*

Recesses *0* (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Theodore E. Deutch, Representative Colin Allred

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☑
Executive (closed) Session ☐
Televised ☑

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☑
Stenographic Record ☑

TITLE OF HEARING:

Syria Study Group: Recommendations for U.S. Policy

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See Attached

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

Sheila Jackson Lee, TX*

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

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

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *4:26 PM*

Aina Abad
Subcommittee Staff Associate

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

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