

DIPLOMACY OR DEAD END: AN EVALUATION OF SYRIA POLICY

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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CONTENTS

	Page
WITNESSES	
Rayburn, Joel D., Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs and Special Envoy for Syria, U.S. Department of State	8
INFORMATION SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD	
Syrian American Council letter submitted for the record	14
Letter to Attorney General Barr submitted for the record	27
STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD	
Statement submitted for the record from Representative Connolly	63
RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD	
Responses to questions submitted for the record from Representative Spanberger	65
APPENDIX	
Hearing Notice	60
Hearing Minutes	61
Hearing Attendance	62

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Wednesday, December 9, 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC,

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:17 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Eliot Engel (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman ENGEL [presiding]. The Committee on Foreign Affairs will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously circulated address or contact full committee staff.

As a reminder to members, staff and others physically present in this room, per guidance from the Office of Attending Physician, masks must be worn at all times during today's proceeding, except when a member or witness is speaking. We are trying to do both. Please also sanitize your seating area. The chair views these measures as a safety issue, and therefore, an important matter of order and decorum for this proceeding.

For members participating remotely, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses, as appropriate, when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

We have a quorum, and I now recognize myself for opening remarks.

This is likely the final hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee for the 116th Congress and my final hearing as chairman.

Yesterday, we had a hearing on the Balkans, a region that is near and dear to my heart, and today we will deal with another policy area that has been a focus of mine for decades, Syria. From the Syria Accountability Act, which became law in 2003; my bill designed to push Syria out of Lebanon, to the Free Syria Act of 2012, which was the first legislative proposal to arm the Free Syrian Army—the opposition to Assad, through the end of my time in Congress—I have worked with colleagues on both sides of the aisle and with outside groups to push back on the murderous regime in Da-

mascus and support the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people.

I have spoken about Syria from this dais more times than I could count in the last few years. And each time, I cannot help but think that there is no way it could get worse, and then it does. Assad's henchmen butcher civilians in the street. They drop barrel bombs full of shrapnel and glass designed to maim and disfigure. ISIS takes over large swaths of Iraq and Syria, barbarically raping, stealing, and murdering. Russia's air force enters the war, further weaponizing the sky.

The regime gives ultimatums to people who are so hungry that they are eating the grass on the ground: kneel or starve. China and Russia block humanitarian assistance from getting to the people who need it the most. The Trump Administration cuts off assistance to the vulnerable people of Syria and threatens to break off cooperation with our Kurdish partners, threatening any gains against ISIS and alarming our closest partners.

I say, "Enough!" There has been too much suffering, too many lives lost, and far, far too little done to stop the carnage. Too little by the United States through different times. Too little by our partners. And this conflict is far from over. It is humanity's wound and it continues to fester.

I remember sitting here as the ranking member of this committee in 2014, surrounded by photographic evidence of torture and violence in Syria's prisons, listening to the agony of Caesar, a brave military photographer who defected, smuggling thousands of photographs and giving us proof of Syria's killing machine. That heart-breaking testimony compelled me to introduce the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

The Caesar Act imposes the most sweeping sanctions on the Syrian regime and its backers since the start of the civil war. Unless they stop the violence against their own people and take irreversible steps toward peace, the United States must raise the price of their choices.

We worked carefully with the humanitarian community to ensure that the Caesar Act would not prevent humanitarian assistance from getting to vulnerable populations. Those Members of Congress who were here then remember those horrific pictures of dead bodies and people just being tortured and killed. They were horrific pictures. They look like they came from the Holocaust in Germany and Poland during World War II. They really just made me sick. So, we are making sure that humanitarian assistance can get to vulnerable populations.

My bill passed the House three times before becoming law last year. The anniversary of its enactment prompted me to call this hearing today. How is the Caesar Act being used to end the conflict? Are we closer to a more peaceful and stable future for the Syrian people? At a time when ISIS is reconstituting in Syria, how can we ensure that they and other violent terrorist organizations are not able to exploit Assad's continued presence to win the propaganda war? Congress must be part of the solution.

Getting Syria right will not be easy, as the last few years have shown us. We will not find a silver bullet in a grand bargain, geopolitical positioning, humanitarian assistance, or military action.

Ending the violence and getting the Syrian people on the path to a brighter future will require some fresh thinking. I appreciate the fact that the next administration faces a wide range of pressing crises and critical negotiations around the world, but I would urge: please do not forget about the Syrian people.

American is a haven for the oppressed. My grandparents fled the pogroms in Europe more than a century ago. The idea that only two generations later their grandson would be a Member of Congress, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it would only have been a dream to them. But, then again, those dreams and ideas are what have drawn immigrants to our shores for generations.

I hope that my family's story demonstrates that we cannot turn our backs on victims of persecution, and I hope we can agree that refugees should always have a place in our country. I also hope that the next administration will welcome Syrians who have been pushed from their homes, as well as other desperate people from around the world. At our best, we are a country of generosity and acceptance. The last 4 years have not shown us that way, and it is time to turn things around.

I look forward to our witness' testimony.

And I will first yield to our friend, our ranking member, Mr. McCaul of Texas, for any opening comments he would like to offer.

Mr. McCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As you mentioned, this is likely our last hearing of this Congress. And it has really been an honor to serve with you, as the ranking member on this committee. And I want to thank you for the respect that you have shown the other side of the aisle, as you always have in a very bipartisan way, allowing many of our members to pass bills in the House.

I gave my farewell address to you on the House floor, if anybody would like to see it. But I am proud of our time together and our record of accomplishment. I think we passed probably more bills than any committee in this Congress, and just about everyone on a bipartisan basis. And, sir, I think that is a record we should all be proud of, but especially you.

And you have governed this committee with civility, with dignity. As Real Clear Politics Stated, "an island of calm in a sea of partisanship"—that is this committee. It is the tradition of this committee, as I have been on this committee for 16 years. I know you have been on it for many more than that.

And so, I want to just say thank you for your service and we are going to miss you, but I know that you will be close by. And most of all, I have really enjoyed our friendship together and that will always continue.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. McCaul. Will you yield to me?

Mr. McCAUL. I would, absolutely.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. McCaul, I just want to return the compliment and say that it has been an absolute pleasure to work with you and your staff to help us pass bills and do what is right for the United States and around the world.

We like to say that the Foreign Affairs Committee—you and I have said that many times—is the most bipartisan committee in Congress. And I think that we have proven that the people who are elected from different parties can work together, should work together. After all, we are all Americans. We all love this country. We care about this country. You may have from time to time different ideas, but we should always remember that other people from other parties are not the enemies. There are plenty of enemies of the United States around the world, but it does not exist in this room or in the Capitol, or any place else where we conduct our business.

And I think it is important to remember that because what happens is—and I have been here a while now—you really do not get to know people unless there are on your committee or from your home State. You just do not have much opportunity to get to know people. Sometimes you have taken trips with them and you know them because of those trips around the world, different places. Sometimes you see them in the gym when you are working out. But, by and large, if the person is not from your home State and not on your committees, there is not much interaction. And when there is not much interaction, people do not know the other people, and some people demonize and the whole cycle begins again.

I am glad that we do not do that on this committee. It really makes me very proud of every member on this committee, Democrat or Republican, because we try very hard to do what we are supposed to do, and that is to work for the American people. And that is what we do.

And so, let me again say, Mr. McCaul, it has been an absolute pleasure working with you, being a colleague of yours, and being a friend.

It is difficult; sometimes life gives you bumps and knocks, but I have always believed in picking yourself up and walking with your head held high and continuing the business. We know that last weekend I was over at your house for dinner—thank you—along with the previous chairman of this committee, Mr. Royce. And it was just a pleasure to be able to go over things from the committee and go over other things.

So, Mr. McCaul, I thank you for those kind words. I thank you for everything you do, and I thank everyone on this committee, both Democrats and Republicans. Thank you for allowing me to be the chair. Thank you for really passing good legislation and doing things to make the lives of people better, make the lives of Americans better. I love this country, and I am so fortunate to be here and to serve in the U.S. Congress.

As mentioned in my remarks, my grandparents came here in 1907. And if they had not come here and they stayed behind in Europe, they would have almost certainly perished in the Holocaust. And so, this country of my birth, my parents' birth, means so much. When people say, "God bless American," I really say it, too.

So, I turn it back to you, Mr. McCaul. Thank you for everything, and we will continue, I know, to keep in contact.

Mr. MCCAUL. Yes, and thank you for that. And your style of leadership has really been a model. And I think the way we have worked here—who would think a Democrat from the Bronx and a

Republican from the heart of Texas could work so well together, right? But it is a model for the rest of the Congress, and your legacy, sir, will continue. You have quite a legacy with this committee, and you will always be remembered. And I look forward to, when we get back some normalcy, having your portrait up in this beautiful committee room.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, sir.

And we have worked a lot to advocate on behalf of the Syrian people, which is the subject matter of this hearing. And you and I saw those photographs that were taken by Caesar. They were horrific. They were reminiscent of the Holocaust. But that is the reality on the ground in Syria.

And I want to thank the witness for being here. Mr. Rayburn, I know that you just came back from Syrian. So, I really look forward to your testimony, and I have some very good questions, I think, for you.

But, Mr. Chairman, we have worked together on Syria to pass legislation sanctioning Turkey's invasion of Syria, to draw attention to the assault on civilians in Idlib, to support access for humanitarian assistance, and to oppose countries renewing ties with the Assad regime.

And as author of the Caesar Act, Mr. Chairman, you worked for years to pass sweeping sanctions to cutoff resources to the Assad regime and its backers. Now we are already seeing how these sanctions are crippling Assad's reign of terror.

And we worked together on the Syrian policy, again, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Americans and as human beings trying to protect innocent civilians. But there is still more to be done.

For starters, we should stand by our allies in northeast Syria to give them more opportunities to succeed. In addition, I recently spoke with key people on the ground in Syria who provided me with important updates. They have all said that we need more support and we need it now. And we want to find the best manner to do that, and I hope we can get them the relief they need as soon as possible.

I would also like to, once again, encourage members of the international community to refrain from diplomatic engagement with Assad. The world cannot accept a butcher like Assad as the leader of Syria. There can be no justice if relations with Syria return to business as usual.

So, I want to welcome our guest here today. We are pleased to have you. I am especially hoping you will address how the Administration has used the sanctions and other tools to secure justice for the Syrian people and further cripple Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers. Our goal should be to force the regime and its sponsors to stop the slaughter of innocent people and to provide the Syrian people a path toward reconciliation, stability, and freedom.

Chairman Engel, your tireless work to fight for the Syrian people is at the core of your legacy, as I mentioned before. So, I want to thank you for everything you have done on behalf of the Syrian people and for making their struggle for freedom remain at the top of your agenda in this Congress. I think it is fitting that this is the

last hearing that we have in this Congress on this, such an important issue and such a humanitarian crisis.

And with that, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields. I thank my friend, Mr. McCaul. Thank you for everything you do.

Our witness today is Mr. Joel Rayburn, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Levant Affairs and Special Envoy for Syria.

Without objection, the witness' complete prepared testimony will be made a part of the record.

And I will now recognize you for 5 minutes to summarize your testimony, Mr. Rayburn.

STATEMENT OF JOEL D. RAYBURN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR LEVANT AFFAIRS AND SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, sir.

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify about the Syrian conflicts today. It is one of the most dangerous crises in the world in both geostrategic and humanitarian terms.

Before I begin, I want to thank Chairman Engel for his years of service, especially his dedication to solving this conflict in Syria and his enormous work on the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. This is a remarkable legacy, Mr. Chairman, and the Syrian people know that. And I would add that, in literally every engagement that we have with Syrian civil society, the term "Kanoon Kaiser,"

[phonetic] as the Syrians refer to the Caesar Act, is mentioned. They know its importance and they thank you for your work and the work of this entire committee in doing that.

I have just returned from a trip to the Middle East last night, during which I discussed the importance of advancing and enduring political settlement to the Syrian conflict with our allies and partners in Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf countries, while also spending time with our local partners in northeast Syria.

For several years now, our vital national security concerns have led the United States to pursue the interconnected goals of an enduring defeat of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in Syria, the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria, and a lasting political solution to the underlying Syrian conflict consistent with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

Based on what I have just heard from our allies and partners, and what we are seeing on the ground in Syria, it is my assessment that each of our major goals in Syria is within reach, and I also assess that our leverage is growing over time. Our adversaries in Syria, conversely, have failed to achieve their goals. The Assad regime remains a pariah, excluded from the Arab League, mired in an economic crisis of Assad's own making, and unable to attract international investment. The ability of the Syrian regime and its allies to dictate the terms of Syria's future is waning. The path to our objectives is still filled with challenges, but the strategic situation today is encouraging, and it attests to what can be done when diplomatic efforts are strongly backed by both this Congress and responsible members of the international community.

A few words about the U.S. approach to implementing and achieving these goals. We believe U.S. strategic objectives are best achieved by an action plan that includes various elements.

First, we must carry out a political process and a nationwide cease-fire, as outlined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

Second, we should continue our counterterrorism campaign and preserve the global coalition to defeat ISIS.

And third, we must press for the withdrawal of foreign forces not present in Syria before 2011.

The United States has developed a broad coalition of like-minded countries to accomplish this plan of action, and we have separately engaged with Russia on such an approach. I would add that, in addition, the U.S. Government will continue to work for the return of Austin Tice, Majd Kamalmaz, and every other American who is held hostage or wrongfully detained in Syria. And we will not give up on those objectives.

Each of the goals that I outlined above in the action plan requires sustained pressure in order to succeed. Along with the European Union, we are applying economic pressure via sanctions against the Syrian regime and its enablers, as you know.

The entire international community recognizes the strong bipartisan support from you that led to the passage of the Caesar Act legislation, and believe me, Assad and his supporters recognize this as well. I particularly want to thank Chairman Engel for his leadership, as well as the whole committee, for making the Caesar Act a reality, as I mentioned before. Since the Act's adoption, the Administration has used the Caesar Act and other related authorities to designate over 90 individuals and entities who use their wealth or positions to support Assad's war.

Alongside our economic pressure, our political pressure includes partnerships with Syrian civil society to remind the world of the regime's atrocities, as well as active outreach to the Syrian opposition.

On the diplomatic front, we lead efforts to withhold normalization or reconstruction assistance to the Syrian government, absent progress on the political process. And we also support the U.N.-led political process Roadmap in Geneva.

And finally, our military pressure comes in the form of U.S. and allied military actions in response to Assad regime chemical weapons use and through U.S. leadership of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. And we also continue to support the defeat-ISIS operations of our local Syrian Democratic Forces partners in the north-east.

In closing, we and our international partners are clear that there will be no peace or stability in Syria until the violence ends, there is accountability for Assad's atrocities, and the political process truly takes hold and meets the aspirations of the Syrian people. That means we will continue to marshal all of our effective economic, political, and diplomatic tools to ensure that this brutal Syrian regime does not dictate the terms bringing this nearly 10-year conflict to a close.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Rayburn follows:]

U.S. Department of State

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

December 9, 2020

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on this important issue of the Syrian conflict, one of the most dangerous crises in the world in both geostrategic and humanitarian terms. I have just returned from a trip to the Middle East during which I discussed the importance of advancing an enduring political settlement to the Syrian conflict with our allies and partners in Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf countries, while also spending time with our local partners in northeast Syria.

The Syrian conflict poses serious threats to the vital national security interests of the United States. It is an extraordinary crisis involving terrorism, the risk of interstate war, chemical weapons, war crimes and atrocities, and a humanitarian and refugee crisis of historic proportions.

For several years now, these vital national security concerns have led the United States to pursue the interconnected goals of an enduring defeat of ISIS and Al-Qa'ida; the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria; and a lasting political solution to the underlying Syrian conflict consistent with UNSCR 2254. In the complex problem that Syria poses, it has proven impossible to achieve any one of these goals by addressing it in isolation from the other two. Progress has required coordinated efforts on all three together, and as a result progress has been fragile and sometimes slow.

Nevertheless, based on what I have heard and seen from our allies and partners, and based on the situation on the ground in Syria, my assessment is that each of our major goals in Syria is within reach, and our leverage concerning each is growing over time. In other words, after many years of frustration and sometimes setbacks, we and our partners and allies are finally on a path that offers success, as long as we remain committed to it. Our adversaries in Syria, conversely, have failed to achieve their goals and their ability to dictate the terms of Syria's future is waning. The path to our goals is still filled with serious challenges, but the current state of affairs is encouraging, and it attests to what can be done when diplomatic efforts are strongly backed by both this Congress and responsible members of the international community.

For over nine years, Bashar al-Assad's brutal campaign against his own people has displaced half of Syria's pre-war population, and few Syrians wish to return without meaningful political change in the country. The Assad regime, meanwhile, is weak and flagging. Much of Syria's airspace, and more than 30 percent of Syria's territory, are controlled by others, including the majority of the country's energy and agricultural areas; and the regime faces serious instability and threats from ISIS in the areas it nominally controls. The Assad regime's massive corruption

and economic mismanagement has fueled an unprecedented collapse of the regime's economy, including a significant drop in the value of the Syrian pound, a vast energy shortage, and an almost complete cessation of international investment.

As a result of their actions, Bashar al-Assad and his regime are international pariahs under comprehensive and coordinated U.S. and E.U. sanctions. The international community broadly agrees there should be no reconstruction assistance as long as the Syrian government's brutal behavior continues. The regime is diplomatically isolated, including through its continued exclusion from the Arab League. A failed Russian-sponsored conference on refugee returns in Damascus last month was an embarrassment for the regime and its backers, and a manifestation of the broad-based, U.S.-led international consensus that Damascus should not be rewarded for its behavior.

Assad, his allies, and the vast majority of the international community that share the U.S. approach to Syria, all recognize the strong bipartisan support from you that led to the passage of the Caesar Act legislation. The Caesar Act has been a powerful tool reinforcing the regime's exclusion from the international community and denying Assad the resources he and his regime use to commit mass atrocities, some of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, against the Syrian people.

U.S. Policy Priorities and Conditions for a Political Solution

As I have noted, U.S. policy priorities in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qa'ida; the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces; and a lasting political resolution to the conflict consistent with UNSCR 2254.

In addition, as Secretary Pompeo previously stated, we will continue to work for the return of Austin Tice, Majd Kamalmaz, and every other American who is held hostage or wrongfully detained in Syria.

In pursuing our objectives, the United States believes that any lasting resolution of the conflict requires that the following six conditions must be met before establishing normal diplomatic or economic relations with a government in Damascus, whether it is the current government or any future one.

First, the Syrian government should not pose a threat to the United States or to Syria's neighbors;

Second, it must cease to be a state sponsor of terrorism, and not allow Syria to be a safe haven for terrorism.

Third, the government in Damascus must sever its relationships with the Iranian regime's forces and Iranian-backed groups. The Iranian regime and the militias it supports must not be allowed to use Syrian territory to threaten the United States, our citizens, or our interests, or to threaten our allies and partners such as Israel and Jordan.

Fourth, the Syrian government must cease its use of chemical weapons and adhere to its obligations under UNSCR 2118 and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Fifth, the Syrian government must create the conditions for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes.

And finally, the Syrian government must hold accountable those who have committed serious human rights violations and abuses, including war crimes or crimes against humanity, or assist the international community in holding them accountable.

As for the means of securing our national goals, we believe U.S. strategic objectives are best achieved by undertaking a road map that includes: carrying out the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254; implementing the nationwide ceasefire called for in UNSCR 2254; continuing our counter-terrorism campaign and preserving the global coalition; and pressing ultimately for the withdrawal of foreign forces not present in Syria before 2011.

The United States has developed a broad coalition of likeminded partners to accomplish these steps. The United States has worked with Russia on such an approach, including at a May 2019 meeting in Sochi between Secretary Pompeo and President Putin, in addition to regular gatherings of our likeminded Syria Small Group consisting of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. We have also coordinated closely with Israel and with Turkey.

The greatest obstacle to a stable and secure outcome in Syria has been the Assad regime's unwillingness, even in the face of disaster, to deviate from its goal of military victory. The regime's recalcitrance has been exacerbated by Russia's unwillingness thus far to sufficiently press the Assad regime to recognize that there is no alternative to a negotiated political settlement to the conflict.

Four Elements of our Pressure Campaign

Economic Pressure:

Our position and approach are firmly supported by our international partners. Along with the EU, we are applying economic pressure via our respective sanctions programs against the Syrian regime and its supporters; we maintain a shared political commitment to oppose reconstruction or stabilization in regime-held areas; and we continue to work to ensure economic isolation of the regime. Since the adoption of the Caesar Act, the Administration has designated over 90 individuals and entities who use their wealth or positions to continue Assad's war against his own people.

We are also expanding the frequency and the types of international engagement with bilateral partners and the private sector to reduce sanctions evasion, develop new targeted sanctions, and coordinate other economic measures against the regime and its supporters, all while ensuring our sanctions do not impede necessary assistance to the Syrian people.

Political Pressure:

U.S. political pressure takes the form of public engagement, in partnership with Syrian civil society, to remind the world of the regime's atrocities and blatant disregard for the well-being of the Syrian people, as well as outreach to the Syrian opposition and approximately 50 percent of the Syrian population – including inhabitants of areas not under Assad's control – and in supporting implementation of UNSCR 2254, including support for constitutional reform and elections.

Diplomatic Pressure:

Our diplomatic pressure discourages closer diplomatic ties with the Assad regime, maintains Syria's exclusion from international fora, and promotes accountability for perpetrators of human rights abuses. We are leading efforts to avoid diplomatic concessions to and normalization with the Syrian government absent irreversible progress on the conditions I have already outlined. We lend diplomatic and political support to an inclusive political process centered in Geneva, and our diplomats in the field have built key relationships to support dialogue and reconciliation among the communities of northern Syria in particular.

Military Pressure:

We have applied pressure to push the conflict towards a resolution in the form of U.S. and allied military actions in response to regime chemical weapons use and through U.S. leadership of the 83 member D-ISIS Coalition, which shouldered the burden of fighting ISIS in Syria while the Syrian regime was focused on killing its own people. Additionally, Israeli military operations in Syria and Turkey's deployments in Idlib deny the Syria regime and Iran and its the groups it backs the ability to further their aims. Armed opposition groups also put military pressure on the Assad regime.

Continuing the D-ISIS Mission

We continue to support Coalition efforts against ISIS through our presence in northeast Syria and in Iraq. Concurrently, we continue to support the defeat-ISIS operations of our local SDF partners in the northeast and will continue to target ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates across Syria.

We also continue to press countries to repatriate their ISIS foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and associated family members and dependents from northeast Syria, and to subject them to the appropriate disposition upon return -- whether prosecution, or rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Proactive repatriation to countries of origin is the best way to ensure ISIS remains unable to reconstitute itself both in the region and overseas.

Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Syrian People

Moving forward, we will continue to ensure the international community supports those suffering at the hands of Assad. To date the United States has provided over \$12 billion in assistance to the Syrian people. We expect our allies and partners to continue generous funding of humanitarian and stabilization efforts, while taking steps to ensure that the Assad regime cannot divert humanitarian aid for its own purposes.

We are also enhancing stability in areas liberated from ISIS in northeast Syria through stabilization and other assistance, including in areas where Coalition members have withdrawn forces, but the Syrian Democratic Forces continue to secure.

As part of any resolution of the Syrian conflict, we support the release of all Syrians held in arbitrary detention by the regime, including the elderly, women, and children.

We also support the work of Syrian documentation groups and international mechanisms that report on and promote accountability for human rights abuses in Syria. These include the UN Commission of Inquiry and the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism, which support potential future prosecution of Syrian regime crimes well as other initiatives like the UN Board of Inquiry on Syria. We will also continue efforts, including at the OPCW, to ensure that the regime faces consequences for its proven chemical weapons attacks against the Syrian people.

Conclusion

There will be no stability in Syria until violence ends, accountability measures are put in place, and the internationally supported political process truly takes hold. As I have noted, the road ahead remains full of challenges, but we can take heart in the fundamental fact that almost a decade after the Syrian conflict began, our adversaries have failed to accomplish their goals and have no viable path to ending the conflict on their terms. Meanwhile, as I have laid out for you, each day, we marshal all the tools of the U.S. government and those provided to us by Congress to bring this nearly 10-year conflict to a peaceful close.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to taking your questions.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you very much, Mr. Rayburn. Thank you for your good work.

Without objection, I would like to place into the record a statement from the Syrian American Council and Americans for a Free Syria.

[The information referred to follows:]



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**SYRIAN AMERICAN COUNCIL
&
AMERICANS FOR A FREE SYRIA**

“Diplomacy or Dead End: An Evaluation of Syria Policy”

House Foreign Affairs Committee

Submitted by Dr. Zaki Lababidi, President, Syrian American Council, and Dr. Ismael Basha, President, Americans for a Free Syria

December 9, 2020

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul and Members of the Committee:

The last four years of U.S. engagement in Syria has produced a mixed record of progress on the ground. The ongoing military campaign in eastern Syria has seen the end of ISIS’s physical caliphate, however military experts recognize the growing threat of the group’s resurgence, particularly as U.S. troop strength in the strategically vital north-east remains in flux. In the north-west, opposition-held territory has been reduced to its smallest area since the beginning of the conflict over the course of several brutal regime offensives carried out with the support of Iranian-backed militias and punishing Russia airstrikes. Though direct military intervention on behalf of Turkey led to a tenuous ceasefire in March, this fragile peace is being routinely violated by pro-regime forces, at the cost of hundreds of lives.

The Assad regime remains in power propped up by Iran and Russia. Tens of thousands of civilians remain in detention and subject to torture, including U.S. citizens such as Austin Tice and Dr. Majd Kamalmaz. Millions more are internally displaced or scattered across the region, united in their refusal to return to a Syria still ruled by the murderous Assad.

However, thanks to the efforts of Congress, the United States has been ramping up the pressure on Assad and his backers. Enforcement of the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act is a vital tool the incoming Biden administration needs to maintain - and expand - as a means to change regime behavior and achieve a positive diplomatic outcome to the conflict. We greatly appreciate the efforts of the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn and his predecessor, U.S. Special Representative for Syria Amb. James Jeffrey, in utilizing the Caesar Act as part of an economic and diplomatic pressure campaign that refuses to reward a government for murdering its own people.

The Syrian American community appreciates the opportunity for Mr. Rayburn to discuss the latest developments in U.S. policy before the committee. It is our hope that assurances can be provided to lawmakers and the public alike of a continuity of policy between administrations, overseen by officials who view ending the conflict in Syria as a national security priority.

We also wish to thank Chairman Engel for holding this hearing and for his decades of service in Congress. A longtime ally and friend of the Syrian American community, his introduction and adoption of the Caesar Act is his lasting legacy on U.S. policy in Syria. Our community stands in his debt, and wishes him success in private life.

Founded in 2005 in Burr Ridge, Illinois, the Syrian American Council is the largest Syrian American community organization in the United States. It serves to amplify the voice of the Syrian American Community. SAC is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, non-partisan organization that includes members from all segments of Syrian society, and has over a dozen chapters nationwide with thousands of supporters. It is an organization devoted to community organizing, awareness-raising, youth empowerment, media outreach, advocacy, and support for Syrians seeking to build a free and democratic Syria.

Americans for a Free Syria is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that helps enact legislation and policies that encourage freedom, human rights, accountability, rule of law, and secular democracy for the Syrian people. By acting as the voice of concerned citizens in Congress, it seeks to promote a free Syria that is led by democratically-elected representatives, respects the human rights of all individuals, and provides sufficient safety and stability for the return of Syrians displaced by conflict.

Chairman ENGEL. I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each. Pursuant to the rules, all time yielded is for the purpose of questioning our witness. Because of the hybrid virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will come back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally. And as we start the questioning, I will start by recognizing myself.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I introduced the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act several years ago as a response to what we saw in this room. I mentioned before those horrific pictures of all these dead people, emaciated. Just awful. Awful. I will never forget it, the utter disregard for human life and the torture of innocent victims—men, women, and children; Muslims and Christians.

This legislation, passed into law last December, mandates the most sweeping sanctions on Assad's enablers. I have welcomed some recent Caesar designations against Syrian individuals, but I would point out that the goal of the legislation was to pressure Assad's international support system and raise the cost of bankrolling the wholesale slaughter of the Syrian people.

But, other than one Lebanese shipping company, non-Syrians have not been sanctioned under the Caesar Act. Why are we not using the Caesar Act to sanction non-Syrians? In particular, why have there been no designations by us of Russian companies and individuals who are so clearly and shamelessly giving Assad a lifeline?

Using executive authority instead of Caesar implies that the Administration is looking for a more flexible way to remove these sanctions, should the time come. The bar for removal of the sanctions under Caesar is fairly high, requiring the Syrians to, among other things, stop the violence against civilians, stop their chemical weapons program, and free political prisoners. Are there plans between now and January 20th to sanction non-Syrians under the Caesar Act, and after January 20th, are there going to be plans to do that as well? Given broad bipartisan and bicameral support for the Caesar Act and its full implementation, how could this administration and the next administration more fully utilize the authorities afforded to it by the bill?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Concerning the question of non-Syrians and targeting them under the Caesar Act, and related authorities, we certainly will, I think, extend Caesar Act designations to non-Syrians in the future, because we agree with you and we understand the intent of the Caesar Act provisions. It is to separate the Assad regime from its sources of international support.

I will say that the Caesar Act had a remarkable chilling effect on those outside Syria who might otherwise restore economic relations with the Assad regime or do some sort of business with the Assad regime or in the same interests with the Assad regime. So, to some degree, Mr. Chairman, the Caesar Act has been successful in that regard, even without designating a large number of non-Syrians under the Caesar Act authorities so far. And we have been

pleasantly surprised by that. In other words, increased international economic relations with the government of Damascus has been the dog that did not really bark.

Now, concerning the question of how we choose which authorities we use to make designations, to be honest with you, there is no larger purpose behind that, as we do our targeting internally between the State Department and the Treasury Department, with the support of the intelligence community. Believe me, we carry out our designations against specific targets just using the most efficient, the quickest, the most expedient, let's say, sanctions authorities, but there is absolutely no intent behind using other authorities in the Caesar Act to make it easier to lift pressure on the Assad regime in the future. In fact, our position is that we need to continue to put accumulating pressure on the Assad regime and its backers in the future, and that is going to be our approach.

Your question of, will there be additional designations under the Caesar Act between now and January 20th, I cannot specify specifically what sanctions we will do in the coming weeks, but we are intending to do some. And in fact, Mr. Chairman, we now have an interagency machinery, an interagency apparatus, that is, I would say, clicking on all cylinders in terms of finding the nodes of the Assad regime's illicit finance network that we most need to target to be able to also see how the regime tries to evade sanctions and to try to stay one step ahead of the regime. And that is working. That is working very well. I am very pleased with the way that that has happened.

Chairman ENGEL. My time is running out. I want to try to get in one quick question because I think it is really important, and I think it shows why we are so unhappy with what is happening.

Because, as this year draws to a close, the Assad regime, supported by Russia and Iran, has recaptured most areas previously held by opposition forces and continues attacks on pockets of Syrian resistance and civilian infrastructure in the northwest part of Syrian. In the northeast, Turkey maintains its hold on territory gained since the October 2019 invasion and continues to harass and displace Syrian-Kurdish populations, which, of course, have been very loyal to the United States.

So, I want to just ask you, what is the future of the remaining pockets of opposition-held territory in and around Idlib in northwestern Syria? And could you describe the extent of devastation and human tragedy caused by the Assad regime there?

Mr. RAYBURN. I absolutely agree with you, the war that the Assad regime and its allies have been waging against Idlib and the surrounding regions, and against the innocent civilians there, has to stop. What we have seen in northwestern Syrian in the Idlib region is, in the last 9 months or so, essentially a military stalemate. After many months of the Assad regime, with Russian and Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah backing, being able to retake territory, we saw that come to a halt when they ran up against the Turkish military supporting Syrian armed opposition groups in February and March of this year. And we have not seen any indication that the Assad regime can overcome that military opposition from Turkey and the Turkish-supported groups there. So, there is a military stalemate.

That does not mean that conditions on the ground are good for the civilians in Idlib and the surrounding region. They are absolutely atrocious. The Assad regime continues to fire artillery. So do its military allies. And so, this is why we believe the pressure has to continue on the Assad regime. We have to continue to use the combination of all our tools and pressure to make it clear to the Assad regime that there is no viable course for them other than coming to a political solution under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you very much.

And before I turn it over to Mr. McCaul, I ask unanimous consent to allow Congressman Green of Texas to participate in this hearing. Without objection, so moved.

Mr. McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I also want to welcome Congressman Green to the committee.

I want to thank you for your resolution on Austin Tice that we passed this week, very bipartisan. His family are constituents of yours and very close to my district and from our home state of Texas. I have been briefed on this in the classified space. So, I am not going to ask you more details about that, but I do want to thank the Administration for your efforts, because I know you have been pressing very hard for his release. And we thank you for that.

I wanted to talk about sanctions, what is Turkey doing, and then, the threat of ISIS.

On the sanctions, as the chairman Stated, we were looking forward to these sanctions really being utilized to the fullest extent, as intended by Congress. But I also want to ask you about the northeast quadrant of Syria, where you have the Syrian Democratic Forces. There have been calls to lift sanctions on the SDF. I do not know how you could do that because it is all within the same country. Can you speak to the wisdom of—and if we cannot do that, how can we help the SDF? They seem to be somewhat successful in bringing all these pockets of different ethnic backgrounds together under one sort of democracy that actually seems to be working and is, obviously, in loyal opposition to Assad.

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

The first observation I would make is that we understand in implementing the Caesar Act that this committee generated that the focus of the Caesar Act is to be squarely on the Assad regime and its enablers. So, we have no intention of releasing designations that would harm our partners in the liberated territories of Syria that are beyond the regime's control.

Mr. MCCAUL. So, in other words, you would argue that the sanctions are not being applied to the SDF?

Mr. RAYBURN. That is correct.

Mr. MCCAUL. Okay. And maybe we can followup on this when I have more time to talk to you, but I am very interested. I know you met with Nadine on the ground. I have a good friendship with her and I get their reporting. And it is an area of concern. We want to help the SDF as much as we can.

Turkey in Syria, these Turkish forces, who are they? Because I have seen pictures and had reporting that it almost looks like they are hiring mercenaries in Syria and some reporting that they have

actually hired former ISIS members. Can you shed some light on that?

Mr. RAYBURN. Yes, Congressman. So, the opposition fighters, the opposition armed groups, that are supported by Turkey, a great many of them are different elements of the Free Syrian Army, part of which has been organized more formally into an organization called the Syrian National Army, which gets material support, training, and so on, and basing assistance from Turkey and is focused on military pressure against the Assad regime and its allies.

And the focus of their resistance is to the Assad regime and its allies is northwestern Syria. There are some that have been active in northeastern Syria. We have seen some of the same information that you have and this is something that, when we see signs that there are some elements that are potentially extremist or we suspect they have been, we raise that with our Turkish counterparts. We also raise that with the Syrian political opposition.

Mr. MCCAUL. My time is running out.

I mean it concerns me because they look like radical extremists, Islamists, to be honest with you. And Turkey, of course, came in and we worked, our Delta Forces—of course, who are our friends in Syria? That is a real question, right? But our Delta Forces came in and worked with the Kurds to crush ISIS. That is how we defeated ISIS in Syria. And then, to see Turkey go in, and I know the PKK has been designated a terrorist organization and they are within that, but to see Turkey come in and crush the very forces that we worked with to defeat ISIS is disturbing as well.

Can you talk about the detention camps—my last question—the threat of ISIS still in Syria? And I get reports about these detention camps. They are releasing ISIS members.

Mr. RAYBURN. Mr. McCaul, thank you for raising this.

The detention camps which have some ISIS members—the ISIS members who are known to be ISIS members, a lot of these are in, essentially, they are in detention facilities specialized for holding, you know, with much greater security, and so on. And there are a large number of those kind of fighters, many, many of them who are not from Syria. They are from all over the world, from the Arab world, from Europe, from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and so on. That is a big problem.

There are other camps for displaced people, many of whom either had to flee from the campaign, the last stages of the campaign against ISIS, or some of whom are ISIS children. They are the children of former ISIS families or they are women. There is a large number of women who were members of ISIS, or some of whom were virtually held hostage by ISIS. There is a very large number of those.

And it is very concerning because the population, for example, at the camp at Al-Hawl is somewhere around 70,000 people. There are more than 30,000 Iraqis. There are somewhere just shy of 30,000 Syrians, and then, there are more than 10,000 who are from neither Iraq nor Syria; they are from other countries.

And it has been very challenging to get the government of Iraq and the governments of those other countries to cooperate with us in repatriation of those non-Syrian individuals back to their countries of origin, for a variety of reasons. But the longer that they

stay in Syria, it is a very big concern that that large concentration of people is vulnerable to radicalization, that you would have children who might be exposed to radicalization, and it could be a problem. It could be the next, unfortunately, the next potential caliphate. So, it is a problem that we really need to urgently try to get a solution to.

Mr. McCAUL. Yes, it is very complex. And thank you for your testimony.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields back. Mr. Sherman?

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. At our penultimate hearing yesterday, I had a chance to pay tribute to you. And so, I will do it in more abbreviated form today. It has been an honor to serve with you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to serving with Mr. McCaul and especially with Greg Meeks. This is, apparently, the last time I will be able to ask my questions immediately after the gentleman from the Bronx, and perhaps, unfortunately, it is the last time I will be able to ask my questions before the gentleman from Queens.

We have a War Powers Act that is designed to restrict the executive branch's authority to deploy our forces into harm's way. We have deployed forces into harm's way in Syria under the 2001 AUMF that authorizes going after Al-Qaeda and, presumably or at least arguably, its progeny such as ISIS.

But there are many interests in Syria that might warrant, or might not warrant, the use of our forces. You have to wrestle with those from a policy standpoint, but do you feel constrained at all by the Constitution and the War Powers Act to not deploy American forces in harm's way against any adversary that is not a descendant of Al-Qaeda?

Mr. RAYBURN. Mr. Congressman, the Department's view on this, the answer is, no, that the legal authorities for our presence in Syria have n't changed and that they are sufficient for what we need to do.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, there are many things you may want to do and many things the next administration wants to do. If you were to, say, fight against Assad to protect the Kurds, is that something you think you can legally do, and if so, what would be the legal authority?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, I mean—

Mr. SHERMAN. I am not saying it is a bad idea. You might want to come to Congress and seek authority, but what authority do you have now?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, I hesitate to address a hypothetical situation like that, Congressman.

Mr. SHERMAN. This is Congress; all we do is talk about hypothetical situations.

Mr. RAYBURN. I know, Mr. Congressman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Is it your intention to follow the War Powers Act?

Mr. RAYBURN. Absolutely, Mr. Congressman.

Mr. SHERMAN. OK. There is an authorization to use military force to go after Al-Qaeda. Do you believe that that authorizes the Administration to go after any enemy—and there are many hei-

nous enemies in Syria—or is it limited to those heinous enemies that attacked us on 9/11?

Mr. RAYBURN. It is the Department's view, Congressman, that the 2001 AUMF provides the legal authority required to use military forces against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria.

Mr. SHERMAN. Against ISIS, but—

Mr. RAYBURN. Against ISIS.

Mr. SHERMAN. I mean, there is Assad. There is Putin. There is Erdogan. There are many other authorities who are committing murder in Syria. Do you think you have the authority to go after them?

Mr. RAYBURN. The Department's view, Congressman, is that the 2001 AUMF also provides the authority to use force to defend U.S. coalition and partner forces that are engaged in the campaign to defeat ISIS.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, that is very different than attacking—obviously, our forces wherever they are can defend themselves.

Turkey has, the Turkish government has embraced some extreme elements of political Islam, sometimes forming alliances with those inspired by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. To what extent is the Turkish government working with Al-Qaeda and ISIS forces, or the progeny of those two organizations, in Syria?

Mr. RAYBURN. I have not seen signs, Congressman, that the Turkish government is doing that.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, you talked about recruiting mercenaries.

Mr. RAYBURN. No, I have not seen—I mean, the way my team and I see it, and the way we assess the situation, is that Turkey considers ISIS and Al-Qaeda to be threats to Turkey, that we share a threat assessment with them, and that they share with us the goal that those forces are defeated in Syria and that they leave Syria. So, I have not seen a sign that Turkey is sponsoring ISIS.

Mr. SHERMAN. In Idlib, they have worked with some forces that trend in that direction, but I can see there is support for your assessment that they are not actually dealing with ISIS or Al-Qaeda as organizations.

Mr. RAYBURN. Yes, we also, Congressman, we see a lot of friction between the forces, like the Free Syrian Army that Turkey really wholeheartedly supports and some of those other terrorist elements or really radical elements on the ground. There is an ongoing conflict between those all the time.

Mr. SHERMAN. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields back. Mr. Wilson?

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to join with the rest of our colleagues, and it is such a rare occasion that everybody agrees. And that is that, indeed, we appreciate Chairman Eliot Engel on his bipartisanship and the success that you have had in Congress and the Caesar Act. It just goes on and on, Mr. Chairman, what you have achieved. And we appreciate from a bipartisan standpoint.

In addition, I got the opportunity to actually live it with you. And that is, I was on the delegation with Congressman Curt Weldon to Pyongyang, North Korea. And you bond when you go to North Korea because, to see the horror of the destitution of North Korea,

the oppression of the people, and we were there in 2003, Congressman Weldon, and what a visionary he was.

And, of course, then, from there, we went to Seoul, South Korea, and you saw the contrast of free market capitalism, of the success there, the democracy of the Republic of Korea. And so, I will always cherish our opportunity to serve together under the most extraordinary circumstances. But what a great example of the success of free market capitalism as opposed to totalitarianism and socialism/communism on the Korean peninsula.

Now, Secretary Rayburn, you have had the hardest job I have ever heard of—okay?—Envoy to Syria. The American people need to actually see the map of what is occurring there, and the map itself is startling, the divisions, and it breaks your heart. I have been to the refugee camps in Jordan, and just extraordinary people under the most bizarre circumstances of so many different interests there.

But what can be a great danger to all of us is the reconstitution of ISIS and its ability to expand zones in northern and central Syria. What is your assessment of the reconstitution of ISIS?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

So, the global coalition, led by the United States, achieved military victory against the ISIS territorial caliphate. That removed ISIS from the battlefield as a field army and as a proto-state that could marshal state-like resources. So, we moved beyond that phase, thank God. And the same thing was done in Iraq, you know, with great sacrifice all around.

Now we are in a phase where ISIS is still a threat as a clandestine terrorist network and as a guerilla force that is trying to reconstitute itself in the remote areas of both Syria and Iraq. So, they remain a danger. I would not say—in northeast Syria, where the U.S. military is, is directly supporting Syrian Democrat Forces, we have not seen ISIS be able to come back and regain control of territory, but they do have clandestine networks that are a big danger, that are intimidating and assassinating people, and trying to destabilize that region and create an opening for them to come back and hold territory.

I would highlight one other danger, which is that the Assad regime and the Iranian regime are now attempting to, if you will, subcontract to ISIS, to some of those ISIS cells, to take action against the Syrian Democratic Forces, against U.S. interests, against the moderate people of the Euphrates River Valley region, in particular. And it is a very malicious and nefarious set of activities that we are seeing.

Mr. WILSON. And that leads to the next question, and that is the assessment of the current role and priorities of the Iranian-backed forces in Syria, and how is their presence evolving, as you just indicated, in the past year?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, Congressman, ever since early 2017, we have seen the Iranian regime forces in Syria stop, essentially, taking part to a large degree in the civil war between the different Syrian sides, and they focus, instead, on trying to create strategic bases for Iranian military forces and Lebanese Hezbollah and try to establish a power projection platform that they can use to threaten Syria's neighbors.

What we have seen over the last year, 2020, is that they have received a lot of military pressure from Syria's neighbors and they have not been able to establish cells to the degree that they would like, the Iranian regime, but they have not abandoned their strategic goal of trying to turn Syria into, basically, an Iranian regime military garrison that they can use to pose a new threat to the entire region.

Mr. WILSON. And it is encouraging, your report on the Caesar Act, a credit to the chairman and ranking member. That is past. Is there more that Congress can do to back up sanctions against the Assad regime?

Mr. RAYBURN. I would say the authorities are good, Congressman. We really like the authorities. We can do a lot under the authorities. I think where the departments can use help now is in being able to build out the infrastructure to make the optimal use of the authorities. So, I think it would be good to have more analysts, to be able to have more bandwidth, to be able to do more sanctions all the time.

We scrape together as much bandwidth as we can, and we have increased that through cooperation with the Treasury Department over the last year. We worked very hard on it. But I would really like to see in the future, I think, and Congress could really help out by helping to increase the State Department and Treasury Department and intelligence community's bandwidth to do more of these sanctions at a higher operational tempo.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, and thank you, Mr. Chairman. But, Secretary Rayburn, you are very encouraging, how positive you are, and thank you for your service.

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, sir.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

It is now my pleasure to call on the gentleman who will be the next chairman, will succeed me as chairman of this committee, Mr. Meeks. Mr. Meeks and I have been friends and colleagues for a long, long time, not only here in Washington, but in New York, where we both reside, and we have been active there, very active in New York as well. I know Mr. Meeks very well and I know that he will do an excellent job—an excellent job—as chairman. He works very hard. He is smart. He is fair. He has a great knowledge of both running a committee and, also, of all the hot spots and problems around the world.

So, I am delighted to call him "Mr. Chairman," and delighted to be able to work with him. And I want to make him a pledge that whatever help he needs from me, he will automatically get it, and I look forward to him doing many, many great things for our country and for the world.

So, it is my pleasure to call upon my good friend from New York. And he and I, again, have a lot in common in terms of where we both grew up and the types of families we came from. And again, it shows how America is a wonderful, welcoming place where people can do well and work hard and attain certain kinds of goals.

So, I look forward to watching Mr. Meeks as chair, and I know he will do an excellent job. So, it is my pleasure to call upon the next chairman of this committee, Gregory Meeks of New York.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And as I said, it is bitter-sweet for me because we are such good friends, and I cherish you as a friend and as a chairman and as a leader. And so, for me, unlike many others that may be on this committee, me and you are going to be seeing each other and talking to each other quite frequently, as I am going to need your strong advice and encouragement as we move forward. So, I am not saying goodbye to you because you are going to still hear a lot from me.

In the way that you conducted this committee, I look forward to following in those footsteps, working with Mr. McCaul in a bipartisan way to keep the traditions of this committee moving forward and the standards that you set, which are very high standards.

But I know for some of my colleagues, because of geographic concerns, they might not get to see and talk to you often, but Gregory Meeks will get to see and talk to you often and utilize your expertise, your advice, and your thought patterns as we move forward. So, this is just a blip in our piece, not seeing you in Washington maybe as often, particularly on Capitol Hill and in the hearing rooms and traveling with you, although I have learned lessons on how to do appropriate travel, so that the Members, when we do travel, get to travel again, get to really get on the ground and understand what is taking place on the ground, as many of your CODELs have been.

So, again, I look forward to our continuing relationship in regards to trying to make sure that individuals who grew up in public housing in the greatest country of the world can lead this great committee called Foreign Affairs and actually do some good in the world, because you have clearly put your stamp on progress and goodness in the United States and around the world. And I thank you for that and look forward to continuing to work with you.

Let me, also, thank Mr. Rayburn for your testimony here today. I know that you served over 26 years in our military and graduated out of West Point. So, we thank you so very much for, and are very grateful for, your service to our great country.

My question is, you know, it is, as most of my colleagues have said, it is quite difficult in Syria when you look at that you have got, nations like Russia that destabilized the region and having a coherent strategy is counterproductive action by Turkey and Erdogan. And I think that we must do all the things that we can with empathy, so that we can never lose sight of the Syrian people and the human tragedy that has taken place there. They continue to suffer very terribly.

For me, I believe in a multilateral approach. I think multilateralism is very, very important and trying to pull together our allies and move and do things in a way that we can make sure that we are standing up for our values and our opposition to human rights indiscretions.

In my opinion, the Administration has failed to stand up to Russia, and the Trump Administration has, in fact, enabled Putin's belligerence and expanding zone of influence in the region. And I see them as being one of the dominant forces there, including, as you have indicated, Iran. But there appears to be no clearly discernible strategy applied consistently across the Administration. I do not see that that has happened.

So, my question is, what path forward is there for the U.S. and for the United States partners to lead a strategic change in Syria? How can we come together with our partners to lead this strategic change that has to take place in Syria? I do not think it can be done by the United States alone. I think it has got to be done with our strategic partners also.

Mr. RAYBURN. Mr. Meeks, I agree with you 100 percent. The United States, in order to achieve our goals in Syria, particularly a political solution to the Syrian conflict under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, we have got to continue to work with our European partners, our partners in the Arab world, and others in the international community who are like-minded, who share with us the judgment that, in order for there to be a stable Syria, a peaceful Syria, not just for the sake of the Syrian people, but for our own vital interests, including our vital security interests, there has got to be a government in Damascus that behaves differently toward the region, that is not hostile to the region around it, and that behaves differently toward its own people; it is not hostile to its own people in a way that destabilizes Syria.

So, I agree with you 100 percent. This has to be done on a multilateral basis, and that is what I and my team are doing, working on every day.

Mr. MEEKS. So, I do not know, maybe I am out of time. I have looked at the clock. But my one other question is, in dealing with the Kurds, I am concerned, what can we do in conjunction with our allies, again, around the globe to protect the people, the Kurds who have been working with us? And then, unexpectedly, we pull our troops out. What do you think we should do to protect the individuals that have been working with us through thick and through thin, whether it was dealing with ISIS crises or the Kurds with their force and who fought with us? What do you think that we could do collectively to make sure that there is not another unforeseen just pullout that leaves them subject to attacks by others, especially by Turkey?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Mr. Meeks.

I think the best thing we can do to help our local partners who have been working with us so closely in the campaign against ISIS is keep the pressure on ISIS, preserve the global coalition, continue to press home our advantage in the campaign against ISIS, so that ISIS cannot return and threaten the people of northeastern Syria, including the Kurdish population there, which suffered hugely at the hands of ISIS.

And then, use our diplomatic efforts to try to keep the situation on the northern border of Syria as calm as possible, and to use our good offices with both sides to try to diffuse tensions there. So that the focus can remain in eastern Syrian; the focus can remain on the threat of ISIS, the threat that is posed by ISIS, and also, the new threat that has been emerging over the last couple of years of the Iranian regime trying to carve out space in that zone. So, that is what I would say is the best thing that we can do for our local partners.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, and I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields back.

Let me again say to Mr. Meeks I know that this committee is going to thrive under his stewardship, and I look forward to all good things continuing to come out of this committee under his leadership.

Mr. Perry.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks for holding this hearing. It seems like there is not a whole lot of official business, so to speak, going on in D.C., and I appreciate your interest in keeping important things on the docket during the waning moments of the session.

Thanks for calling attention to this foreign policy priority. The challenges facing policymakers with respect to Syria are numerous, obviously. The government in Damascus is a State sponsor of terrorism. It allows the Iranian regime, as Mr. Rayburn points out in his witness testimony, to regularly threaten our allies in Israel and Jordan.

Over the past several years, the Trump Administration has made important strides in shoring up our Syria policy, including through the implementation of the Caesar Act and working to negate ISIS and Al-Qaeda's influences in the country.

However, my objective today is not to highlight the successes of this administration's foreign policy. I think those achievements are plain enough to see. My purpose is to underscore that these successes are despite the best efforts of wayward, unelected bureaucrats working to undermine President Trump at every opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record a letter to Attorney General Barr demonstrating the breathtaking dereliction of duty of James Jeffrey, the U.S. Special Envoy for Syrian Engagement, if I may.

Chairman ENGEL. Without objection.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The information referred to follows:]

SCOTT PERRY
10TH DISTRICT, PENNSYLVANIA
1207 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

3 December 2020

The Honorable William P. Barr
Attorney General of the United States
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear Attorney General Barr,

Over the last four years, we have seen America's standing in the world improve dramatically – in no small part due to the visionary and courageous leadership of President Trump. The President's dedication to placing America first – which includes extricating our Nation from prolonged and unnecessary conflicts – has been the focal point of his foreign policy agenda.

Every President is entitled to a team that will serve the interests of their duly elected boss. There can be no equivocation on this point – the President of the United States must, for the sake of the Country, maintain a team he or she can steadfastly depend upon for counsel and accurate information gathering.

Despite the serious implications for National security, less than scrupulous bureaucrats have routinely worked to undermine this President. Ambassador James Jeffrey's admission to *Defense One* reporter Katie Bo Williams that he lied about U.S. Troop levels in Syria is hardly the first case example of a nauseating and toxic dereliction of duty we've witnessed from holier-than-thou federal officials – but few transgressions have been as brash and irresponsible as Ambassador Jeffrey's.

In the November 12 interview, Ambassador Jeffrey indicated that his team routinely and intentionally misled the President of the United States regarding Troop levels in Syria. The President announced in 2018 and again in October 2019 that he would begin withdrawing U.S. Troops from Syria – fulfilling an important promise to the American People. Mr. Jeffrey lead a team that purposefully undermined that objective, boasting the following during his interview:

"What Syria withdrawal? There was never a Syria withdrawal. When the situation in northeast Syria had been fairly stable after we defeated ISIS, [Trump] was inclined to pull out. In each case, we then decided to come up with five better arguments for why we needed to stay. And we succeeded both times."

After listening to the counsel of Ambassador Jeffrey and his team, the President decided to leave 200 Soldiers in Syria. However – and as Mr. Jeffrey made abundantly clear – there are far more than 200 Soldiers in that country.

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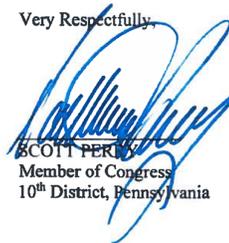
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It is a crime, under 18 U.S.C. 1001, to make false statements to a federal official – specifically, it is a crime to “*knowingly and willfully [falsify, conceal, or cover up by any trick, scheme, or device a material fact].*” Anyone knowingly and willfully lying to the President regarding Troop levels in Syria would be liable to charges under this section and possible imprisonment.

To ensure against any similar instances in future, I request that you investigate any persons who were involved in falsifying information to the President regarding Troop levels in Syria and charge them in accordance with the language within 18 U.S.C. 1001 and any other applicable provision of law.

Thank you for your outstanding leadership and public service. I look forward to your reply.

Very Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "SCOTT PERRY", is written over the typed name and title.

SCOTT PERRY
Member of Congress
10th District, Pennsylvania

Mr. PERRY. President Trump announced in 2018, and again in October 2019, his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria and fulfill an important promise to the American people. There is no ambiguity about the President's position on the issue, whether we agree with it or do not agree with it. That is why he is the Commander-in-Chief and that is why we have elections.

In a November 12th interview with Defense One, Ambassador Jeffrey boasted that the President never did achieve his principal objective in Syria because he, Ambassador Jeffrey, intentionally undermined it. After listening to Mr. Jeffrey's counsel, President Trump decided to leave 200 soldiers in Syria. However, and as Mr. Jeffrey made abundantly clear, there are far more than 200 American troops in that country. The only issue was the President was kept in the dark about that particular material fact. This is beyond unacceptable.

The President needs to be able count on a team of advisors to carry out his policy agenda and be honest. The American people expect and deserve that. It compromises the security of our Nation to have unelected bureaucrats wantonly bend and break the law. 18 U.S.C. Code 1001 clearly States that it is a crime to knowingly and willfully falsify, conceal, or cover up by any trick, scheme, or device a material fact. It should be of concern to everyone on this committee that the President, our Commander-in-Chief, was intentionally lied to in the course of carrying out his charge.

Now that has vitally important implications for the future of Syrian policy and, indeed, for U.S. foreign policy as a whole. I mean, we have got to be able to count on the actions and the words of the chief diplomat, which is the President of the United States.

My hope is that my colleagues will join me in bringing this matter to light and ensuring that any and all appropriate legal remedies are pursued to ensure the integrity of all counsel given to a duly elected President of the United States, regardless of who that is or from what side of the aisle they come from.

Mr. Rayburn, are there any implications for national security on an unelected bureaucrat to willfully lie to the President of the United States?

Mr. RAYBURN. Mr. Perry, the State Department team from Secretary Pompeo down to the lowest level has been diligent in executing the President's guidance on Syria. In fact, the three goals that I mentioned in my testimony were goals that were given to us by the President. So, we have been following the President's guidance throughout.

I respect and admire Ambassador Jeffrey, but what was characterized in that interview simply in my experience did not happen. The State Department neither sets U.S. force levels nor are we responsible for communicating them to the President. It is the Department of Defense that does that with the President's—

Mr. PERRY. So, are you saying he did not say that in the interview?

Mr. RAYBURN. Sir, I am not saying that he did not say that in the interview. What I am saying is that that did not happen in reality. The State Department is not responsible, it is not our job to—

Mr. PERRY. I did not say the State Department was responsible, but he said that he did not follow the President's order and that there were actually more troops left in Syria. And I am just asking if there were policy implications, or otherwise, regarding those statements or any statements in the future of that, like where an unelected bureaucrat, diplomat—I do not mean to say it pejoratively—makes decisions outside the Commander's intent.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sir, in my experience it did not happen.

Mr. PERRY. So, one of them has to be a lie? You just do not know which one?

Mr. RAYBURN. Sir, I cannot characterize, I cannot characterize what happened in that interview. That was conducted after Ambassador Jeffrey retired from the State Department. What I can say is, at no point did the State Department misrepresent our military posture in Syria. It is not our job to do that.

Mr. PERRY. I yield the balance.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman's time has expired. Mr. Connolly?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Can I be heard?

Chairman ENGEL. Yes, you can, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Great.

Well, I listened with great interest to my friend's concern about misrepresentations made to the President with respect to force levels in Syria. I wish we had equal fervor in protecting the President and the country from misrepresentations about a duly elected President-Elect and the process where a record number of Americans participated in a free and fair election that resulted in the election of President-Elect Biden. But that is a different matter.

Mr. Rayburn, what is our policy objective in Syria? What is we want to accomplish?

Mr. RAYBURN. Sir, as I mentioned, it is the three interconnected goals. Those are our primary focus. It is the goal of getting an enduring defeat of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. It is the goal of seeing all Iranian-commanded forces withdrawn from Syria because of the destabilizing role that they play. And the third element of that is achieving a political solution to the Syrian conflict under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, the political solution.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, implicit in those three goals, is part of our objective the replacement of the Assad regime?

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 calls for a political process that will result in a transition to a different government in Syria. Now exactly how that government is constituted, that is meant to come from the Syrian people themselves and the voice of the Syrian people in that political process.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Are we confident that there is any kind of mechanism in the near future in Syrian that would accurately reflect the voice of the Syrian people in a free, democratic choice of leadership?

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, I think the mechanism that is outlined in 2254 is the best mechanism that we could hope for. What it is going to require to bring it about is for us to continue to employ our pressure tools to compel the Assad regime and its enablers to come into the 2254 process, to accede to that process. They are

doing everything they can, Congressman, to try to stay out of the 2254 process. That is why we are putting month by month more and more pressure on them with our political pressure, economic pressure, and so on, and some with their pressure, to try to compel them to stop the war and to come into the political process.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, good luck with that. I do not see a lot of evidence that that is working, but that is a discussion for a different day.

One of the objectives you cited was defeating ISIS in Syria. Have the Kurds been allies in that effort?

Mr. RAYBURN. The Kurdish forces that are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and some of them in Iraq, for example, the Kurdish Peshmerga, of course, yes, they have been very important partners in prosecuting the campaign against ISIS.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Wouldn't it be fair to say, as a matter of fact, that the Kurds were for a long time the only element on the ground actually winning back territory and defeating ISIS on the ground?

Mr. RAYBURN. They were a major element, that is for sure. I do not think we could say they were the only ones, I mean, because it is a campaign that was going on across both Iraq and Syria. And it was very important that the Iraqi Security Forces, with our help, were making huge advances against ISIS at exactly the same time that the global coalition was helping local partners, who were both Kurdish and Arab and some Christian, Syrian Christian, in Syria to sort of make efforts on the two ends of the caliphate at the same time. So, you wound up with a squeezing of the ISIS caliphate. So, it had to be a comprehensive approach. The Kurdish forces under the SDF played an enormously important role in that, absolutely.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And at one point, did not President Trump decide, rather precipitately, to pull out U.S. troops, and therefore, U.S. support for the Kurds that led to the Kurds cutting a deal with Assad, because they felt abandoned by the United States Government?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, what transpired, Congressman, is that the President wound up issuing policy guidance to maintain the support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, and that is why it is going on today. I, myself, just 2 days ago, I was on the ground in Hasakah in northeastern Syria with our U.S. military counterparts and our Syrian Democratic Forces partners, who are continuing a very intense campaign of pressure against the remnants of ISIS in northeast Syria.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes, I understand, but I seem to recall at the time when the President made this decision without consultation with serious people, like, for example, Secretary Mattis, that it led to resignations; it led to condemnations of the policy. It was seen as not only inconsistent, but it could be construed as an abandonment of our Kurdish allies on the ground who had fought so valiantly against ISIS. Remember that?

Mr. RAYBURN. Ultimately, Congressman, the President decided to maintain our support to the local partners. So, I would say that abandonment did not happen, and it is witnessed—I mean, I saw it with my own eyes just a couple of days ago. The relationship between our forces and our diplomats on the ground—I have a small

team of diplomats that are there as well—with the Syrian Democratic Forces remains vital for the security of northeast Syria.

Mr. CONNOLLY. OK. If I have any time left, let me just ask a humanitarian question. How many refugees have been generated by the cascading crises and conflicts in Syria? How many Syrians are refugees now?

You are mute.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sorry. I muted myself instead of unmuting myself.

More than 5 million, well over 5 million Syrians are refugees, Congressman, and another almost 6 million or more who are internally displaced.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Internally displaced.

Mr. RAYBURN. So, it is more than 11 million Syrians—that represents more than half of Syria's prewar population—are displaced from their homes as a result of the conflict.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, can I just ask real quickly, Mr. Chairman—

Chairman ENGEL. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. And how many Syrian refugees have been allowed into the United States in the last year?

Mr. RAYBURN. In the last year, Congressman, I believe the number is 481.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Five million refugees and we have accepted 481? Do you think that is doing our fair share? And I will end with that.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Your number is correct.

I will just end, Mr. Chairman, by saying I just think it is scandalous that this administration has abandoned refugees. We talk about trying to have a resolution in Syria, and yet, we have almost closed the doors. We have gone from accepting 5500 refugees in the last year of the Obama Administration to 481 last year. And by the way, in this fiscal year, a total of eight, with 5 million refugees. I think that is scandalous and I think it, frankly, undermines whatever policy we are pursuing in Syria.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields back. Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me, just first off, say that, obviously, Syria is a huge tragedy, and I think, in hindsight, we are going to look back and see the things we should have done and did not do. I think there is this idea that America is war-fatigued and any involvement anywhere is over the top.

But I just remember early on, with people using different examples—if the U.S. intervenes, you are going to see all this horrible stuff happen, and if we do not, it will not. But I think where we are at in Syria is beyond even our wildest kind of horrible scenario. You have, in essence, kind of great world powers all parked there. You always are on the edge of some new conflict brewing. And, of course, the human tragedy is unspeakable.

You think about the 7 million refugees, as you mentioned. That is a prime breeding ground and recruiting ground for terrorism. If you have no hope and opportunity, it is real easy to be susceptible

to somebody coming along and saying, "The West is at fault. Here is some extreme ideology. Your hope is in this." And it is easy to recruit terrorists out of it.

But I just want to ask you—and, sir, thank you for being here, by the way. I appreciate it. And thank you to the chairman for calling this.

One area that I believe the Administration has done a good job is in pushing back against Iranian influence in Syria. And through your maximum pressure campaign, the IRGC both has limited funds and a limited willingness to conduct their malign influence in Syria. Can you talk a little bit about how Iran's calculus has changed following the increase in sanctions and the strike that killed Soleimani?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

I would say that the Iranian regime over the last year, since the strike against Qasem Soleimani, I think it has been proved that the Iranian regime cannot overcome the maximum pressure that we place upon them and they cannot overcome the military pressure that the Israelis, for example, put against the Iranian regime activities in Syria, in a way that Qasem Soleimani had hoped for.

However, we have also seen that, though I believe the Iranian strategy in Syria has failed—and what we have seen over the last year, it has been demonstrated that it cannot succeed because they cannot overcome the pressure from the Israelis and from us—that the Iranian regime senior leadership remains committed to executing that strategy that really has no hope of doing what they intended it to do. And that is a very dangerous situation.

So, they continue to try to move in strategic weapons. They continue to try to control Syrian territory in order to establish a strategic road from Iran over to southern Syria, and even to Lebanon, to threaten Syria's neighbors. And they continue to try to establish outposts, maintain militias of really non-Iranians—from Iraqis, Afghans, Lebanese, and so on, as well as local Syrians that work for the Iranian regime—and different outposts to try to control territory to both destabilize the local situation, but also to try to consolidate that strategic ground line of communications.

They continue to try to do that, even though any objective assessment I think tells us they cannot succeed. So, they need to recognize reality. It means that there has to be continued pressure, so that they give up the strategic goal, and so that they withdraw their forces and abandon this strategy.

Mr. KINZINGER. Yes, I think it is interesting, when you look at that, you know, you look at the Soleimani strike and it is different than, I think, the fight against certain terrorist groups where, if you kill a leader, another leader rises up. This is a situation where I think Soleimani had unique influence and unique, I guess, abilities. And they are struggling now after this. You see that in Lebanon and every place, frankly, where Iran has had, tried to have, proxies and influence, that they have actually failed.

I always think it is interesting how, when the Israelis pushed back against Iran too close to their country and Syria, it does not really make news. When we do something that is a massive thing, we have to debate here. And the reality is I think Iran is desperate. And I think, as much as I can understand my friends on

the other side of the aisle with the Iran nuclear deal, I think re-plugging into that would only send a lifeline to Iran to continue the kind of tragedy that we are seeing.

I did have a bunch more questions, but that conversation went long. I will just say I really appreciate the work you are doing. I really appreciate the attention you have given to this. It is a huge tragedy. There is a lot more that unites Republicans and Democrats on Syria than not, and I hope that, going forward, we can continue to maintain pressure on Assad and understand the difficulties that some of these countries hosting these refugees have faced.

So, with that, thank you for being here.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. Deutch.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Rayburn, for joining us today.

I want to just take another moment to congratulate my friend, Chairman Engel, at this, his final hearing. Mr. Engel, during your time as chairman, you have advocated for a principled American role in the world. You have fostered a spirit of bipartisanship on this committee. I think it is especially appropriate that yesterday we were here focusing on the Balkans and today on the Middle East, two regions where you have played an outsized role, including and especially in Syria through the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. I value your friendship and leadership and know that you will remain engaged on these important issues in the future.

I also want to congratulate Mr. Meeks on his historic selection as chairman-elect and commend Mr. Sherman and Mr. Castro for their work on the committee. And I look forward to working with all of you in the next Congress to help restore America's global leadership.

In March, we are going to mark a 10th anniversary of the start of the war in Syria. The last decade has seen the deaths of 600,000 people, the displacement of more than 11 million, both inside Syria and around the Middle East. Assad's reign of terror, including starvation and indiscriminate bombing, has caused destruction and devastation to millions of innocent civilians.

The conflict and associated humanitarian tragedy has destabilized neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, and will reshape the region for decades to come. For 10 years, there has been a humanitarian crisis in Syria, and ending the conflict through negotiated diplomatic solution is key to stabilizing the Middle East and achieving U.S. interests in the region, and most importantly, providing a better future for the Syrian people.

The President's policy has been defined by the irresponsible choice to rapidly withdraw U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, a decision made without coordination with our allies and partners, without much input from his advisors, leading to the resignation of Secretary Mattis. The President's decision destabilized Syria and made the American people less safe, strengthened Russia as the main international power deciding the future of Syria. And finally, it reduced U.S. leverage to shape a political outcome and tipped the balance of diplomatic and military power in favor of Iran, Russia,

and Assad. And if we are going to avoid a dead-end in Syria and revive diplomacy, it is important that we openly acknowledge these and other mistakes and that we learn from them.

Mr. Rayburn, your testimony acknowledges only a political solution will end this conflict, but the Assad regime has held to its desire to use military force to end it. You also acknowledge that it has been exacerbated by Russia's refusal to lean harder on Assad.

So, we have two different political processes—Geneva and Astana. And we were sidelined in the Turkish-Russian Security Corridor Agreement. Russia blocked Security Council Resolutions that are meant to just help get assistance to those in need.

And my question is pretty simple. What is our leverage at this point to jumpstart the process in a way that furthers our security interests, that protects the Syrian people, and that produces real peace rather than just a stalemate, as recently retired Special Envoy Jeffrey called it?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

I think the centerpiece of our leverage is what we have been able to do under the Caesar Act authorities and other related authorities to apply economic pressure and the pursuant political pressure to the Assad regime and its allies. But what we have seen over the past year is that—and we weren't sure about this when we started—but what we have learned is, I think, that the Assad regime cannot absorb the shock over time of our accumulating economic and political pressure that the Caesar Act gave us. And at the same time in 2020, we learned that the Assad regime does not have the military wherewithal to accomplish a military victory, a military outcome, and create facts on the ground.

So, I have been encouraged, but the situation on the ground for the Syrian people remains awful in pretty much every corner of Syria. But, strategically speaking, I think 2020 has been the year when we have seen the leverage of our adversaries in Syria has hit its ceiling, while our leverage has grown and, in particular, with what we have been able to accomplish with the Caesar Act.

Mr. DEUTCH. What about designating Russians, Mr. Rayburn?

Mr. RAYBURN. That remains a distinct possibility.

Mr. DEUTCH. What leverage do we have with Russia?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, I think we have a lot of leverage with Russia. I think the most important leverage we have with Russia is the pressure that we put on the Assad regime, Russia's client, which has been unrelenting and which I know, because we have our plans, we know what we would like to accomplish with our designations and political pressure in the future. We know that that pressure is only going to deepen.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Rayburn, I'm sorry.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sorry.

Mr. DEUTCH. I appreciate that. I just want to ask one quick question, Mr. Chairman.

Very quickly, you noted, Mr. Rayburn, that the U.S. will continue to work for the return of Austin Tice and Majd Kamalmaz, and every other American who is held hostage or wrongly detained in Syria. You may know I represent the Levinson family. So, issues of American hostages hit very close to home for me. The members of this committee strongly support efforts to bring all Americans

held in Syria home. Do you believe that those efforts to achieve their release should occur separately or must they be a part of diplomacy to reach a political solution in Syria?

Mr. RAYBURN. So far, Congressman, our diplomatic engagement on trying to find out the status and get back our missing and unjustly detained Americans is carried out by our Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. I play a close supporting role in that, but the engagement has gone through Hostage Affairs.

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes, I appreciate it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deutch.

Mr. Chabot.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would like to reiterate the comments relative to yourself about your leadership, and I want to thank you for the many years of service and dedication and commitment you have given to us. Regardless of which side of the aisle we were on, you have treated us all with tremendous respect and deference, and you are totally what a chairman should be. And that is why you are getting so much praise from both sides. You deserve it, and we all wish you all the best in the future.

And I am running out of superlatives that I can give for you because we have had a number of hearings here, but they are all heartfelt. You are a great friend, and even though you are a Democrat and I am a Republican, I consider you a tremendous human being and wish you nothing but the best.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Mr. Rayburn, I wanted to focus first on Idlib, if I could. The situation there in Idlib province is precarious at best, with well over a million internally displaced people who have been the target of Assad bombings. What can be done to prevent Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, obviously, from invading the province or committing further atrocities there?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

Of course, we make clear in our engagements with our Russian counterparts, and with others, that our political and economic pressure is meant to, among other things, in addition to pushing for a political solution to the conflict, it is also meant to deter the Assad regime from continuing this brutal war against his own people. So, we apply our own economic and political pressure.

We also signal support for what Turkey has done militarily on the ground in the Idlib region by being willing to use Turkish military force to stop the Assad regime and its allies from continuing an assault on those, you know, the people who are living under horrific conditions in Idlib.

So, it is a combination of the two. It is the political and economic support that we are able to place, and it is Turkish military pressure.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

As you know, both the U.S. and Turkey have designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. How do you assess statements by Mazloum Kobani from the Syrian Democratic Forces during a recent interview with The Crisis Group—it was published back on November 25th—mentioning the presence and role of thousands of

PKK-trained non-Syrians; in other words, foreign elements within the SDF ranks? And are there ongoing consultations with the SDF on this issue, and if so, at what level?

Mr. RAYBURN. We absolutely believe that it is a constructive step for all parties in northern Syrian, all parties in Syria, for that matter, to agree that part of settling the conflict, part of reducing tensions and violence against Syrians, is that non-Syrians need to leave Syria. Non-Syrians should not be using Syria as a base to attack Syrians or to attack others in the region. So, I think Mazloum's comments were very constructive in that regard. And the answer is, yes, we are ready to be helpful to try to help local groups go through that process of trying to get foreign elements to leave Syria.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

I have probably got time to squeeze one more question and answer into my time. So, let me go to this. Could you discuss our efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of northwest Syria, and what kind of coordination mechanisms are in place with Turkey to accomplish that?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

Well, I mean, we have a lot of coordination mechanisms. In fact, I have a team, the START team, that is located in Istanbul, which helps to oversee the implementation of U.S., the delivery of U.S. aid programs into northern Syria, northwest Syria, in particular, where the need is so acute. We work very closely with Turkish counterparts to do that, and to try to overcome some of the bureaucratic hurdles or logistical hurdles because it is so essential for those people.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Actually, I do have time to get one last one in. A central aspect of the Caesar sanctions bill, which we have already talked about in committee, was sanctions on the Syrian Central Bank, but, thus far, the bank has not been sanctioned. When do you expect progress on that?

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, I think the Syrian Central Bank is sanctioned under other authorities. So, it is the Treasury Department which has to make a determination under the Caesar Act about the qualifications of the Syrian Central Bank under the Caesar Act provisions. I do not have an answer for you on when Treasury is going to complete its work on that, but I know that it is something that they have been working for some months.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

My time is expired, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I also want to begin by thanking you for your extraordinary leadership of this committee. You have been a principal voice for American global leadership and for the power of America's example around the world. And you have promoted bipartisanship throughout the work on this committee in the best traditions of our national government and for the benefit of the American people. And you have, obviously, been a terrific leader of this committee, a great friend, and wonderful

colleague. And I, too, want to say thank you. I look forward to staying in contact with you.

And I congratulate our incoming chairman, Mr. Meeks, who I know will be a great leader of this committee, and, of course, thank Mr. Castro and Mr. Sherman for their participation as well.

And I want to thank you, Mr. Rayburn, for being here today.

I want to focus first on our Russian and Turkish involvement in the region. In March 2020, Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan reached an agreement that established a security corridor. And I wondered if you could tell me kind of what is the status of that, to what extent is the U.S. able to monitor military movements and violence against civilians in these areas, and how much longer do you envision this arrangement holding? There has been a lot of talk that it could collapse at any moment. So, your assessment of that, please.

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

A very important issue. You are talking about the cease-fire agreement that was reached between Russia and Turkey in Sochi. That was an important point at which it was clear that the Assad regime and its allies had to abandon their major offensive to try to overrun Idlib. It was an important point when we saw the military balance, the strategic military balance, shift against the Assad regime in northwest Syria. I would say it has been tense, but, roughly, durable as a cease-fire. We have not seen the Assad regime attempt to return to a major offensive against Idlib in the intervening months.

And frankly, Congressman, I think that is because they recognize that they suffered a significant defeat at the hands of the Turkish military and its local Syrian partners back in February and March. So, I think they realize that they cannot tangle, the Assad regime does not have the military means to tangle with the Turkish military and its local partners.

So, I do not expect the Assad regime to try to upset that cease-fire agreement. Now, in terms of the actual implementation of the agreement between the Russians and Turkish, some of that we are not privy to, but we have seen that I think that it is clear that the Assad regime, and Russia's preferred option of trying to achieve a military solution to the Syrian conflict, was rendered irrelevant as a result of that February-March confrontation.

Mr. CICILLINE. Okay. Thank you.

I want to try to get in a couple of more questions. The Defense Intelligence Agency reports evidence of increasing cooperation between the Syrian Democratic Forces, our Kurdish partners in Syria, and the most potent anti-ISIS force, obviously, and Russian forces. What is the Administration doing to move the SDF away from cooperation with the Russians? Is that even possible?

I think you are on mute.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sorry.

Since October 2019 and the confrontation in northeast Syria at that time, there has been coordination between Syrian Democratic Forces and Russian forces, and even Assad regime forces, in parts of northeastern Syria, where the U.S. military is no longer located.

What we would not like to see is that turn into some sort of political agreement between the communities of northeast Syria and Damascus.

Mr. CICILLINE. Mr. Rayburn, I have really limited time and I want to get one more question in. My question is very specific. Is the Administration doing anything to move the SDF away from corroboration with Russia?

Mr. RAYBURN. Specifically, well, look, we maintain our partnership with the SDF. So, we are the indispensable partner for the SDF and we make that clear in our—

Mr. CICILLINE. I take it that there is not a specific effort underway. I am just raising this. I think it is a very serious issue, but I want to get to one last question.

You mentioned the Al-Hawl camp was built to house about 10,000 people, but it has housed, as you mentioned, 70,000 people for the last 2 years. Ninety-four percent of them are women and children who fled ISIS-controlled areas. And so, the public reporting from NGO's has been that the conditions are horrific. Five hundred people at least the last year perished in the camp due to malnutrition, poor health, and hyperthermia.

And I just would like to know a little more about the conditions there, what we are doing, and what is your assessment of SDF's ability to continue to administer this camp? What is the situation with COVID in Al-Hawl, and particularly with the concerns that all of us have about the radicalization of people who are left in those conditions? Could you talk more about that camp and the prospects for kind of continuing the conditions over there and whether things are going to improve and people are going to be repatriated? But just a more full discussion on that.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sure. There is a COVID problem in Al-Hawl, and it is very challenging because the medical conditions there, the medical infrastructure there is very rudimentary. So, it is a problem. There is more help that is needed for the local authorities to try to tackle that COVID problem, and so it does not spread. It is a very vulnerable population, very densely contained.

For the SDF to administer a security camp, it takes an enormous amount of resources. So, I mean, the best answer for Al-Hawl camp over time is to try to reduce it, first and foremost, by vetting people who are in Al-Hawl. And so, those who do not pose a risk who are Syrians, where it is possible, could return to their local Syrian communities, again, only after they have been very closely vetted and it is established that they are not a risk. And the SDF is working on that.

There are more than 30,000 Iraqis that need to be repatriated to Iraq. There is not yet a fully working mechanism to make that happen. And so, that needs a lot of attention. It needs a lot of diplomatic energy in the future.

And then, for those several thousands who are neither Iraqis nor Syrians, but who are many from Europe or North Africa, from other places internationally, it has been very challenging to get those host nation governments to accept the repatriation of their citizens. And so, that is something that really we have got to apply more energy with trying to reduce that population in the future.

But the bottom line, Congressman, is the problems there are very difficult and the best answer is to try to reduce the population of Al-Hawl camp as quickly as we can, and it is very tough.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman's time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to add my voice to the chorus of those expressing their praise and respect for you, your chairmanship, your bipartisanship, your leadership, and grace. So, I wish you and your family all the best, and I know that you will not be a stranger to this committee or to any other service to our country.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you.

Mrs. WAGNER. Definitely. It is my pleasure, sir.

I also want to welcome Deputy Assistant Secretary Rayburn. And I thank the chairman, in particular, again, for his work on the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, critical legislation that has given the United States the tools to hold the Assad regime accountable.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Rayburn, I was horrified last year when Turkey initiated a military offensive against Kurdish forces in northwestern Syria. I believe that the United States has a duty to prevent genocide of the Kurds, contain ISIS so terrorists cannot regroup, and ensure any repositioning of U.S. forces will promote stability in the region.

More than a year after a cease-fire resulted in the withdrawal of Syrian Democratic Forces from the Syria-Turkey border, how has the Turkish incursion affected the situation on the ground in Syria, particularly regarding the safety of our Kurdish partners?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, ma'am.

So, that situation in October-November 2019, it was a very challenging one. It was very difficult. We were able to produce an agreement with the government of Turkey to observe a cease-fire in that zone of northeastern Syria, where their military operations had extended. And that cease-fire has been, essentially, durable. It is a tense situation there. We see occasion flare-ups along the line, but we have not seen any major moves from either side.

And our message to both sides has been it is not in your interest—it is not in Turkey's interest; it is not in the SDF's interest—to see a renewal of that confrontation. It distracts, we think, both sides away from the major problems in Syria, which are the Assad regime, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Iranian regime, and so on.

So, I would say we have been able to continue the campaign against ISIS. The global coalition has been able to continue its efforts, and there has not been a resurgence of ISIS in northeast Syria. They continue to act as a clandestine network, but they have not experienced a resurgence. And so, it is something that has really complicated our task in northeast Syria over the past year, but we continue to do our work there.

Mrs. WAGNER. And I would like to get in a couple of questions here.

Assad seems to reject the necessity of a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war, believing, instead, that it can achieve a military victory over opposition forces. Russia is not putting sufficient pressure on Assad to convince the regime to participate seriously in any

kind of negotiations. In your view, does this undermine the Russian-backed Astana talks, and what leverage can the United States use to rejuvenate negotiations?

Mr. RAYBURN. That is a good question. In our view, the Astana Forum, which we do not participate in, is defunct. It was meant to be a cease-fire forum, and then, the Assad regime and the Russians attacked all the cease-fires, attacked all the cease-fire zones. So, that is a dead forum. They still meet, but there is no political solution going to come out of the Astana Forum.

That is why we spend all of our time applying pressure to the Assad regime and its allies to compel them to come into the only viable forum that exists, which is the one in Geneva, the political process in Geneva that is U.N. supervised under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. I think we can get them there. It will take more pressure. It will take more actions under particularly the Caesar Act and other Syria sanctions authorities, but I think we can get there.

Mrs. WAGNER. Humanitarian assistance ensures that our efforts to hold the Syrian government accountable are not hurting the Syrian people, who have already suffered so very much. At the same time, we must prevent the regime from using humanitarian assistance to circumvent economic pressure. I understand that Russia and China are using their veto power at the U.N. to try to funnel aid through the government's seat in Damascus. How is this complicating our ability to provide aid to the people of Syrian?

And I am out of time here. So, very quickly, sir.

Mr. RAYBURN. You got it exactly right, ma'am. It is very difficult. So, a lot of the humanitarian assistance that we support comes cross-border. It does not go through the Syrian government in Damascus. The Russians would like to compel everyone to do humanitarian assistance cross-line working through Damascus. We resist that. We try to exercise oversight over the humanitarian assistance that we contribute to that does have to go cross-line, and there is some. We support humanitarian assistance throughout Syria, even in the areas that the Assad regime controls. But it is something we have to watch very closely, and I think we need to work more closely with the U.N. agencies in the future to try to guard against the Assad regime being able to divert humanitarian assistance away from the Syrian people and into the channels the Syrian regime would benefit from. It is a problem we need to watch closely.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you. Thank you, Secretary Rayburn, for your service over time.

I appreciate the chair's indulgence, and I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mrs. Wagner.

Mr. Keating.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And again, thank you for all your work. I have enjoyed working with you and hope to continue to do so.

Along those lines, I had an amendment that passed the NDAA that the chairman worked with me—thank you, Mr. Chairman—to establish a coordinator for ISIS detainees. And as part of the congressionally appropriated dollars for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, the U.S.-trained Provincial/Regional Internal Security Forces, PRISF, is funded to detain roughly 12,000 ISIS militants

in custody and roughly 2,000 foreign fighters. Mr. Rayburn, could you tell us the status of that? And can you tell us with confidence that these prisoners, these dangerous ISIS and foreign fighters, that they are secure?

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, it is a tough problem. I think they are secure right now, but there is always a danger. And the longer those foreign terrorist fighters are on the ground in Syria, there is a danger that, for example, they would overextend the Syrian Democratic Forces and other local security forces that have to try to guard them, that have to secure them. So, the answer for the foreign fighters, in the same way that it is for Al-Hawl camp, the answer is to try to get the foreign fighters processed and repatriated back to their home countries, and that has been very challenging.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Rayburn, are there efforts in place, not only with these detainees, but also with the refugees, to inhibit the coordination and further radicalization of those individuals? It is a real concern. So, what is being done in that regard with the detainees and, also, with these refugees?

Mr. RAYBURN. I would say there is not enough being done. And it happens that on Monday, when I was in northeast Syria talking to U.S. military counterparts and our local partners, that the recognition that there needs to be a de-radicalization campaign in not so much the foreign fighter facilities, because a lot of those are really hardened ISIS people, but more among the displaced population or the lower-threat population, maybe people that were sort of auxiliaries to ISIS, but they weren't necessarily dyed-in-the-wool radicals. But there needs to be an effort to help with de-radicalization efforts there.

As far as the refugees are concerned, that is an enormous problem, and really, there needs to be more attention to that. It is different in each different place because the refugees are spread out over so many countries.

Mr. KEATING. All right. Well, it is an ongoing concern, and I hope that some of the pullbacks we have had, some of the support we have, has not deteriorated or inhibited our ability to deal with an important issue. And I hope that the Administration can work successfully repatriating these people, so they can go back to their own countries to seek justice, an ongoing concern that I do not think was helped as we pulled back some of our influence militarily through the area.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. The gentleman yields back. Thank you, Mr. Keating.

Mr. Mark Green.

Mr. GREEN OF TENNESSEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for your work in this region and, of course, on the committee. My comments from before go and I wish you the best.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. GREEN OF TENNESSEE. Ranking Member, thank you for your—thank you, sir—thank you for your comments, too.

And, Mr. Rayburn, thank you for your testimony today. I want to start my comments with a good, hardy “Go Army, Beat Navy.”

I started my company, my medical company, in Panama City, Florida, where I met a physician named Oussama Rifai. Dr. Rifai had grown up in Syria, in fact, grown up in Aleppo. And this was in the 2007–2008 timeframe. And I got to know Dr. Rifai, and then, he convinced me that I should join the Syrian Medical Society and go back to Syria to teach physicians in the country.

So, in the early part of 2011, I began to prep some lectures to do and to deliver in Aleppo, Syria. I was excited to go. Dr. Rifai had shared with me the amazing beauty of that city, the city of Aleppo, where Christians and Muslims worked together in peace. He described it, citing examples where the Muslim families would babysit the children of Christians while the Christians did Christian festivals and services, and vice versa. It was an unbelievable city.

My friend calls me a few weeks into the summer and says, “Are you still going to Syria?” And I am like, “Well, I think so.” And, of course, it deteriorated, continued to deteriorate, and I wound up not getting to go.

But this war comes and destroys the beauty of that city, crushes the people of that country, spawns the amazing, unbelievable, horrific ISIS caliphate that President Trump and the United States military so crushed, and has created this unbelievable situation where Turkey and the Kurds and Russia and the Syrian government are not in this milieu, and it is probably the hardest foreign policy challenge of the United States. It is a 9.9 out of 10.

Clearly, this guy Assad is a butcher and he is following in the line, if you go and study what happened in Hama, Syria years ago, he is following in the footsteps of his father. The apple does not fall very far from the tree.

But just a few quick questions. Most of my questions have already been asked by committee members. I just wondered, Mr. Rayburn, if you could talk a little bit about Russia’s long game, what their footprint is today, and what their long game is there, and what our plans are to thwart what they are doing.

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

The Russians have been there for a long time. They have had a military presence there going back into the cold war. so, it is half a century that the Russians have had a naval base there, that they have had a very close relationship with the Syrian military.

What we would like to see is that all the forces that were not there before 2011, ultimately, go home, and that there is a political solution that makes it so that they have no rationale to be there. I mean, that is us included.

As far as what the Russians are doing there, to be honest with you, I think the Russians now, since 2016, have been trying to enable Assad to win a military victory that he cannot win and that they cannot sort of lift him up and carry him over the finish line. The Syrian regime military is too hollow. That regime is too brittle and weak.

And so, what is their long-term game? It is not clear to me that there is a viable one because of the path that they have been on. The path they have been on for the last four or 5 years has hit a dead-end or a cul-de-sac and there is nowhere for it to go.

So, to be honest with you, I think, honestly, it is time for a reality check for all the allies of Assad to realize that there can only be a political solution to this conflict. They are not going to get their military Reconquista.

Mr. GREEN OF TENNESSEE. Thank you for that.

And I am, essentially, out of time. Chairman, I yield back.

And thank you, Mr. Rayburn, for your comments.

Mr. RAYBURN. And beat Navy, sir.

Mr. GREEN OF TENNESSEE. Yes, beat them.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Espaillat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I turn to Mr. Rayburn, I would like to acknowledge the chairman's final hearing, and thank him for his tireless commitment to this committee.

Chairman Engel and I share neighboring districts, and he has been a wonderful friend and mentor to me in my first two terms. And while in the State Senate, I represented his home district as a State senator. So, our friendship is deep and I value it, and I wish him all the very best.

My question is that, despite the dire threats facing refugees to return to Syria, neighboring States like Lebanon and Turkey that have hosted thousands of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 are increasingly calling on those Syrians to return home. Reports have emerged, verifiable reports have emerged, that Syrian refugees have been forced to return from both neighbor States, including hundreds in the late 2019 year, documented by both Amnesty International and various Lebanese press reports throughout 2020. These evictions and forced returns of Syrians from Lebanon are very well-documented. Could you provide an update on the latest in terms of these forced refugee returns, Mr. Rayburn?

Mr. RAYBURN. Yes, Congressman. Thank you for raising this. It is really important, I think less so Turkey, because I think Turkey shares with us the fundamental position that refugee returns have to be safe, voluntary, and dignified, and there has to be an independent assessment that conditions on the ground are safe enough for people to return.

In Lebanon, we have had a challenge with that with our Lebanese counterparts, and we have seen them try to remove the "voluntary" out of that formula of safe, voluntary, and dignified. And there has been a great deal of pressure on Syrian refugees from time to time to try to coerce some of them to go home.

We have tried to make it very clear in our engagement with Lebanese counterparts that it is unacceptable to see refugees of any kind suffer back to Syria, when we know that the conditions—

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Are these—

Mr. RAYBURN. Sorry.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Are these refugees safe going back there or are their lives in danger? What is the status, for the most part, of these refugees?

Mr. RAYBURN. I think you can say, Congressman, the situation in Syria is not safe for people who would like to return home, because, simply put, the Assad regime has not ended its war against

the Syrian people. And that is the sine qua non; that is the starting point, if there is going to be the creation of conditions on the ground in Syria before people will feel safe enough to voluntarily go back.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. So, what additional steps should the U.S. take to work with our other partners, as well as multilateral organizations, to let the U.N. to prevent these forcibly returns that could lead to the deaths of many of these refugees?

Mr. RAYBURN. I think we have to look if there is—I mean, there are avenues open to us, even in terms of if it gets down to economic sanctions, certainly political pressure. But we will issue warnings, if we see that kind of activity beginning, we will issue warnings to those countries.

Now, at the same time, it is incumbent on us, I think, and the international community to continue supporting those countries who have very meager resources and who are bearing the burden of, and the pressure of, having to host a large refugee population, to help them with resources to make it so that they can bear that burden better.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Let me turn real quickly to the Caesar sanctions. Now I think that we can all safely say that, although throughout the decades the United States has applied a range of sanctions to Syria and the Assad government, it really has not significantly changed the behavior of the government. What makes the Caesar sanctions different?

Mr. RAYBURN. The Caesar sanctions, first of all, I love the Caesar sanctions, as someone who is implementing them, because not only does it mean that we can use the prongs that are within the Caesar sanctions, it means that everyone we designate under any Syria authority, the Caesar Act attaches secondary sanctions to them. And that is what is really powerful, because it is not just the people or the businesses or the organizations that we sanction directly; it is anyone that does business with them or interacts with them is vulnerable to sanctions as well. And that is where we get the real power of the Caesar Act.

I think we are seeing things change on the ground in Syria. The Syrian regime did not dream that it would be at the end of 2020 and would have its currency crashing, its regime economy failing, and its resources that it uses to fund its war against the Syrian people dwindling the way it has. And I think the Caesar Act has played the central role in helping to bring that situation about. So, I think things are changing, and you will see that more in the coming months.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Espailat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Ms. Wild? Ms. Wild.

[No response.]

Okay, we will move on.

Mr. Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. All right, Mr. Chairman. Here I am. Can you hear me all right?

Chairman ENGEL. Yes, we can hear you fine. We can hear you fine.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much.

Well, I want to start by just expressing my immense gratitude to you for your service to this Nation, to this House, to this committee, and your mentorship and friendship to me, in particular.

I will never forget coming to Congress, and, you know, one courts the chairmen of the committees one wants to serve on. And not only were you gracious and respectful of me as a freshman, but your enthusiasm for the work of this committee and your sort of intellectual depth you bring to it, it just has been a real inspiration to me. And so, that is something that I will take forward with me. So, I am really grateful to you for all that.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Mr. LEVIN. So, let me ask a question about chemical weapons. Earlier this year, the Administration reported—and I am quoting—“We believe the Assad regime is seeking to reestablish strategic weapons production capabilities it lost in the course of the conflict, and we continue to see Syrian procurement activity in support of its chemical weapons and missile programs.”

So, aside from sanctioning Syrian individuals, what is the State Department doing to respond to a renewed Syrian chemical weapons program and is there a diplomatic strategy?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

Yes, there is a diplomatic strategy, and it can be summarized in building an international consensus, building a coalition of like-minded countries to use all of their pressure—political, economic, whatever kind, some law enforcement—to hold the Syrian regime accountable, not just for the chemical weapons use that has been documented in the past, but this very real danger that the Syrian regime retains the ambition to reconstitute its chemical weapons arsenal.

Right now, you are seeing on the diplomatic side, I think the most important forum that is underway right now is at the OPCW in The Hague, where we and many other like-minded countries are going through a process of following up on the OPCW’s ultimatum to the Syrian regime to come clean about its chemical weapons use and its program, and if not, then to be under the danger of suspension from the OPCW.

Mr. LEVIN. Sir, so would you say that this is a good example of the importance of multilateral institutions and of the U.S. working collaboratively with many allies to achieve our foreign policy goals?

Mr. RAYBURN. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Well, that is good, and I hope on a going-forward basis, we will really emphasize our work with other countries and not take a go-it-alone approach.

Let me ask you about the humanitarian situation. As of this fall, roughly half of Syria’s prewar population remains internally displaced, 6.2 million people, or registered as refugees in neighboring States, 5.6 million people, and nearly 80 percent of the remaining population is living below the poverty line. The U.S. has directed more than \$11.3 billion toward Syria-related humanitarian assistance since Fiscal Year 2, and Congress has appropriated billions more for security and stabilization initiatives in Syria and neigh-

boring countries. What is the Administration's humanitarian assistance strategy, given the dire, dire circumstances in Syria right now?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

Actually, when we bring it up-to-date, we are actually over \$12.2 billion in humanitarian assistance that the United States has contributed for the Syrian people since the beginning of the conflict. The strategy right now is to try to continue the humanitarian assistance flow, especially cross-border into northern Syria. Right now, we are in the middle of trying to work with the U.N. agencies and other humanitarian providers to do winterization, because there is the onset of winter in Syria which can be harsh conditions or awful.

We, also, over the last several months were able to put together assistance for Syrians inside and outside Syria of \$141 million to address the particular emergent needs brought on by the COVID pandemic, which has hit Syria very hard.

So, I think in the coming months what you will see us do is try to—and we have had to respond to the Russian pressure to reduce the capacity, to reduce the U.N. mandate to do cross-border assistance. So, I think what you will see us do in the coming months is to continue to work with like-minded countries to lock in ways to have that humanitarian assistance be predictable and continue, enduring into the liberated territories of northern Syria, at the same time that we watch for measures to try to contain the COVID pandemic in Syria. Those are, I would say, the two priority areas right now.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. Chairman, I see my time has expired, but it is difficult to say this for the last time, but, with gratitude, I yield back to you.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Levin. I very much appreciate that. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Ms. Wild.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I join in the comments of my colleagues about your service. It has been my great honor to be on this committee with you as the chairman.

I am going to be moving as I ask this question because I am about to run out of charge, and I apologize for that. But I will go ahead.

And I wanted to start, Mr. Rayburn, sort of following up on what Mr. Levin just asked you about. And that is, and without restating the obvious that all of us are aware of in terms of the terrible suffering that is happening in Syria, I do want to know whether you believe that we should reevaluate our sanctions policies toward—we will just limit it to Syria right now—in light of the unintended effects that those sanctions appear to be having on everyday Syrians' food supply in areas controlled by the Assad regime. And I guess a followup to that is, what specific steps is the Administration taking to help alleviate the hunger crisis in Syria?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Ms. Wild.

Since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2020, the United States has actually spent \$1.7 billion on humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. So, we have stepped up our contribution. At the same

time, we have made very clear, through our diplomatic engagements, through our engagements with civil society and business communities, that there are specific carve outs to our sanctions programs, so that we do not constrain humanitarian assistance on the ground, nor things like food production.

The Assad regime has undertaken, along with its allies, a propaganda campaign to claim that we do, but we have clarified at every opportunity that we do not sanction that kind of activity. The kind of people and businesses and organizations that we are sanctioning under our sanctions program right now are the worst of the worst of the entourage of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, and they are not doing anything—the kind of people we are sanctioning, the kind of organizations we are sanctioning are not doing anything to alleviate suffering of the Syrian people. They are the ones causing the suffering of the Syrian people.

In particular, under the Caesar Act, the point of the Caesar Act is to put pressure on the regime, so that they will stop killing and stop inducing the suffering of Syrians. So, I think the regime's propaganda tries to put it absolutely upside down.

Ms. WILD. So, let me ask you this: how much assurance do you personally feel that the humanitarian aid that the United States is providing is actually getting to the everyday Syrians?

Mr. RAYBURN. I think we can be more confident in that in places where we have access—northeast Syrian, for example—and in places where we have NGO partners that can have less restricted access. That is northern Syria. We are less confident in that in places that the Assad regime controls. There is always the risk of diversion, but it is something that we stay in close touch with the U.N. agencies to try to guard against things like Assad regime cronies being able to get subcontracts by using front companies, and things like that, to implement assistance that they, then, will divert into militia hands, Assad Shabiha hands, or other Assad regime crony hands.

Ms. WILD. I am going to switch gears and try to be quick because I am running out of time. But I want to return to the issue of Ambassador James Jeffrey and some statements that he made, specifically one in an interview last month in which he said, "We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there." My question to you is, is that statement accurate, No. 1? And No. 2, what is the actual number of troops we have in Syria today?

Mr. RAYBURN. In terms of the actual troop numbers, I would defer to the Defense Department for comment on that. And I know, for example, simply put, troop numbers are beyond the purview of the State Department. I mean, that is for the Defense Department to set, and we all—

Ms. WILD. Okay. Could you comment on Ambassador Jeffrey's comment?

Mr. RAYBURN. Sure. I mentioned this earlier in the hearing. The State Department team, from Secretary Pompeo on down, has been very diligent in executing the guidance of the President, and in my experience at no time did the State Department mischaracterize the military posture in Syria. We had no reason to do that. We did not have the responsibility to either set force levels or to report

them to the White House. So, as far as I know, that did not happen.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. The gentlewoman's time has expired.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ms. Wild.

Ms. Houlahan.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, of course, I will very much miss you, but I do not think that this is goodbye. I think that we will talk and see one another. But thank you for being such a good mentor to me and to so many others.

My question has to do with a statement that was made by CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie about Syrian refugees. And the quote that I have is that he said, "Unless the international community finds a way to repatriate, reintegrate into home communities, and to support locally grown reconciliation programming for these people, we are buying ourselves a strategic problem 10 years down the road when these children will grow up radicalized. If we do not address this now, we're never really going to defeat ISIS." And that is what he said.

So, my question is, do you agree, sir, with General McKenzie's assessment and what role has the State Department played in this effort? What role should the State Department play in this effort?

Mr. RAYBURN. I do agree with General McKenzie's assessment. I do think the number of Syrian refugees and displaced people outside Syria/inside Syria is so immense. It is a population that is very vulnerable to radicalization in the future, and it is something that has to be addressed. The No. 1 way to address that is to end the conflict through a political solution under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, so that the war ends, so that conditions inside Syria change, and so refugees and IDPs can go back home. That is the single greatest thing that we can do, and that is what the State Department team works for 24/7.

Now, in terms of the specific threat of refugee and IDP settlements/camps, especially inside Syria, we work very hard to try to encourage repatriation of non-Syrians back to their countries of origin. And that is really hard because a lot of the countries of origin do not want to take them back. They are not open to taking them back. So, it is going to take a lot of diplomatic energy. We have got to redouble our efforts to press those countries to take their people back, and some of them are not good people. We know that. Some went off and joined ISIS, went off and joined Al-Qaeda. So, they are a danger, but it is doing no good to anyone for them to remain in Syria.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So, as we are talking about the progress in defeating ISIS and Al-Qaeda that we have made, how do you in the State Department kind of envision reconstruction in Syria, specifically the role that the U.S. plays in that effort? And also, frankly, kind of what lessons have we learned from Afghanistan, bad lessons or good lessons that we have learned from Afghanistan, and how should those lessons be applied in the reconstruction of Syria?

Mr. RAYBURN. Concerning reconstruction, which is another way of saying, I think, normal economic relations between the international community and the Syrian government, we withhold that

and we press others to withhold that until the Syrian government has acceded to the implementation of the political solution under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. So, until there is irreversible progress under 2254 and that political process, the United States should not contribute to reconstruction in Syria, and we shouldn't encourage it. We should discourage others from doing so, to keep the pressure on the Syrian government.

As far as lessons from Afghanistan, I think you are probably meaning about the different studies that have been done about how reconstruction wound up fueling corruption, and so on. I think that is a problem that will have to be addressed when the time comes. It is one that we have to watch out for for sure. I mean, I was involved in Iraq for many years, as we witnessed a similar problem in Iraq. So, it is a problem. It is a problem I would like to have, though. That would be a better problem to have right now than having the war in Syria raging fully. So, if we get to a reconstruction phase, it should be once the political solution is irreversibly being implemented and the war is over.

Ms. HOULAHAN. So, I only have a couple more seconds. But you spoke a little bit about the pressure that we had. Other than sanctions, what kind of other leverage could we use, to your point, to help the Syrian government find their way and to have other allies and non-allies help make progress a reality in this area? What other leverage points do we have? And I only have, I'm sorry, about a half a minute, 15 seconds.

Mr. RAYBURN. Sure. The biggest way is political isolation and accountability, including through law enforcement or international cooperation for law enforcement. Isolation has to remain. The Assad regime/the Syrian government has got to remain isolated from the international economy, from the international community, until it accedes to 2254.

Chairman ENGEL. Okay. Thank you.

Ms. HOULAHAN. I ran out of time, and I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ms. Houlahan.

Mr. Malinowski? Is Mr. Malinowski here?

[No response.]

Okay. We will move on.

Mr. Vargas.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. I am here.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Sorry, I was muted.

First of all, I just wanted to add my words to all the words of thanks, to the praise that you have received. It has been such a pleasure and honor for me to work with you on this committee for the last 2 years.

Somebody mentioned that there will be a portrait of you hanging in the committee. There are many former chairmen with portraits. There are, I think, very few former chairmen who have had streets named after them in the

[audio interference] of countries that the United States has helped, as you have been honored, which is a tribute to you and to the kind of American leadership that you have championed and will continue to champion through your career.

Since it is the last hearing of the year, I also just want to say a word of thanks to everyone I have had a chance to work with: my subcommittee chairs, Mr. Castro, Mr. Deutch; to the members on the Republican side with whom I have partnered, Mr. Kinzinger, Mr. Curtis, Mrs. Wagner, our ranking member, of course—the bipartisanship on this committee is wonderful—and to members of the committee staff who have been so helpful to me, Mira Resnick; Jen Hendrixson White, who helped so much with the Hong Kong bill that we passed this week; Ed Rice; Laura Carey; Jay

[audio interference]; Sajit Gandhi; Janice Kaguyutan, and so many others for their hard work.

I just have a couple of questions to Mr. Rayburn on the subject of today's hearing. I think a number of members have raised all of the problems that arose from the President's aborted decision to withdraw troops from Syria and to leave our allies in northeastern Syria in the lurch, so to speak. Fortunately, that was aborted. But I think there has been less attention paid to the decision the Administration made to basically stop stabilization funding for the parts of Syria to which we do have access, including not sending appropriated funds or seeking additional funds from Congress. I think the argument was made, well, our allies our stepping up. Most of that money from our so-called allies was from Saudi Arabia, which has very different priorities and values from the United States.

So, my first question to you, Mr. Rayburn, is really where that stands in terms of American contributions to stabilization, USAID programming, in those areas. And would you recommend to the next administration that the United States play a leading role on the civilian side, in addition to the military side, in the Syria to which we have access?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

We do agree we are in a stabilization phase in the campaign against ISIS in eastern Syria and Iraq as well. And so, stabilization activities of all kinds have to continue. I mean, that includes military stabilization, but it is also reestablishment of essential services to try to get those communities up on their feet.

Of course, we do contribute as well with humanitarian assistance. And the stabilization projects in Syria to date have totaled about \$1.3 billion. That has included, as you mentioned, contributions from our Gulf partners. The Saudis contributed \$100 million; the Emiratis contributed \$50 million that were used across 2018 and 2019. Those went into U.S. programs. So, they were not independently executed by the Saudi government or the Emirati government. So, they went according to our priorities and they funded our projects.

And so, yes, the stabilization activities like that need to continue, and we will continue both doing what we can from the U.S. side, but also trying to solicit partner contributions as well. And there have been a number of stabilization activities that continue under the auspices of our partners in the global coalition as well.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. I guess the final questions with the little time I have left. We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation for ordinary Syrians under Assad's control. You began to

address this, but how would you weigh the balance in terms of responsibility for suffering of ordinary civilians in, say, Damascus between sanctions and the Assad regime's own economic policies and corruption?

Mr. RAYBURN. I think we have to continue the pressure that we are applying, and we have to try to target that as precisely as possible, so that we are sanctioning the parts of the regime that we need to sanction in such a way that it is not having a spillover effect to harming the Syrian people. But, I mean, in the end, as I mentioned earlier in the hearing, the single greatest thing we can do to try to end the suffering of the Syrian people is to hold the Assad regime accountable, so that it has to stop the war and it has to accede to the political solutions, come into the political process in a meaningful, irreversible way.

You have to understand, the Assad regime is still bombing the Syrian people. It is still shelling the Syrian people. It is still disappearing the Syrian people into its prisons right now. And that is the single greatest cause of suffering of the Syrian people.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. Mr. Castro.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. Rayburn, thank you for your testimony today.

In August, The New Republic reported that an American shell company has gotten an unusual license to export Syrian oil. The report alleges that the company is closely connected to a prominent donor, to certain U.S. politicians. And the report also alleges that U.N. Ambassador Jeffrey met with Nechirvan Barzani to talk about this deal. Can you tell us why you met with Mr. Barzani to discuss this deal? And also, did you meet with Mr. Barzani to discuss oil deals with any other American companies or only the one that was for this particular prominent donor?

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, you are speaking about the license that was issued to Delta Crescent Energy to help the local authorities of northeast Syria to try to raise the efficiency of those local oil installations that our local partners control. We supported that. We issued foreign policy guidance. The Treasury Department issued a license. We supported that because we support trying to get the economy of northeast Syria up and running to the extent that it can under the present conditions of war across Syria. So, I mean, we thought it was a good thing for not just U.S. companies, but others to be able to come in to help the local communities stand back up on their feet.

We are talking about the communities that were victimized by ISIS. They were in the heartland of the caliphate. So, when you go through those communities, they are completely blasted from years and years of war. They need everything. So, for them to be able to use their resources, oil resources—

Mr. CASTRO. But did you lobby for this deal for this particular company?

Mr. RAYBURN. No, we did not lobby. I would have to—we did not lobby anyone for the deal. We issued—

Mr. CASTRO. You had a discussion about it, though?

Mr. RAYBURN. Yes.

Mr. CASTRO. You had a meeting about it?

Mr. RAYBURN. Oh, yes, we met with members of that company. We met with local authorities.

Mr. CASTRO. You met with Mr. Barzani also?

Mr. RAYBURN. With Nechirvan Barzani, yes.

Mr. CASTRO. Yes. And did you discuss deals for any other American companies besides that one?

Mr. RAYBURN. No.

Mr. CASTRO. So, just that one deal?

Mr. RAYBURN. That I was involved in, yes.

Mr. CASTRO. The reason I ask the question, you know, this is a huge donor to some important U.S. politicians. I am going to editorialize a little bit, but I do not know that there would be too much dispute from many Americans that we are just leaving what has been a dark period of corruption and graft, in some cases fraud, that has been looked the other way at, sometimes, I would argue, encouraged by the Trump Administration. And so, that is the genesis of my question.

Mr. RAYBURN. I do not have any visibility on those aspects, Congressman. I mean, this was a straightforward issue of issuing foreign policy guidance for a license request, which is something that we do routinely.

Mr. CASTRO. All right. I am going to ask you about some humanitarian issues real quick and following up on Mr. Malinowski's question.

Despite a large portion of Syrian territory no longer facing active fighting, the humanitarian situation has only worsened. More than half the Syrian population needs humanitarian assistance, as you know. The U.N. announced earlier this year that 9.3 million people are now food-insecure, an all-time high. Many Syrians report waiting 6 hours to purchase bread, if they can afford it at all.

You said in your written testimony that the Administration has ensured that our sanctions against Syria are not impeding essential assistance to the Syrian people. This is commendable, and certainly, Assad and his allies have actively subverted humanitarian aid. Still, most NGO's working on the ground say our sanctions are actively hindering their ability to deliver assistance to the Syrian people.

And so, my question is, what steps, if any, will you take to reduce the humanitarian impact of our sanctions? For instance, are you willing to whitelist certain Syrian organizations and banks to allow NGO's to transfer money and purchase supplies from them?

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, we already do that any time—I mean, there is a problem in the humanitarian community of over compliance, where banks or other institutions over comply with our guidance. We try to work with Treasury to clarify that. OFAC has issued guidance over time explaining exactly what is permissible and what is not under our Syria sanctions program. So, I feel pretty confident that we are making headway there.

And when we get specific instances from a humanitarian NGO, or something, where they are denied the ability to open a bank account, or something like that, we can engage with the business or the bank to clarify our policy to them. We are willing to do that all the time.

Mr. CASTRO. I yield back, Chairman. Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Castro.

Mr. Trone.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to the remarks that have already been made in how much myself and certainly members have really appreciated your leadership on this committee. It has just been spectacular for a long, long period of time. And the key that has made this committee so successful and so productive is your spirit of bipartisanship, and that type of leadership is what we need throughout this Congress.

I would also like to call out the tremendous work that you have done in the Middle East area, and that has been so important to our most important ally over there, Israel.

Your mentorship and friendship has also really meant a lot to me. As a freshman member, it is just so wonderful to have someone that can help you learn the ropes and give someone like myself guidance. And so, I really, really want to thank—I appreciate it—for your service.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Trone. Thank you very much.

Mr. TRONE. You are welcome. You are welcome. Thank you.

If the witness could talk about—and it has already been touched upon already—the dire threats facing the refugees' return from Syria, from neighboring States, Lebanon, Turkey, that have hosted thousands of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. And now, they are increasingly calling for Syrians to return home.

Reports have emerged that Syrian refugees are being forced to return from both of the neighboring States, including hundreds at the end of late 2019, documented by Amnesty International and by various Lebanese press reports of evictions and forced returns of Syrians from Lebanon. And I would like to know kind of what extent, if at all, is the U.S. working to remind neighboring countries, such as Lebanon and Turkey, of their obligations under international law.

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

I think, with respect to Turkey, we have a good understanding with the government of Turkey, and we both share the fundamental view that refugee returns have to be safe, voluntary, and dignified. And I think we have a good coordination with Turkish counterparts on that.

With respect to Lebanon, it has been more challenging. And in my previous role as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs, I and my colleagues have had to interact with Lebanese counterparts from time to time to remind them that refugee returns have to be those three characteristics—safe, voluntary, and dignified. There are some Lebanese political figures who would like to line-through the voluntary aspect, but we have reminded them that that is not acceptable.

And by the same token, we have tried to continue to do our part in marshaling international community support to help alleviate the burden that the refugee hosting countries bear because some of them are of very meager resources. Lebanon is one. Lebanon is going through a very, very difficult economic crisis. And Jordan is another one. And so, these are countries that I think it is impor-

tant for us to continue to have the international community provide assistance, so that the refugee burden can be alleviated, but not at the expense of removing that voluntary aspect of refugee returns.

And then, again, and also trying to push for the single greatest thing that could make refugee returns to Syria possible, which is for Bashar al-Assad and his regime to end their war against the Syrian people and go into a political process to get to a political solution to the conflict.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

And quickly, what do the armed U.S. partner forces in Syria expect from the United States over the short term, the medium and long term? What are they looking for us to do?

Mr. RAYBURN. So, the main one you are talking about is the Syrian Democratic Forces and other local partner forces in northeast Syrian. And I think what they expect, and I think what they can count on, is that the global coalition to defeat ISIS is going to be maintained and that the campaign to defeat ISIS by, with, and through local security partners will continue, not just in Syria, but in Iraq, because it is a problem that spans both countries.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you. I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Trone.

Mr. Vargas.

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

I also want to join my voice to all those other voices that have congratulated you, Mr. Chairman. I have to say that I learned of Eliot Engel when we adopted a Muslim family. My wife and I adopted a Kosovar family, the

[audio interference], because of the ethnic cleansing that was going on there. And they asked if I knew President Clinton at the time, which I did, and Eliot Engel. I did not know Eliot Engel, but I know Eliot Engel now and I know why he has a street named after him and, also, stamps, because of your great work there. And, of course, they have incredible respect for you, as do I.

And I will miss you very much, and especially the work you did in the Middle East, and, in particular, the work that you did around peace in Israel.

I do want to ask—Mr. Rayburn, thank you for being here—I do want to ask you a little bit more about the refugee issue. Now I have been to the refugee camps in Lebanon, both in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley. I have also been to the refugee camps in Jordan, and I have been to the refugee camps in Egypt, where there are Syrians.

I have to tell you, the conditions are not great, and some situations better than others. But one of the things that I did see, and asked about, was that a lot of the countries in the Middle East really were not stepping up and doing their fair share of putting money into these camps to help out. Now has that changed?

Mr. RAYBURN. The contributions from the international community, like-minded countries, to the refugee problem has remained pretty high. We have not seen it decrease. And this year, the main forum of the Brussels Donors Conference, which is co-hosted by the EU and the United Nations, we got another set of good pledges. So, I think, so far—you know, fingers crossed—the international community is continuing its level of support.

Mr. VARGAS. Well, what about the Gulf countries? I mean, that is the criticism that I heard there, that a lot of the wealthy countries in the Middle East had not put a lot of money themselves, that they had sort of walked away, and instead, allowed the rest of the world to shoulder most of the burden.

Mr. RAYBURN. Congressman, I would have to get back to you and check what the Gulf countries' contribution has been to assistance for the refugee communities outside of Syria. I do not have that in front of me right now.

Mr. VARGAS. OK. And I would say, also, I mean, it has been some time since the first time I went there. They have been in these refugee camps now for a long time, and things do happen. Children grow up there. They learn how to live like refugees, which is difficult. I know that they cannot repatriate right now, and you said, to repatriate, it would have to be safe and dignified and—I do not want to put words in your mouth—you said, safe, voluntary, and dignified. And I know they cannot do that at the moment. And since they cannot, why do not we receive more of these refugees ourselves? I mean, I think it is a real scandal that we do not accept more of these Syrian refugees. Why do not we?

Mr. RAYBURN. So, Congressman—

Mr. VARGAS. Mr. Rayburn, are you there?

Mr. RAYBURN. I am here, Congressman.

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, the United States has resettled more than 22,000 Syrian refugees. In Fiscal Year 2020, we resettled 481, and currently, there are 29,000 Syrian nationals who are pending processing in our refugee admissions program. So, I would say the refugee process continues, yes.

Mr. VARGAS. Well, it certainly continues, but at a meager pace. I mean, there are so many refugees that we see went to Turkey. I mean, Turkey, in my understanding, has over 3.5 million refugees from Syria. And yet, we are looking at 400 this year? I mean that, to me, seems scandalous, that we are not doing our fair share to receive these people who are in dire need.

But I guess I would just end, and I want to thank you. I know you have been working hard. This is not a criticism of you, but it is a criticism of this administration that has not been willing to welcome Muslim refugees into our country at the level that we should be, because they are in dire straits.

And last, I would say, of course, we have been talking about the issue of Ambassador Jeffrey. I would highlight that, back in 2016, he was one of the 50 Republicans

[audio interference] who signed that letter that Donald Trump was “not qualified to be President and Commander-in-Chief”—that is a quote—and that he would put our country's national security and well-being at risk. So, of course, he was hiding things from the President because he was afraid the President did not know what the hell he was doing.

Thank you again. And I do thank you for your service. I know you are a very capable person. We have very many capable persons in the Administration, and I appreciate it. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Vargas.

Mr. Costa.

Mr. COSTA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to concur with my colleague, Congressman Vargas' comments, not only on the refugees, not only Turkey, but Jordan has done a great deal, but also his comments on Ambassador Jeffrey as to the President's conduct on foreign policy, I would say overall.

Special Envoy Rayburn, I want to redirect the questioning. A lot has been discussed this morning about Turkey's involvement in Syria and what their real intentions are and the different alliances that they have played on. And I would like, with your expertise, to have you make a comment with regards to Turkey's regional ambitions, not only as it relates to Syria, but I, along with many of my colleagues, have been very, very upset and concerned with their interaction with Azerbaijan acting as a proxy with Armenia, and where that has put Armenia in a very precarious position at this point in time, given the resolution that I think was forced on Armenia by Russia and Turkey as it relates to Azerbaijan and the territory in dispute with Artsakh.

What is Turkey's—I mean they have got tremendous problems right now with not only the pandemic, but with their economy. And Erdogan has taken this country in such a bad direction, in my view, the jailing of journalists and such. It is not the Turkey that we knew two decades ago, and frankly, I am not sure that they are worthy of continuing to be a partner in NATO, given their actions in recent years.

Could you care to comment, please?

Mr. RAYBURN. Thank you, Congressman.

Turkey's involvement beyond Syria in places like Azerbaijan and others is beyond my lane, and I cannot answer for what Turkey thinks its interests are in those other crises or those other places.

In Syria, with Turkey, we try to maintain as constructive a dialog as possible. What Turkey does to protect the civilians of northwest Syria who have been under incredible assault from the Assad regime and the Russians for several years, this is something that we support, as do other like-minded countries, including many, many European countries.

And where there are tensions in places like the border zone of northeast Syria, we work very hard to try to diffuse those tensions and to make the atmosphere as constructive as possible. We do not succeed in that all the time, and there have been some real ups and downs, some real challenges. But I would say right now there is a tense calm in northeast Syria, and in northwest Syria I would say we need the Turks to continue doing what they have been doing.

Mr. COSTA. Well, what do you think their real goals are toward the Kurds? You talked about northeast Syria.

Mr. RAYBURN. That is difficult to say. I mean, I think we could say what we believe is in the best interest of both, which is for there to be a secure and peaceful border between northeast Syria and Turkey, so that the communities on both sides of the border can live in peace. And we try to apply our diplomatic energy to diffusing tensions and trying to help both sides point toward that kind of future.

Mr. COSTA. But when you look at all the players in Syria, I mean, you could make a case that there are four different conflicts that are going on, and it just does not seem to me that—notwithstanding all of your efforts, Mr. Rayburn, that it is not clear. I mean, you opened your statement by indicating that you thought that things were turning out in a way that might provide positive outcomes for our intentions and our allies, but that does not seem to be clear to me.

Mr. RAYBURN. Well, I strongly believe that, and with my background, I do not think I am an irrational optimist. I lived through the whole Iraq conflict and that was a pretty depressing one.

The Syria situation is pretty depressing, too, in conditions on the ground.

Mr. COSTA. Very depressing.

Mr. RAYBURN. But I think we are on a different trajectory now, and I think you will see that in the months to come. Our leverage is going to grow month by month, and I think our adversaries have hit their peak and they are waning now. That is my personal judgment.

Mr. COSTA. Well, my time has expired, but I hope that your note of optimism is warranted, because it still does not seem to be clear to me that that is deserved. But we will continue to work on all of the above and hope for the best.

Thank you very much.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Costa.

Mr. Al Green of Texas.

Mr. GREEN OF TEXAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Castro, Mr. Chairman, for your friendship and the many things you have done.

I also am an interloper today. So, I have to thank the chairperson, Mr. Engel, for allowing me to have this opportunity.

I thank Mr. McCaul for his friendship, not only here, but also on Homeland Security.

Ms. Pelosi, the Speaker, helped us with this issue related to Austin Tice, as did Mr. Hoyer. So, I thank them as well.

I have been on this 8-year mission, a mission of mercy, along with the Tice family, to secure the return of Austin. And as is known by the people who are here, H.Res. 17 passed the House recently, bipartisan, bicameral support. It received little attention in the press, which is the predicate for my question.

Has this been called to the attention of the President, H.Res. 17, which would have Mr. Tice and Mr. Kamalmaz returned home? Do you know whether it has been called to the attention, Mr. Rayburn, of the President?

Mr. RAYBURN. I do not personally know that, Congressman. But, knowing the attention that the President has given to the Austin Tice issue, as well as other unjustly detained or missing Americans, I cannot imagine that it wasn't brought to the White House's attention. And I know my counterpart, Ambassador Roger Carstens, who works on hostage affairs, he is very well-informed about that House resolution. And so, I am pretty confident this has been reported, made available up the chain.

Mr. GREEN OF TEXAS. Thank you.

Moving to another question, UNSCR 2254, does it preclude a negotiated return of Mr. Tice and Mr. Kamalmaz?

Mr. RAYBURN. No, not at all.

Mr. GREEN OF TEXAS. And this resolution has passed, and if the President is aware of it, and we can have a negotiated return of these two persons—and by the way, I would want all persons returned as well; I just happen to be familiar with these two. And I would hope that the family members who heard me make my earlier comments would understand that I want their relatives returned home, too. It is important. They have missed them.

But, given that we have done this, is there anything that you can share with reference to a negotiated return of our friends, of these Americans?

Mr. RAYBURN. For a fuller accounting of that, of that engagement, I would defer to Ambassador Carstens. What I can say is that we strongly believe that the Syrian government has information about the status/whereabouts of these missing Americans, including Austin Tice, that they have not shared. And we believe that they have it within their means to effect a return of Austin Tice and, certainly, a disclosure of his and other missing Americans' status. And they, so far, have been unwilling to share that information, and they have been pressed by our side to do so.

Mr. GREEN OF TEXAS. My final question is something that I did not really come to ask, but I rarely get this opportunity, so I will. Tartus and Sevastopol are pretty important to the U.S.—or to Russia. Russia is a cold water country. Tartus gives Russia a place for its Black Sea fleet to be dispersed. Oh, pardon me, Sevastopol does. Tartus gives it access to the Mediterranean. How likely is it that Russia will leave Syria, given that Tartus is fairly important to its global designs?

Mr. RAYBURN. That is a good question, Mr. Green. We have not held out as a condition for the political solution to the conflict that the longstanding Russian military relationship with the government of Syria has to end. We have not held that out. In fact, the language that we have used is that military forces, foreign military forces, that are present in Syria that were not there before 2011 should leave as part of the political resolution to the conflict. So, the Russians had a naval presence there for many decades before 2011, and we have not tried to press for their preexisting relationship to end.

Also, the relationship that the Syrian government would have in its international relations, in its military relations, that is for the future Syrian government that will result from the political solution and the transition, the political transition process, that is envisioned under 2254, that is for the Syrian people to decide in the future. So, we rely on them to do that.

Mr. GREEN OF TEXAS. Mr. Chairman, you were more than generous. Thank you so much. I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Green.

Thank you, Mr. Rayburn, for your testimony.

To the members, thank you for your comments and your questions.

And as a reminder, any extraneous material can be submitted for the record.

With that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:08 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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

Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), Chairman

December 9, 2020

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 in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. Pursuant to H. Res. 965, Members who wish to participate remotely may do so via Cisco WebEx. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Wednesday, December 9, 2020
TIME: 10:00 a.m., EDT
LOCATION: 2172 Rayburn House Office Building
SUBJECT: Diplomacy or Dead End: An Evaluation of Syria Policy
WITNESS: Mr. Joel D. Rayburn
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs and Special Envoy for Syria
U.S. Department of State

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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

FULL COMMITTEE ATTENDANCE

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Eliot L. Engel, NY
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Joaquin Castro, TX
	Dina Titus, NV
X	Adriano Espaillat, NY
	Ted Lieu, CA
X	Susan Wild, PA
X	Dean Phillips, MN
X	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	David Trone, MD
X	Jim Costa, CA
X	Juan Vargas, CA
	Vicente Gonzalez, TX
X	Al Green, TX

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Michael T. McCaul, TX
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X	Steve Chabot, OH
X	Joe Wilson, SC
X	Scott Perry, PA
	Ted Yoho, FL
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	James Sensenbrenner, Jr., WI
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X	Brian J. Mast, FL
	Francis Rooney, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
	John Curtis, UT
X	Ken Buck, CO
	Ron Wright, TX
	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Greg Pence, IN
X	Michael Guest, MS
X	Mark Green, TN

STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Statement for the Record from Representative Connolly
“Diplomacy or Dead End: An Evaluation of Syria Policy”
December 9, 2020

While the Trump Administration purportedly shared the same goals in Syria as the Obama Administration of an enduring defeat of the Islamic State, a political settlement to the conflict, and the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces, the current administration’s retreat from U.S. leadership has left us with little leverage and empowered other parties – namely Russia, Iran, and Turkey – to shape Syria’s future. President Trump’s Syria policy has been characterized by impulsive and shortsighted moves like the rapid and reckless withdrawal of American troops, ceding diplomatic leadership to our adversaries, and slamming the door on Syrian refugees. The Administration’s erratic approach and lack of a coherent strategy have emboldened President Bashar al-Assad and his patrons Russia and Iran to the detriment of U.S. national security and long-term stability in the region.

Last year, President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, greenlighting a planned Turkish operation to clear U.S.-backed Kurdish forces from near the Turkish-Syrian border. Critics from both sides of the aisle warned that doing so would not only abandon our allies, the Syrian Kurds, but also push them into the arms of Assad’s regime, creating a power vacuum that could benefit Assad, his Russian and Iranian backers, and the Islamic State. Each of these concerns was borne out in real time. The Kurds announced an agreement with Assad, brokered by Russia, that paved the way for Syrian government forces to return to the country’s northeast for the first time in years. After a Turkish airstrike near a camp holding families displaced by the violence, more than 500 female detainees connected to the Islamic State reportedly escaped in the ensuing mayhem.

With that incomprehensible and indefensible decision to retreat, President Trump upended U.S. policy in Syria, breathing new life into the Islamic State and handing a major victory to our adversaries, Russia and Iran. That withdrawal also further compromised U.S. leadership and hampered our ability to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis and meaningfully contribute to a political settlement. Our calls for an immediate ceasefire and cessation to the violence ring hollow when we don’t have a seat at the negotiating table. The Trump Administration has been unwilling to make the diplomatic investments that would be necessary to ensure that a political settlement reflects U.S. national security interests and protects humanitarian concerns.

In addition to these geopolitical dimensions, Syria remains a humanitarian catastrophe with roughly half of the country’s prewar population displaced. Approximately 6.2 million Syrians have been internally displaced, and there are 5.6 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. This crush of humanity has strained resources within countries hosting massive refugee populations, drastically changed regional demographics, and destabilized neighboring countries. Despite a record high number of refugees worldwide, President Trump has repeatedly announced record low refugee admissions goals throughout his administration and explicitly banned Syrian refugees from the U.S.

resettlement process. That is why I introduced the Lady Liberty Act (H.R. 6909) to require the President to set the refugee admissions ceiling at a minimum of 110,000 refugees annually and have urged USCIS and the State Department to take immediate steps to boost refugee resettlement this fiscal year. But that is just the beginning of what will be required to repair the damage done to the U.S. refugee resettlement program by this Administration.

Ultimately, it is political negotiations that will bring lasting relief to the millions of affected Syrians who have known only violence and displacement for nearly ten years. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration's retreat has allowed the Syrian government to retake most of the formerly opposition-held areas, reducing pressure on Assad to negotiate. This enduring conflict is perhaps the most vexing foreign policy dilemma facing the incoming Biden Administration as it seeks to regain leverage and rebuild relations with our allies to work toward peace and stability in Syria.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record submitted by Representative Spanberger
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Forcing Iranian Withdrawal

Question:

“Along with supporting a political settlement to the Syrian civil war, the Trump administration has stated its other goals for Syria are the “defeat of ISIS” and the “withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces.”

However, some Administration officials have stated that the removal of Iran from Syria is a political rather than a military goal.

- Does the administration seek the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces, and if so, what are the parameters of this goal? Is the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces, at least in part, a military goal?
- There is no current authorization for use of force against Iran. Under what legal grounds are U.S. troops operating against Iranian or Iranian-supported forces in Syria?
- Can you please share the full list of authorities U.S. armed forces are operating under in Syria?
- If it’s a political goal, what unilateral or multilateral levers do you believe could potentially cause or incentivize Iranian withdrawal?
- Given the Assad regime’s decades-long relationship with Tehran and reliance on its military, political, and economic backing, is the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria a realistic goal as long as Assad or his affiliates remain in power?”

Answer:

Mr. Rayburn:

- The withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces from Syria is a strategic goal of U.S. Syria policy.
- Information regarding the current presence and status of U.S. troops rests with the U.S. Department of Defense. Our military presence in Syria is conditions-based and its mission is the enduring defeat of ISIS. The 2001 AUMF and, in certain circumstances, the 2002 AUMF authorize the use of force in Syria against al-Qa’ida in Syria and ISIS. Congress has also authorized assistance to appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for certain purposes.

- The 2001 AUMF and, in certain circumstances, the 2002 AUMF authorize the use of force in Syria against al-Qa'ida in Syria and ISIS. Congress has also authorized assistance to appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for certain purposes. In the 2015 NDAA, for example, Congress authorized the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to "provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, stipends, construction of training and associated facilities, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals." That authority has since been extended, with some modifications, in subsequent legislation.
- The United States applies economic and political pressure against the Assad regime for hosting Iranian-commanded or -supported forces and enabling their destabilizing presence. The United States applies economic pressure on Iran – both directly and via the groups it supports in Syria – for its activities. The Department directly targeted with sanctions designations Iranian-linked military entities in Syria including the Fatemiyoun Division and the Syrian National Defense Forces, a pro-Assad, Iranian-affiliated militia, as well as Syrian financiers who use their links to Iran to evade U.S. sanctions. This pressure is accompanied by efforts to maintain the political isolation of the Iranian regime for its destabilizing activities in Syria and the region.
- The United States believes that the Assad regime or any future government in Damascus must sever its relationship with the Iranian regime's forces and the militias it supports so that Iran and Iranian-backed groups cannot threaten the United States, our citizens, or interests, or our allies and partners. U.S. strategic objectives in Syria, including the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces, can best be achieved through undertaking a set of steps laid out in a road map that includes the withdrawal of foreign forces not present before 2011. This policy has broad support among our international partners.

Syrian Kurds

Questions:

“Since late 2019, media outlets and NGOs have reported that more than 200,000 Syrian Kurds have been displaced in northeast Syria by the Turkish incursion and ongoing Turkish military actions.

- What is the status of those internally displaced within Syria nearly a year after Turkey's invasion?
- There are continued NGO and media reports of Turkish-supported militant groups committing violence against Syrian Kurdish communities, including against hospitals and ambulances, and that the Turkish military continues to arm and support such groups in violation of the international law of armed conflict. Are such reports accurate?

- What, if anything, has the United States done to press Turkey to end support to such groups?
- Ankara deepening its incursion into northeast Syria remains a concern. How to do you assess the chances and risks of further incursion? And what is the United States doing to make clear that we stand firmly in opposition to this?"

Answer:

Mr. Rayburn:

- In October 2019, Turkey's Operation Peace Spring displaced over 215,000 civilians in northeast Syria. More than 100,000 of those Syrians remain displaced today and the humanitarian situation in northeast Syria is dire. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) require shelter, food and non-food items, fuel, water, and health assistance. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the country's COVID-19 outbreak, particularly for those living in crowded settlements and lacking access to sufficient sanitation and hygiene. Humanitarian access remains a challenge in many parts of Syria. Countrywide, more than 6.6 million IDPs live in protracted displacement and approximately 13 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance.
- The United States takes seriously allegations of abuses or violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. The Administration welcomed the UN Commission of Inquiry's most recent report, which found once again reasonable grounds to believe that the Assad regime has continued to perpetrate crimes against humanity. The report also found reasonable grounds to believe that members of other groups, including Turkish-supported opposition groups, have participated in acts that may amount to war crimes. The United States condemns any human rights abuses or violations of international law by any group and urges actors to take positive steps to end such behavior.
- The Department of State continues to engage with officials at high levels of the Government of Turkey and with the Syrian Opposition in pressing for investigations into allegations of abuses and violations and for accountability where appropriate. This includes engaging them to express our concerns about recent attacks by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Sultan Murad militias near Ain Issa. Turkey and the Syrian Opposition have acknowledged the importance of progress in this area. We will continue to follow these concerning allegations closely and remain engaged.
- The United States is concerned by the risk of military escalation in northeast Syria and continuously engages our NATO Ally Turkey, the Syrian opposition, and our partner forces the Syrian Democratic Forces to de-escalate. We have been very clear that the United States strongly opposes any new military operation from or into northeast Syria, and this has been conveyed to all parties both publicly and privately on numerous occasions. Any new offensive would further undermine regional stability and provide malign actors with opportunities to exploit this instability for their own purposes.

U.S. Diplomatic Drawdown in Iraq**Question:**

“Reports indicate that the Administration has decided to withdraw some staff from its embassy in Baghdad. It’s said that these adjustments are taking place to reduce risk, which is needed due to increasing danger to American personnel during this administration’s tenure.

While your role does not cover Iraq, our presence diplomatically in the region has implications for Syria.

- Is the Administration planning a diplomatic drawdown in Iraq? If so, can you describe the scale?
- Would a drawdown impact the U.S. ability to monitor and advance objectives in Syria? How would a drawdown impact the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Syria?
- What message does it send the region, our partners and adversaries alike, to draw down diplomatically? “

Answer:**Mr. Rayburn:**

- The recent adjustments to in-country staffing levels in Iraq are temporary and reversible, consistent with the existing Ordered Departure status. We constantly assess the security and health environment in Iraq and hope to revert to higher in-country staffing levels as soon as circumstances permit. We have maintained our diplomatic presence since March under Ordered Departure status, and we will be able to continue doing so under the new in-country staffing levels. Ambassador Tueller and a reduced staff will remain, and their work on behalf of the American people will go on. We will also continue to conduct many engagements virtually and telephonically, as we have been doing since the COVID-19 pandemic started.
- Monitoring and advancing U.S. objectives in Syria is a responsibility shared by U.S. diplomats and U.S. humanitarian professionals throughout the world. The team of diplomats in the Turkey-based Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) play a particularly significant role. The United States has staff in the region dedicated to supporting U.S. humanitarian activities inside Syria. This diplomatic staff is not based in Iraq and therefore would not be affected by any change to Mission Iraq.
- Our temporary and reversible adjustments to in-country personnel levels are a reflection of the security and health environment in Iraq, rather than of our interests, which have not changed since the last Strategic Dialogue meeting in August. We are reaching out to our counterparts in Iraq and throughout the region to drive home the message that we have not left Iraq and that our core mutual interests remain.