

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TURKEY'S  
OFFENSIVE IN NORTHEAST SYRIA**

---

---

**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

—————  
OCTOBER 22, 2019  
—————

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations



Available via the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

JAMES E. RISCH, Idaho, *Chairman*

MARCO RUBIO, Florida	ROBERT MENENDEZ, New Jersey
RON JOHNSON, Wisconsin	BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, Maryland
CORY GARDNER, Colorado	JEANNE SHAHEEN, New Hampshire
MITT ROMNEY, Utah	CHRISTOPHER A. COONS, Delaware
LINDSEY GRAHAM, South Carolina	TOM UDALL, New Mexico
JOHNNY ISAKSON, Georgia	CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, Connecticut
JOHN BARRASSO, Wyoming	TIM Kaine, Virginia
ROB PORTMAN, Ohio	EDWARD J. MARKEY, Massachusetts
RAND PAUL, Kentucky	JEFF MERKLEY, Oregon
TODD, YOUNG, Indiana	CORY A. BOOKER, New Jersey
TED CRUZ, Texas	

CHRISTOPHER M. SOCHA, *Staff Director*  
JESSICA LEWIS, *Democratic Staff Director*  
JOHN DUTTON, *Chief Clerk*

## CONTENTS

---

	Page
Risch, Hon. James E., U.S. Senator From Idaho .....	1
Menendez, Hon. Robert, U.S. Senator From New Jersey .....	4
Jeffrey, Hon. James F., Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC .....	6
Prepared statement .....	7



## **ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TURKEY'S OFFENSIVE IN NORTHEAST SYRIA**

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2019**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:34 p.m. in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James E. Risch, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Risch [presiding], Rubio, Johnson, Romney, Graham, Barrasso, Portman, Paul, Young, Cruz, Menendez, Cardin, Shaheen, Coons, Udall, Murphy, Kaine, Markey, and Merkley.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH, U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

The CHAIRMAN. The U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations will come to order.

We have an interesting hearing today, as evidenced by all of our interest and participation here today.

And I would like to say good afternoon to all and thank you to our guests who are going to, I think, be very enlightening after the discussions I have had with them earlier today. And of course, the situation we have is quite fluid, and I am sure they can help us get up to date, which is difficult as fast as this situation is moving.

This hearing today is intended to assess the geopolitical and humanitarian impact of Turkey's cross-border attack on U.S. interests in the Middle East, determine how best to salvage U.S. interests moving forward, and evaluate the state of U.S.-Turkey relations.

Before we talk about the current state of affairs in Syria, it is important to recall the path that brought us here.

To begin, the Syrian civil war is a complex, multi-sided conflict that has drawn in Russia, Iran, the U.S., NATO allies, and other entities. Over the course of this 8-year-long conflict, Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad, with the support of Russia and Iran, has relentlessly bombed towns and cities across Syria, resulting in over 500,000 deaths and leaving over 10 million people displaced.

We are all aware of the many confirmed uses of chemical weapons by the Russian-backed Assad regime, adding to the humanitarian suffering and violations of international law. The Syrian, Russian, and Iranian regimes now hope to build upon the successful defeat of the self-declared Islamic caliphate and expand their control over the northeast of Syria. These are the circumstances we find ourselves in today.

Beginning in 2011, the Islamic State took full advantage of the chaos in Syria to gather its strength. The group's ascendance was accompanied with a nearly unprecedented level of cruelty.

By 2014, ISIS had gathered enough strength to spill over the Syrian border into Iraq. ISIS captured huge swaths of territory and declared the formation of its so-called caliphate. The world watched as the Yazidis faced slaughter on Mount Sinjar. Iraqi soldiers were marched to mass graves in the Camp Spiker massacre. Women and children were sold into slavery. Execution videos made by ISIS were packaged as recruitment materials.

After several false starts, the United States led a Syrian Kurd and Arab fighting force and a 91-nation coalition intent on defeating the caliphate. With a limited number of boots on the ground, U.S. and coalition air power, coupled with an effective Kurd-based ground force, forced the territorial defeat of ISIS. The heavy Kurdish involvement in the defeat of ISIS has come at great cost. Nearly 11,000 Syrian Kurds have been reported killed and many more wounded.

That brings us to the present day. Turkey's relationship with the region's Kurdish population has been fraught for centuries and particularly over the last three decades. U.S. support for Syrian Kurdish fighters in the war against ISIS created massive tensions in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. Turkey views the Syrian Kurds as an extension of the insurgency group known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or the PKK, which has fought an insurgency against Ankara for the past three decades. On and off violence has affected the citizens and country of Turkey for years, which is why the U.S. has worked for months to help address Turkey's security concerns.

Let me be clear. Turkey's misguided invasion into northern Syria now threatens to unravel all the progress the U.S. and our partners have fought so hard to achieve.

ISIS is defeated, but elements remain that could reconstitute and pose a threat to U.S. national security interests and those of our allies in the region.

Our counterterrorism concerns emanating from Syria and the surrounding region remain very real. Continuing regional conflict and instability, coupled with opportunities to establish sanctuary space, creates conditions for ISIS revival with the potential to attack the U.S. homeland and our allies. Absent continued counterterrorism pressure, ISIS is likely to return whether in Syria or elsewhere. Only through vigilance will we keep ourselves safe. Partnership with the Kurds will remain an important part of that strategy.

Turkey has assured us they will continue to battle the Islamic State. To say the least, I remain skeptical of Turkey's counterterrorism guarantees. We have tread this ground before. We have offered Turkey the opportunity to combat ISIS and its affiliates. Turkey has promised to provide forces to combat ISIS. But Turkey has failed to follow through with those forces. Worse, sometimes the forces in question had questionable ties to jihadist or al Qaeda-linked groups.

The fact of the matter is that Turkey's primary concern is its decades-old struggle against PKK. Countering ISIS falls much further down Turkey's list of priorities.

In addition to sacrificing our gains against ISIS, Turkey's actions threaten further instability and chaos in a country that has already suffered years of destruction and devastation. Reports of Syrian and Russian troops occupying abandoned U.S. positions underscore that Turkey's actions have opened the door to Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers. Additionally, the humanitarian toll of this incursion has been swift and severe.

The U.S. withdrawal has created an opportunity to be exploited by Russia. Indeed, on the day the U.S.-brokered cease-fire is set to expire, President Erdogan met with President Putin to discuss the future of Syria today. U.N. Security Council resolution 2254, the framework for a political resolution in Syria, a cease-fire, formation of a constitutional committee and free elections, remains very much in doubt with Putin's high level of involvement. We should very strongly discourage unhelpful parallel talks and instead reinvestigate the U.N.-brokered process on Syria's future.

ISIS detainees and foreign terrorist fighters, many of them at makeshift prisons, add to the complexity. We have already seen reports of breakouts at the al Hol camp. Further release or escape of battle-hardened terrorists, particularly high value individuals, will only serve as a strategic boon to ISIS and swell their ranks.

Finally, there is the broader issue of U.S.-Turkish relations. Prior to the Syrian invasion, Turkey's increasingly autocratic posture and dangerous tilt toward Moscow was a cause for serious concern. That remains a concern today. Turkey has imprisoned Americans and U.S. consulate employees. It has jailed more journalists than anywhere else in the world. It also recently purchased and accepted delivery of the Russian S-400 missile defense system despite the loud protests of Turkey's closest allies. Now we are forced to confront a Turkey that acts blatantly against U.S. national security interests and brutally attacks U.S. regional partners over our most strenuous objections.

While I appreciate efforts to reduce the violence through negotiations, if Turkey maintains its aggressive path, it must bear a cost for undermining U.S. security interests. That is precisely why Ranking Member Menendez and I have written legislation to sanction, block arms sales, and impose costs on Turkey if it continues its ill-advised Syria invasion.

I took a little liberty by saying the Ranking Member and I. There were many members of this committee who had input into this. I want to compliment the staffs of both the majority and the minority for working so hard on a bill that we think is a good bill. It is still a work in progress. We have a number of other fronts that have been opened up with other bills being offered. In fact, some members of this committee have partnered on some of those bills. I would urge when these kinds of things happen, that we try, as best we can, to act as a committee. We are much stronger when we are together, and I think that a bill that comes out of this committee with a real push from the vast majority of the committee would be very helpful. And we hope to be able to move the bill that we are working on and continue to work on today in the very near future.

Ambassador Jeffrey, DAS Palmer, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on this current crisis and its future implications. I

appreciate your time and thank you for your attendance here today. I hope you can provide some guidance on how the administration intends to tackle this difficult situation and provide some ideas for a constructive path for the U.S. Congress to take moving forward.

With that, Senator Menendez.

**STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY**

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, let me thank you for holding a hearing as quickly and as propitiously as this one. I think that the urgency of now, as it relates to Syria and our interests, cry out for a hearing like this, and I appreciate and applaud your quick response to it.

I want to thank Ambassador Jeffrey and Deputy Secretary Palmer for coming before the committee. Ambassador, I understand you came out of retirement for this post. And I am not going to suggest you need a mental check.

[Laughter.]

Senator MENENDEZ. And I applaud your commitment to serving our country. I think it is incredibly important.

Ambassador Jeffrey, we understand that you and Ambassador Satterfield and the rest of our diplomatic corps and military leaders on the ground had spent the past months doing the work of diligent diplomacy, balancing an increasingly belligerent NATO ally and a militia force in pursuit of defeating ISIS in Syria.

However, your recent efforts in my view were hamstrung from the outset since December—December—of last year when President Trump made abundantly clear that he was more swayed by President Erdogan's manipulative threats and persuasions than by advice from his own diplomatic and military corps.

Indeed, the President's decisions over the past month are yet another betrayal of U.S. foreign policy to Russia. A betrayal of our Kurdish partners who fought and died alongside us in the battle against ISIS, who are now throwing in their lot with the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian government, the regime that barrel bombed and gassed its own citizens and uses ISIS as a political tool. A betrayal of our ally Israel, as the current chaos further empowers Iran's pursuit of a land bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean. And a gift to ISIS, which has been given the time and space to regroup, as well as thousands of civilians continuing to flee even under this so-called ceasefire.

Everyone in the region is recalibrating their relationship with the United States. As thousands of Kurds, who we once called partners, pelt U.S. troops with rocks and potatoes, President Erdogan held a press conference with President Putin today in Sochi where he said "we will continue to make big steps with my dear friend, Mr. Putin, to provide the long-lasting peace and stability to Syria." That betrayal is fully in view in that press conference where Russia has agreed to join Turkey in cutting a swath of land for Turkey that ultimately, at the end of the day, is a cleansing of Kurds who have historically had this land as part of where they have lived going back in time.



As the pause in hostilities expires as we sit here, it is clear that the United States has been sidelined. Russia and the murderous Assad regime are calling the shots. We do not even have clarity about whether, where, and how many U.S. troops might remain. If there was any doubt before, Erdogan's intentions are clear: an ethnic cleansing mission in northeastern Syria at the expense of broader regional stability, including the fight against ISIS, and of partnership and cooperation with the United States and other NATO allies.

NATO members commit to upholding principles laid out in the articles of the North Atlantic charter, including solidarity with allies in the alliance, as well as dedication to democratic principles and practice. In recent years, Turkey's behavior has belied nearly every single one of those principles. Purchasing the S-400 air defense system from NATO's main opponent, Russia, and developing increasingly close relations with the Kremlin. I know that I hear the majority leader and even some of my colleagues suggest we have to worry about not pushing Turkey into Russia's arms. They are there. They bought the S-400. They could have bought the U.S. Patriot missile system, interoperable as a NATO ally. They were meeting with Russia and Iran in Astana about the future of Syria, and they strike a deal with Russia to ultimately pursue their interests.

Erdogan has cracked down on human rights and eroded democratic institutions in his country. The most journalists imprisoned anywhere in the world is not North Korea, Iran, or Russia. They are in Turkey. And Erdogan's aggression in the region extends to the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus where Turkish military ships bully international energy companies conducting legitimate exploration activities. And over the weekend, the "New York Times" reported on Turkey's interest to pursue nuclear weapons. This is not the behavior of a constructive democratic actor or NATO ally.

But I am hoping we can use today's hearing to get a full assessment of how the United States is now pursuing our interests on the ground in Syria. The President's effective abandonment of American interests in Syria, opening the door for Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria, has unequivocally harmed American national security, potentially increased the threat of terrorism against the homeland and against Americans, and solidified Russian and Iranian political and military power across Syria and beyond.

The American people are smart enough to see through the President's hollow claims of fulfilling a campaign promise to bring American troops out of the Middle East. He has simply moved most of the troops from Syria into Iraq where reports today say that leadership in Iraq is saying they cannot stay there and has also sent thousands more troops to Saudi Arabia over the past year. How is that getting out of the entanglements of the Middle East?

So as we must when Presidents do not, the Congress has stepped in to put America's interests first. I was pleased to join Senators Young, Murphy, and Gardner from this committee in introducing a resolution condemning Turkey's actions, calling on the President to reconsider his decision, and calling for a comprehensive strategy against ISIS.

Moreover, as the chairman has mentioned, we have worked on legislation to address not just Turkey's actions, but also calling on the administration to submit a comprehensive review of our counter-ISIS strategy, humanitarian and stabilization assistance for Kurds in Syria in areas liberated from ISIS, and accountability for crimes against humanity, as well as sanctions on Russia.

So, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to this hearing, and I look forward to working with you to move this bill through the committee and to the floor. I think the fierce urgency of now continues to dictate that we move expeditiously.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Menendez, and I could not agree with you more about the urgency of this and also the fact that we do need to work together because it is very obvious that a once strong ally in Turkey and a fellow member of NATO has really gone in a very bad direction and wound up in a very bad place. So I think it is best if we all work together to do this, and there are good signs that there is a lot of involvement from most every member of this committee.

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you so much for joining us today. The Honorable James F. Jeffrey is the Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Ambassador Jeffrey is a senior American diplomat with a variety of experience, having served as the Deputy National Security Advisor from 2007 to 2008, as well as the United States Ambassador to Turkey from 2008 to 2010.

Ambassador, I think you are about as well qualified as any person to sit in that seat and help us wrestle with what is a very difficult situation and a situation that is much different than what you found when you were dealing with Turkey.

So with that, the floor is yours. Please enlighten us.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES F. JEFFREY, SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR SYRIA ENGAGEMENT AND SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE GLOBAL COALITION TO DEFEAT ISIS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ambassador JEFFREY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of this committee, it is an honor to be here.

I have submitted a written statement for the record. What I would like to do is to summarize our views in the next few minutes and then answer your questions.

As you have indicated, the focus of today's hearing is a tragic situation in northeast Syria, including the U.S.-Turkish agreement to bring about a ceasefire on the 17th of October and the just announced a few hours ago Russian-Turkish agreement for a ceasefire in other parts of that northeastern strip.

But to understand why this happened, how the Trump administration has responded, and what lies ahead it is important to keep in mind the underlying situation, specifically the most horrific, destabilizing, and dangerous conflict of the 21st century, as Senator Risch just mentioned, the Syrian civil war raging since 2011. This devil's brew mixes together the three champions of Middle East disorder: a local despot, Assad, arguably worse than Saddam or Qaddafi; an ideological state on the march, Iran; and several

variants of radical Islamic terror from ISIS to Al Nusra, and all exploited cynically by an outside power, Putin's Russia.

Thus, all our actions in Syria are driven by our core objectives: defeating Islamic terror, restoring Syria to a civilized state, and ensuring the removal of all Iranian commanded forces from that country. Some argue that these objectives are too ambitious, but frankly, we have no other choice than to pursue them in order to lead the world out of this crisis.

Now, in dealing with today's situation in northeast Syria, Turkey is obviously the immediate heavy. It has acted unwisely and dangerously, as you have indicated, despite, as I am ready to describe, warning after warning and incentive after incentive from this administration to choose differently, including a package of economic and security commitments and a visit to Washington. As a result, millions of vulnerable Syrians, our Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF, partners in the field in the northeast, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf, and in the end, Turkey itself through this intervention are all made less secure, and ISIS is made more emboldened.

But in digging out of this mess, let us remember that with Turkey's actions, we face yet another all too common regional phenomenon, this time with a NATO State that is a major neighbor to a conflict feels that its existential security on its border is not advanced by American policies and unfortunately acts against them.

As we in the administration, you in Congress, and our partners and allies around the world strive to overcome this crisis, it is critical to keep in view these larger issues and objectives.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ambassador Jeffrey follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR JAMES F. JEFFREY

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on this important issue. As you know, I have just returned from Ankara and I look forward to discussing the October 17 Joint Turkish-U.S. Statement (October 17 Joint Statement) on northeast Syria, which established a 5-day pause in Turkish military operations in the northeast running to October 22, a withdrawal of Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) forces from those areas controlled by the Turkish military, and if all goes well a more permanent halt to the Turkish operation, as well as joint Turkish-U.S. efforts toward the population in the affected 'safe zone' area to ensure security, decent treatment of religious and ethnic minorities and restoration of the security smashed by the Turkish offensive beginning October 8.

The conflict in Syria has raged for over 8 years, fueled by Bashar al-Assad's regime and his despotic and barbaric treatment of Syrian citizens, Russia's continued enabling of Assad's brutality, and Iran's malign influence in the region.

U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates in Syria, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence; and resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms favorable to the United States and our allies and in line with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. A sound strategy for use of our assistance resources is key to achieving these goals.

The United States has worked closely with our local partners, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria, in the campaign to defeat ISIS since 2014. Our cooperation led to the territorial defeat of the so-called "caliphate" earlier this year. During this time, the United States and our Coalition partners provided assistance to restore essential services, support local security and governance, to alleviate humanitarian needs, and to help restore the local economy in areas liberated from ISIS. These efforts helped meet basic needs and create an area of relative stability in Syria, and enable the enduring defeat of ISIS elements there.

One longstanding issue in this campaign has been Turkey's belief that there is no distinction between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both the United States and Turkey have designated as a terrorist organization, and the YPG and our partner the SDF. Turkey thus views the YPG—a key component of the SDF—as an existential threat which receives support from the United States. To Turkey, our cooperation with and support to any of these bodies is akin to supporting a statelet on its southern border run by a terrorist group it believes has declared war on Turkey. The State Department has led efforts over the past year and a half to reduce that friction and achieve better coordination of U.S. and Turkish efforts regarding Syria.

When President Trump announced a strong, deliberate and coordinated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria in December 2018, the Administration said we were transitioning primary responsibility for the defeat of the few remaining ISIS remnants in Syria to our allies and partners on the ground inside Syria.

Beginning in January 2019, the Administration worked with Turkey on implementing a safe zone in northeast Syria that would prevent the resurgence of ISIS, protect Turkish security interests vis-a-vis the SDF/YPG, facilitate stabilization, and create conditions to enable the safe, voluntary, dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This effort culminated in U.S.-Turkish military-to-military arrangement in August for a security mechanism; the SDF was informed and supported the elements of that arrangement. The United States, Turkey, and the SDF all began executing the arrangement in late August. We believe we very quickly implemented the initial steps of the arrangement to create an area along approximately 140 km of the border region in the northeast. This included YPG voluntary withdrawal to approximately 5–14 km from the Turkish border of armed personnel generally, displacement of heavy weapons to 20 km from the Turkish border, U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Turkish air activity over northeast Syria, and joint U.S.-Turkish patrols in the relevant area.

Turkey from President Erdogan on down disputed the conduct and implementation of security mechanism activities, but, more importantly, pressed beginning in early September for an entirely different concept—one Turkey had tried and failed to foist on the United States and, through us, the SDF since January: a 32 kilometer zone to the key east-west highway, M4/10, along the entire northeast from the Euphrates to the Iraqi border, and sole Turkish military, as opposed to joint U.S.-Turkish engagement on area security. Turkey also began stressing its desire to move up to four million Syrian refugees now in Turkey into cities to be constructed in the area, an initiative that went far beyond the scope of the military-to-military arrangement. The United States at every level has underlined our resolute opposition to this plan as a threat to our SDF partners, the fight against ISIS elements, and overall security in Syria.

Indications grew in September 2019 that Turkey was planning for a large-scale unilateral operation. Again, all levels of the U.S. Government warned Turkey not to act.

Erdogan, however, said that Turkey would soon move forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria. He was told clearly, including by the President, that U.S. Armed Forces would not support or be involved, and that the United States does not endorse such actions, but that we would not put U.S. forces in harm's way. President Trump also publicly warned Turkey that the United States would take measures sanctioning the Turkish economy if Turkey were to take steps that the United States considers “off limits.”

Turkey launched this operation despite our objections, undermining the D-ISIS campaign, risking endangering and displacing civilians, destroying critical civilian infrastructure, and threatening the security of the area. Turkey's military actions have precipitated a humanitarian crisis and set conditions for possible war crimes. As the President warned Erdogan, we have used diplomatic and economic tools available to us to press Turkey to halt its military actions.

On October 14, President Trump signed an Executive Order designed to encourage Turkey to halt its offensive military action in northeast Syria and adopt a ceasefire. It provides the United States with the authorities to deliver severe economic consequences and apply additional pressure if Turkey continues with this offensive. The United States has imposed sanctions on three senior Turkish Government officials: Hulusi Akar, the Minister of National Defense; Suleyman Soyly, the Minister of the Interior; and Fatih Donmez, Minister of Energy, and on two ministries, Defense and Energy. Turkey must follow through on its commitments from the October 17 Joint Statement with the United States to avoid further sanctions under this new E.O.

The United States undertook various diplomatic initiatives to reinforce our sanctions, including a Presidential letter to President Erdogan on October 9 and a Presi-

dential message to him 3 days later. In the latter we warned the Turks that the SDF was likely to turn to Russia and the Assad regime if Turkey continued its offensive, which then occurred. The President then dispatched the Vice President, Secretary Pompeo, and National Security Advisor O'Brien to Ankara to negotiate with Turkey the terms of a ceasefire and the YPG's evacuation from affected areas. As I indicated already, on October 17 those talks, including 5 hours with President Erdogan, produced a Joint Statement outlining a pause that will lead to a ceasefire—that Turkey and the YPG are adhering to—for 120 hours to allow the withdrawal of the YPG from the Turkish-controlled safe zone. In return, the United States committed not to impose new sanctions under the October 14th E.O., "Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria." Turkey has committed to a permanent ceasefire upon completion of the YPG withdrawal; in return, the United States would lift the sanctions now imposed under the E.O. This solution will save lives and contribute to long-term stability in the region.

Assuming the pause moves to such a longer-term halt, we will work with Turkey and local residents on the humanitarian and social commitments of the October 17 Joint Statement, cooperate with our local partners against ISIS even as the U.S. military continues the withdrawal directed by the President, and press for full implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, the only hope for a long-term resolution of the underlying Syrian conflict.

To these ends, we are looking to organize a number of senior level meetings with our international partners involved in the Defeat-ISIS Coalition as well as our Syria-focused group. Our intent is to re-affirm with our Coalition partners the shared goals of ensuring that ISIS does not re-emerge.

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

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Ambassador.

With that, we will hear from Mr. Matthew Palmer. Mr. Palmer is a Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. He is a member of the Senior Foreign Service and oversees U.S. policy with respect to the Western Balkans and the Aegean. His former positions include posting at the U.S. embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, the U.S. mission in the U.N., as well as the National Security Council.

And as I understand it, you are going to forego an opening statement, and both of you are going to take questions from the committee. Am I correct on that?

Mr. PALMER. That is correct, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

So with that, first of all, I want to say, Mr. Jeffrey, I appreciate your focus on trying to get in a better place than where we are. There has been a lot of debate about what was the precipitating factor.

Would you agree with me that with Assad having amassed 30,000 troops on the northern border and the heat having been turned up as much as it had in recent weeks and months, that this invasion was inevitable into Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It was a very real possibility, Mr. Chairman. It was not inevitable.

First of all, we told Turkey what exactly would happen. They would not get very far in this offensive, and they have not gotten very far. As you see, they now are in ceasefire agreements with both us and the Russians, and we told them exactly how this would play out, that it made no sense to scramble the entire situation in northeast Syria in order to do something they could not attain, which is to put together under their own control a 32-kilometer deep, 440-kilometer wide security zone, as they called it, in northeast Syria, somebody else's country. Rather, we offered them again

the incentives that my colleague and I can go into more detail in terms of our very important bilateral relationship, as well as a security zone that we set up and got Turkish agreement to in August with the agreement of the SDF, our partners in the northeast—we refer to them as Kurds, but it is a Kurdish-Arabic group, with one portion of the Kurds supporting it, but we call it the SDF. I think that is the best term—with the SDF in agreement to allow patrolling of Turkish and American joint units down to 30 kilometers and the withdrawal of the YPG, which is the more, if you will, PKK-oriented part of the SDF, from the immediate area of the border.

That was a deal that not only was on the table that we were executing until Turkey decided in October to go for broke with this offensive despite, as I said, warnings not to do this all the way up to President Trump.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

What is your prognosis as far as attempting to put the genie back in the bottle and back up to what was offered to them in the first place?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I have to caution everybody that I have been wrong at least as much as I have been right in predicting things on Syria. I think we are in a better place now than we were a week ago. We have an agreement with Turkey that is about to—actually as I am speaking—the 120 hours that we agreed on Thursday for the YPG forces to withdraw from an area that was controlled by Turkey. That was the term we used, where the Turkish forces had been as of last Thursday, essentially the central 130 kilometers of this 440-kilometer zone in the north of Syria between the Euphrates and Iraq.

The YPG was to withdraw during that period. The Turkish military was to maintain what was called a pause. And at the end of that—that is now—the Turkish military is to go to a halt, a more permanent essentially ceasefire, although the Turks did not want to use that word.

Meanwhile, we promised during that 120 hours not to put on any new sanctions on Turkey under the executive order on sanctions on Syria that we distributed on the 14th of October. And with this commitment, if it is met by the Turks, we will then lift those sanctions that we did put on three Turkish ministers and two Turkish ministries.

Meanwhile, basically taking a page from what we had done, Putin and Erdogan got together in Sochi, Russia today to come up with a similar ceasefire in many regards for the rest of northeast Syria, except the Turks got even less, the ability to patrol with the Russians 10 kilometers deep and a potentially not particularly believable Russian commitment to get the YPG out of that area.

So Turkey has not really gained all that much from this, as I said, but in the process has scrambled the entire northeast, undercut our efforts against ISIS, and brought in the Russians and the Syrian regime forces in a way that is really tragic for everybody involved.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Menendez?

Senator MENENDEZ. Ambassador, did you advise the administration to green-light, in essence, Turkey's intentions and desires to invade in Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I certainly did not, Senator, but nobody in the administration green-lighted the Turkish—

Senator MENENDEZ. So in December when the President made the remarks that, well, you know, and indicated he wanted to get out, which caused the Senate to cast a vote to try to dissuade him, as well as colleagues particularly on the Republican side to speak to the President, was that not already the beginning of the end? And then the decision.

Were you consulted about the removal of troops as precipitously as they were?

Ambassador JEFFREY. The President then in February modified his decision and agreed that we would keep a residual force on.

Furthermore, in December, when the President said he would withdraw ground troops from that area, he said he would continue to maintain them in al-Tanf in the south of Syria and that we would maintain air support over the—

Senator MENENDEZ. But that has all changed. He is talking about taking everybody out. Now he is maybe leaving a couple hundred around oilfields.

So my question is, were you consulted about the withdrawal of troops, as was recently done?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I personally was not consulted before—

Senator MENENDEZ. You were not consulted even though you are the Special Envoy here in the context of Syria.

Let me ask you this. Is it not fair to say that the SDF has been a reliable partner in the fight against ISIS?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely, Senator.

Senator MENENDEZ. Is it not fair to say that we cannot achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS through air power alone without some type of ground forces?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We need ground forces. They do not necessarily have to be American, Senator.

Senator MENENDEZ. That is right. And this is exactly the point. It was the Kurds who were largely our ground forces. It is the Kurds that lost about 11,000 to 13,000 of their people. It is the Kurds that were detaining over 10,000 ISIS fighters and families for us. So it does not have to be us. But when you betray the entity who you were fighting on the battlefield with and you basically leave them when you are finished using them and say, you know, you are on your own, it is a hell of a way to send a global message that, in fact, do not fight for the United States because when they are finished with you, they will let you die on the battlefield.

Is it not true that U.S. troops would be at risk of significantly higher casualties in fighting a resurgent ISIS without SDF partners or some similar partner?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely, Senator.

Senator MENENDEZ. Is it not true that the SDF has now sought military and political protection from Bashar al-Assad Russian-and Iranian-backed government?

Ambassador JEFFREY. They have come to an agreement in certain areas to coordinate. That is true.

Senator MENENDEZ. Is it not true that we have a greater risk of creating a vacuum where Iran can ultimately position itself to

build its long-sought land bridge to the Mediterranean, which is a threat to our ally, the State of Israel?

Ambassador JEFFREY. At this moment, we are looking at all of our political, military, and economic options to avoid just that, Senator, under this new circumstance.

Senator MENENDEZ. Well, I do not know what our options are when we get out, we do not have any guarantee on airspace that we are going to be able to use airspace for any missions whether it be anti-ISIS or defending our ally, the State of Israel. I do not know what guarantees there are.

Is it not fair to say that Iran is not an agent of Russia? Russia is not going to be able to tell Iran thank you for fighting, get out now.

Ambassador JEFFREY. You are absolutely right. Iran and Russia have divergent interests in Syria. Unfortunately, both of them are allied against our interests and supporting Assad's.

Senator MENENDEZ. Now, in the midst of facing, according to the Department of Defense Inspector General, that there are still 14,000 to 18,000 ISIS fighters despite this conversation consistently about ending the caliphate, and these other 10,000 that are detained, which if the Kurds have to just defend themselves, they are not going to be busy detaining ISIS fighters. That is potentially a hardened force of 30,000 if they reconfigure it together.

What is our plan to defeat them and to end that threat?

Ambassador JEFFREY. For the record, it is the SDF which is about 50 percent Arab. It is the Arab-Kurdish coalition in the SDF that is still maintaining control over essentially all of those detainees, the 10,000 you mentioned, Senator. That is an accurate figure.

The 14,000 to 18,000 are scattered in, if you look at the map, three areas: as you are looking at it, Iraq particularly the Sunni Arab areas, the northeast that we are talking about today, and the rest of Syria more or less under the control of either the Syrian Government or the Turks in the northwest.

In those Assad-controlled areas of Syria, ISIS is running amuck without much control. We do some air strikes into there, but it is not really an area we can have a whole lot of action on other than to monitor it and, as I said, strike when we have a good target.

In the northeast—that is the area that we are focused on—we are going to work with the SDF. That is our plan. The SDF leader, Commander Mazloun, has committed to us that he wants to continue working with us, and that is what we are looking at the options that I mentioned earlier right now urgently.

And in Iraq, we are continuing to work with the Iraqi Government and with the coalition of some 20 or 30 nations from around the world to keep ISIS under control there.

Senator MENENDEZ. Now, Ambassador, I have a deep, deep respect for your service, and you are dealt the hand you are dealt and that is what you do as a career person.

But let me just say they are running amuck under the Assad-controlled area. We still have the expectation that the SDF, as they fight for their lives, is going to be fighting ISIS for us. That is an incredible expectation. And in Iraq, the forces that we are transferring out of Syria there—we are being told by the Iraqis they are not going to be able to stay.



So I do not see a strategy or a plan that will make sure that the homeland is secure against a potential of a resurgence of ISIS that is a threat to the national interests and security of the United States. And I hope to see it, but I do not see it as of now, which is why we have asked—we think it is only fair that all Members get a briefing from the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the CIA Director about the dynamics of this. And we cannot seem to get a briefing. Something is wrong when we have such a major national security interest and Members of the U.S. Senate, both Democrats and Republicans, cannot get a hearing. I hope you send the message back to the administration. That is not acceptable.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. We are going to break here for a few minutes. There are two votes. We will vote on the end of the first one, which has now past, and the beginning of the second one, and then we will reconvene due to the importance of this hearing and everyone wanting to get their thoughts in. So with that, the committee will be at ease.

[Recess.]

The CHAIRMAN. The committee will come to order. I apologize for the delay, but that is what happens when you are trying to walk and chew gum at the same time, which we can occasionally do and sometimes cannot.

We have got another vote going on, but instead of breaking, I think what we will do is rotate the chair so that everybody can break.

But in the meantime, Senator Romney, the floor is yours.

Senator ROMNEY. I appreciate very much the testimony of those who are here today. Ambassador Jeffrey, your lifetime of service to our diplomatic efforts, as well as our military, is remarkable and greatly appreciated. We obviously get defined by events we might not have imagined, and this is one of those times for our country and, of course, for you as well.

I am going to ask a few questions briefly and then get to something of more substance, but maybe some yes or no if possible.

Were you on the phone call with President Erdogan along with our President?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I was not, but I was very thoroughly briefed on it, Senator.

Senator ROMNEY. And were you consulted before the decision was made to withdraw our troops?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I was consulted on the framework of that call, the points that the President was going to make and such. The specific decision to withdraw our troops has been a longstanding debate within the administration going back to early 2018.

Senator ROMNEY. But were you advised about the decision to withdraw all of our troops following that Erdogan call?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That specific decision I was not in advance.

Senator ROMNEY. Do you know when the Kurds were informed of our decision to withdraw our troops?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Immediately thereafter, Senator.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Do you have a sense of how many Kurds have been killed since we withdrew our troops?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Again, it is a mix. In fact, the area that we are talking about that the Turks went into is a largely Arab area. And I do it myself. I use the shorthand “Kurds.” But we are talking about the SDF and the YPG, which are mixed groups. But in that area, it is probably in the low hundreds of killed in the fighting up to the ceasefire on Thursday.

Senator ROMNEY. And does ISIS remain a terrorist threat?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Senator ROMNEY. As I read your written testimony, I was impressed that it is extraordinary in a number of ways in that as you describe—it is on the third page of your written testimony at the very bottom. You say the United States at every level has underlined our resolute opposition to this plan—this is the Turkish plan—as a threat to our SDF partners, the fight against ISIS elements, and overall security in Syria.

Turn the page, the next paragraph down. Erdogan, however, said that Turkey would soon move forward with its long-planned operation in northern Syria.

And next paragraph. Turkey launched this operation despite our objections undermining the de-ISIS campaign, risking, endangering, and displacing civilians, destroying critical civilian infrastructure and threatening the security of the area.

There is no discussion here of we wanted to end endless wars and this was the result of a long strategy of America to get out of the region. It was instead, based upon what you are saying here, Erdogan basically said we are coming in, get out of the way, and America blinked. Am I reading that wrong?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Largely correctly, Senator, with one very, very important exception. It is not that we got out of the way because we were not militarily in the way. We had told Turkey we would oppose any such action diplomatically and through sanctions. President Trump was very open on that in his tweets, and Turkey had heard this at every level. The leadership either did not believe it or they thought that their existential security concerns overrode what we might do to them. And they went in despite a very carefully packaged set of incentives and sticks to get them to stay with the security agreement we had done in August with them, and suddenly President Erdogan told President Trump he was not going to stick with it and he was coming in.

Senator ROMNEY. But we withdrew our troops quite precipitously. You say that is unrelated to the fact that Erdogan was going to come in militarily?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely. We had two outposts of about 12 men each on that whole area, but their purpose was basically to observe if there was any firing across the border. They were not a defense screen or anything else.

The troops that the President has decided to pull back and have been pulled back in the Manbij area and in the Kobani area—they are well south and west of where the Turks came in. It is just that there was a danger that as the Turks, as you are looking at the map, would come in and as possibly Russian and Syrian troops because we knew that the SDF would turn to them came in from the

west, our troops would be caught in the middle and their retreat path would be. So it was a prudent decision taken by our military leaders to get those troops out of the way, sir.

Senator ROMNEY. If one assumes that it was a good idea for us to withdraw troops from Syria—and I am not one of those, but even if one were to assume that and even if one, like myself, believes it is a good thing that we are apparently in a ceasefire setting and hopefully we will have a permanent one, would it not have been preferable and desirable for us to have negotiated a posture with Turkey and our Kurdish allies such that we did not have the casualties which have resulted from Turkey coming in in a heavy way and bombing and killing our allies, which has given us a terrible black eye around the world and has led to unnecessary casualties? Why could this not have been negotiated?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Well, again, we negotiated extensively with the Turks, including the security zone mechanism that we had in August that we were carrying out with them with our troops and their forces. We negotiated until the very moment that Erdogan's troops came in. The President wrote President Erdogan a letter. The President then followed up with a message to President Erdogan urging him not to act and pointing out that it was likely that this would simply produce the Russians and Syrians coming into the northeast, which is exactly what happened.

So President Erdogan, again, looking at the Russian-Turkish agreement and looking at our agreement from last week, the YPG has pulled back but has not been really defeated or eliminated from the game. So one Turkish objective was not achieved, and Turkey has not gained much territory, if that was their objective. And we told them all along that this would happen and if they did that, they would run into a great deal of trouble with us, thus the sanctions and the other steps we took against them 10 days ago now.

Senator ROMNEY. I would only note, Mr. Chairman, that our President told President Erdogan that we were pulling out our troops. We did so, and they attacked within a matter of hours. And you say those are unrelated, but it would seem to me that there was a relationship.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Romney.

Senator Cardin?

Senator CARDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you for your service. We appreciate it very much.

You talk about signals sent to Turkey. And I want to deal with the war crimes that are taking place in that country. Are you familiar with the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act that was enacted by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I am.

Senator CARDIN. And are you familiar with the report that was issued under that law?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Generally, Senator.

Senator CARDIN. Well, you might want to tell us about it because I am not familiar with it. I am not sure I received it.

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would have to look into it, but we are examining war crimes in the context of what is going on in Syria mainly with the regime because that has been our—

Senator CARDIN. Absolutely. And the law required the report within 90 days. I do not believe that was complied with. And you are talking about sending the right signals to Turkey.

Do you not believe that if we would have issued visible information about holding those accountable for the current war crimes in Syria that may have acted as a deterrent to Turkey?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I cannot speculate on that. I will say that if we are supposed to issue reports within 90 days on something serious like war crimes, we should live up to that requirement.

Senator CARDIN. Are you familiar with the reports that have been issued by the United Nations and other groups about expected war crimes have been committed by the Turkish forces in their invasion into northern Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We have seen some preliminary concerns. We have not seen any detailed reporting. The detailed reporting, of course—and there are volumes of it—is on the Assad regime's actions throughout Syria. But we are very, very concerned about what we and all of us have seen on video footage and some of the reports that we have received from our SDF colleagues, and we are looking into those as I speak.

Senator CARDIN. Well, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said last week that Turkey appears to be committing war crimes. Do you disagree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We would say that the Turkish supported opposition forces, who were under general Turkish command, in at least one instance did carry out a war crime, and we have reached out to Turkey to demand an explanation.

Senator CARDIN. Congress has already acted on this, making it clear that “never again” should mean “never again.” And the only way that is going to mean anything is if regimes that commit war crimes are held accountable and it is not just swept under the rug as part of any other type of resolution of a conflict. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I certainly do. Whether they are foes of the United States or allies of ours, everybody has to be accountable.

Senator CARDIN. Do we have your commitment here before this committee today that the information concerning these actions will be made available, and if it rises to the level of war crimes, that the United States will seek an international forum to hold those responsible accountable?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Within our constitutional requirements to carry out foreign policy, this will be a very high priority.

Senator CARDIN. That is not exactly what is said. My point is, are you willing to make an assurance to this committee that you personally will make sure that we do not just once again refuse to hold those responsible for atrocities accountable for their actions? It is a simple answer.

Ambassador JEFFREY. We will do everything in our power as an administration to ensure that the world knows if there are war crimes and that actions are taken to see that they do not happen again. Absolutely.

Senator CARDIN. Well, and I would appreciate if you would get back to me in compliance with the law passed by Congress as to compliance with the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act. Senator Rubio and I introduced that legislation. We expect our laws to be carried out. And I do think one of the consequences of the failure to carry out accountability for war crimes are more war crimes that are committed. And if we had a clear indication that those crimes that had already been committed in Syria, that there was now a process going on internationally to hold them accountable, I am very confident that Turkey may have done things differently in northern Syria.

Ambassador JEFFREY. We will do our best to adhere to our legal requirements and also the spirit of what you said, Senator.

Senator CARDIN. You have indicated that you were not consulted in regards to the decision to withdraw our troops from northern Syria. Do you agree that the consequences of that encouraged or gave an ability for Mr. Erdogan to move forward into northern Syria and that that added to the national security concerns of America, which you have already testified to, in regards to facilitating Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime?

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, I do not think that contributed to this very tragic decision by the Turkish Government.

Senator CARDIN. So if our troops there, if we had not removed our troops, you believe that we would have seen the same scenario with Turkey engaging American troops in northern Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. They would not have engaged American troops, first of all, because it was understood that neither side would ever engage the other regardless of—

Senator CARDIN. Well, would it not have been different? Where our troops are today, Turkish forces and Russian force are there now. If we had our troops there today, do you think we would have had the same consequences?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We had the troops there. The withdrawal did not take place or really start until well after the—essentially most withdrawals of American troops—

Senator CARDIN. I understand that, but you really believe that Turkey was going to do this current engagement even if American troops were in the region, making it very likely there would have been a conflict between two NATO allies in northern Syria? That is not believable.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Senator, let me explain this. If U.S. troop had been given the order to stand and fight against a NATO ally, I think you are right. The Turks may have thought twice. They have never been given that order over two administrations. In fact, we had told Turkey the absolute opposite, that we would not—

Senator CARDIN. You do not think that Turkey was holding back an aggression against northern Syria because of the U.S. presence in that region?

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, I do not think that at all.

Senator CARDIN. Well, I will tell you you have lost me on the credibility of your comments. Every expert I have talked to on the military side has said that Turkey would not have risked an engagement against U.S. troops, that that was something was something that would never have happened.

Ambassador JEFFREY. That is absolutely true, Senator, but the U.S. troops would have to have had the mission of resisting the Turks. They did not have that mission. And a good question to ask any military expert that says that is did they have that authority and would they have acted without that authority. I think the answer is no, they would not.

Senator CARDIN. Just to complete this, then you agree with the President's decision? As a professional, you are fully in accord with the President's decision to relocate our troops.

Ambassador JEFFREY. I carry out the instruction——

Senator CARDIN. My question is—you have now said it did not have any effect. So do you agree with this policy or not?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I agree that Presidents have to make that decision, not people in the bureaucracy such as me.

Senator CARDIN. And for the record, you did not answer my question.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cardin.

Senator Rubio?

Senator RUBIO. Thank you. And I apologize if this has been asked before. I just wanted to get some clarity.

The U.S. policy toward Syria, the official policy, as it was described—it had three objectives: prevent the resurgence of ISIS; number two, to give the U.S. leverage in any future political solution in Syria so that it would arrive at an arrangement that is pursuant to the Security Council resolution which calls for a new constitution and for a new election; and the withdrawal of all Iranian forces. Is that an accurate assessment of our Syria policy?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is, Senator.

Senator RUBIO. Is that still our policy?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is, Senator.

Senator RUBIO. Well, if that is still our objectives, I wanted to kind of get some background. What we all have heard about the concerns of a couple things on ISIS, the prisoners going free, the flow into Iraq potentially, but also the potential that they would seize some of these oilfields previously held by the Kurds which would provide revenue. How much thought or preparation are you aware of that went into this decision before—how much thought and preparation went into preventing those things from happening before that decision was made?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I cannot determine how much thought specifically went into that. What I do know is that we were prepared ever since December 2018 when the President announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces over time to deal with the situation when we did not have U.S. forces on the ground. We were looking a coalition allies. We were looking at U.S. air support in the air and we were looking again with other ways to work with the SDF. So we had plans in place, and these plans, of course, are largely still in effect. The people that are being detained are still being detained by the SDF not by us, and the stabilization operations against ISIS along the Euphrates by the SDF are still going on. Fortunately, we still have our forces there——

Senator RUBIO. We would have to have known that the absence of a U.S. presence would make it harder for the SDF to focus on those priorities. They would have to make their number one pri-

ority facing the Turks. So was there any advance thought given to if we leave, here is what we are going to do to make sure the SDF does these or can still do these things?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Exactly. And what we realized was we had to work some kind of arrangement between Turkey and the SDF so that the SDF would not be, as you said, diverted from the fight against keeping ISIS suppressed because ISIS as a state has been defeated since March, and sucking the forces up to stand off against the Turks. So that was part of our overall strategy. That is why we did the joint security mechanism with the Turks in August to get them to—

Senator RUBIO. But none of those plans are in effect any longer.

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, but now we have a ceasefire that has replaced them.

Senator RUBIO. Well, the ceasefire expires here in a couple minutes. I do not know what the time is over there.

Ambassador JEFFREY. The ceasefire under the terms of the agreement—we are verifying this now if both sides agree that it has been fully maintained. And we already have a letter from the commander of the SDF forces, Mazloum Kobani, that it has been adhered to. We are waiting for the Turkish. If so, then the ceasefire becomes—it is not a ceasefire. It is now a pause—becomes a half of Turkish military operations. So it is in effect a more permanent ceasefire I do think so, yes.

Senator RUBIO. So you are saying you believe that if they withdraw from these areas, that the Kurdish forces will still be able to house these ISIS killers.

Ambassador JEFFREY. This is one that we are looking at whole series of options under this different set of circumstances, including what we will be doing with our forces as we continue the withdrawal, where will we be working with the SDF, with us, with our coalition partners, and with air power.

Senator RUBIO. By the way, I must ask, why would the Kurds even care what we want them to do any longer? We are not there alongside them. They have now had to align themselves with Assad and the regime. So why are they even interested in our opinion at this point about what we want them to do with these prisoners?

Ambassador JEFFREY. The Kurds never fought—I am sorry. The SDF never fought ISIS because we wanted them to. They fought ISIS because it was an existential threat to them to deal with ISIS, and they still feel that way.

Senator RUBIO. Real quick. Let me ask you about the withdrawal of Iranian forces. How do we do that now? For example, how do we prevent Iran from seizing some of these oilfields—them or their aligned groups—and using it to generate revenue to recoup the costs of their engagement in Syria? But also it gives them some leverage over some of these Arab tribes that are in the area. So what is our plan now to limit that? Where do we do that from?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is part of an overall political settlement to this conflict in Syria. First of all, there are—

Senator RUBIO. What seat do we have at that table? We are not there anymore.

Ambassador JEFFREY. We are still there, Senator.

Senator RUBIO. In the southern part, al-Tanf.

Ambassador JEFFREY. We never placed primary responsibility for our overall policies in Syria on our U.S. military presence. That was primarily devoted to defeating ISIS, and it was very successful doing so. But the Turkish presence in the northwest, which we generally do support, is really operations against Iran inside Syria, which we do not talk about. The Israelis do not talk about. But they do continue. We are supportive of Israeli operations. We are very supportive of diplomatic and particularly economic pressure against the Assad regime. And our hope is that if the Assad regime wants to return to the international community of nations, it has to do certain things, and at the top of the list is inviting the Iranian forces to go home.

Senator RUBIO. I am out of time. Just a very quick thing here I want to say, and that is it is my belief that Erdogan's goal is not a safe zone. It is a strip of land from the Iraqi border to the Euphrates under his control that has few, if any, Kurds there where he can relocate 3.5 million Syrian Arab refugees back into the country. That is his real goal here. Is it not?

Ambassador JEFFREY. He has said publicly repeatedly, including in New York at the United Nations, that is his goal here today. And my assessment is he is not going to get that or anything close to that.

Senator RUBIO. But that is what he said is his goal.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Senator RUBIO [presiding]. Senator Shaheen?

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Ambassador Jeffrey, the joint statement that you negotiated with the Turks does not specifically define the parameters of the safe zone. Can you clarify the areas where Turkish troops can operate according to the agreement?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It was actually Vice President Pence who negotiated it. We were just there supporting him.

That is a very good question. We never used a map. We basically used, at the time the thing went into effect, which was 2200, 10 o'clock at night, Ankara time on the 17th of October, wherever Turkish troops were is where the safe zone that we referred to existed.

This sounds like a sloppy way to do things. It actually worked. The SDF/YPG forces knew what that region was because we had been in constant—I had personally been in constant contact with them throughout the negotiation. The Turks knew where their forces were, and that is exactly what we have seen. It has worked because we did not get specific because we did not want to challenge various Turkish interpretations of what a safe zone should be like. What we wanted to focus on was where the Turkish forces were and where the YPG forces were in that area. They have all withdrawn as has been reported to us, and the Turkish forces, with some minor changes, have not moved from that area. So it has worked. But it basically is essentially—when we did the security mechanism in August, we established a central block in northeast Syria along the Turkish border of about 30 kilometers.

Senator SHAHEEN. I understand that. I am sorry to interrupt, but I am running out of time here.



You are using the terms “YPG” and “SDF” interchangeably, and you said that the YPG have withdrawn from that zone. Is it true that all of SDF forces have withdrawn from that zone?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That was a decision of the SDF commander, yes.

Senator SHAHEEN. And he said that they have all withdrawn?

Ambassador JEFFREY. He has in writing.

Senator SHAHEEN. Because we had a meeting last night with the head of the Syrian Democratic Council who did not reaffirm that. She suggested that they have not withdrawn from that safe zone.

Ambassador JEFFREY. One, we have a written letter to the Vice President from Mazloum Kobani saying that. Two, on the ground, we believe that that is the case. We are asking the Turks urgently if they have spotted anybody in that zone that they can point out to us. But, yes, I think that that commitment was—and it was for all armed personnel. He did not distinguish. And I think that was a good decision between the YPG, which is a Kurdish offshoot of the PKK.

Senator SHAHEEN. No, I understand.

That joint statement also said that Turkey and the United States are committed to de-ISIS and Daesh activities in northeast Syria, including coordination on detention facilities. Exactly what did the Turks commit to in terms of securing ISIS detention facilities and camps in northeast Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We began talks with them in January 2018 after the President announced the withdrawal in December. And the Turks showed some interest in some staff work concerning detention facilities in that up to 30-kilometer deep zone. There are very few detention facilities right now in the area where the Turks are. So at the moment, the questions is pretty moot.

Senator SHAHEEN. But they did, in fact, shell two prisons, Ayn Issa and Maruk, that the Syrian Democratic Forces had to flee from to escape the shelling. Is that correct? And detainees were able to escape from those two facilities?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I will check. Ayn Issa I think was a displaced persons camp for people who were basically associated with ISIS. So they were not technically detainees, but we will check. But that is true. A few people did escape.

Senator SHAHEEN. And so how exactly will Turkey prevent an ISIS resurgence? And again, what have they committed to do to continue to fight ISIS?

Ambassador JEFFREY. In the area where Turkey is and, in fact, in the entire area along the Turkish border, 30 kilometers deep, there is very little ISIS presence. The ISIS presence in the past several years has been along the Euphrates far to the south and in the Manbij area west of the Euphrates.

Turkey has a fairly good record of fighting ISIS in northwest Syria, particularly in the al-Bab area in 2016, and I am sure that if ISIS showed up, Turkey would take it on as well because it has been repeatedly attacked by ISIS inside Turkey. And we will coordinate with them, as we have in the past with them, on information concerning ISIS and operations that they do and we do. We are used to doing that. But again, ISIS is not a major issue in that part of the northeast at present.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, I appreciate that it is not a major issue because with the SDF and our support, we have driven them out of Syria.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Exactly.

Senator SHAHEEN. But does that suggest that Turkey is not going to move into Manbij?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Turkey is not going to move into Manbij according to the agreement that we just saw with the Russians.

Senator SHAHEEN. So Russia has moved into Manbij.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Syrian forces and some Russian advisors are in Manbij right now, and judging from this agreement, they have no intention of letting Turkey back in—not back in but into it.

Senator SHAHEEN. And a final question. Can you speak to how Iran has been empowered by our decision to move out of Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Iran is under extraordinarily tough economic sanctions. It is under pressure from Israel, supported by us and other allies throughout the region. I do not see it being empowered particularly. The one area that Iran is interested in is the American forces in the south along the main east-west highway from Tehran to Beirut at al-Tanf, and President Trump has decided we will not pull out of there. I do not think Iran is particularly empowered by this.

Senator SHAHEEN. So you do not think that our moving out and allowing Russia and Iran and Assad to decide the future fate of Syria helps to empower Iran in the Middle East?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We have not decided on anybody other than the Syrian people under the relevant U.N. resolutions to decide the fate of Syria, and we certainly have not handed it off to these guys.

Senator SHAHEEN. We may have, but we are not there anymore and Russia and Iran are there. And so is Assad. So I think it is—

Ambassador JEFFREY. Again, the U.S. Air Force is very much there right now. And that is now something that the Department of Defense and the White House are looking at. Our military forces are still in al-Tanf and plan on being there.

But honestly, I am a diplomat. This is the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Military power is not the only tool we use to achieve our goals in this world. We use diplomatic. We use political. We use economic.

Senator SHAHEEN. No, I understand that. But when we pulled out the troops, we had earlier pulled out our diplomatic personnel, our USAID personnel. We had stopped—this administration had stopped the stabilization funding that Congress appropriated last year so that it did not go into Syria. And so the other tools that we have to support a solution in Syria have also been taken away.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you.

Senator Johnson?

Senator JOHNSON. Mr. Ambassador, thank you for your service.

Chairman Risch started out his questioning or his opening statement with a little bit of a history lesson. I want to throw a couple more details in here.

The Arab Spring protests in Syria began in the spring of 2011. At that point in time, Syria's population was almost 21 million. Today, some estimates place it as low as 17 million. Over 5 million Syrians are refugees. Over 3 million, I believe, are in Turkey. There are about 6.5 million Syrians displaced within Syria. So you have more than half the population out of their homes, and it is a mess.

By some estimates, there were already 100,000 Syrians killed in the conflict by the end of 2013.

In June 2014, ISIS moves in and takes over Mosul.

Aleppo finally falls in December 2016 after all the barrel bombing.

By the time this administration took office, approximately 300,000 people had been killed in the Syria Civil War. Iran, Russia, Assad pretty well won the war.

The Kurds obviously joined us in defeating ISIS because they were able to take over about a third of Syrian territory. Correct?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Mainly, as I said, because they had an existential threat from ISIS, but in the process, they took over about a third of Syria.

Senator JOHNSON. One of my questions—we talk about leverage. Now we do not have leverage. What leverage did we have, let us say, in January 2017 after Aleppo fell and Iran, Russia, and Assad were already pretty much in control of two-thirds of Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. First of all, we had the leverage of a totally broken state, which is what we still have today. Your statistics are absolutely right, Senator. About half the population of Syria is not under Assad's control. Much of the area of Syria is not under Assad's control. That includes much of the northwest, and we will see how it goes in the northeast in the days and weeks ahead. Some of it is under Turkish control right now. As I said, the SDF and we are still to the south of that 30-kilometer deep band. So that is pressure on him.

Again, Assad has Israel and the Iranians have Israel to contend with in basically a silent war in the skies and on the ground in Syria.

And the country is an international pariah. It has been ejected from the Arab League. There is no reconstruction assistance flowing into that country from anywhere, and we have no difficulty mobilizing international sentiment in the U.N. or anyplace else against Assad until blocked, of course, by Russia.

Senator JOHNSON. So my concern is I do not want to see an ethnic cleansing. I do not want to see ISIS fighters released. I do not want to see ISIS reconstituted. You in your testimony already said that the SDF and Turkey, quite honestly—it is in their best interests to make sure that ISIS fighters do not regain the battlefield. Correct?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Both Turkey and SDF have fought against ISIS in certain areas, particularly in the case of Turkey. Effectively SDF has always been effective. If they are not forced to face off against each other, we can rely on both of them against ISIS.

Senator JOHNSON. Where do the 3.3 million refugees from Syria reside in Turkey now? Where did they come from?

Ambassador JEFFREY. They came mainly from the Arab areas. There are about 300,000 Kurds who fled because they are politically not aligned with the essentially pro-PKK sentiments of the PYD, which is a political ring of the YPG, the military force. But most of them came from the Arab areas, the Aleppo area in particular, all the way down to the Jordanian border. They fled across into Turkey.

Senator JOHNSON. So the SDF and the Kurds—are they just primarily protecting the region in Syria that they always occupied, or have they moved into Sunni areas that the Sunnis, if they ever could return from refugee status into Syria—you are going to have a dispute in terms of who owns what.

Ambassador JEFFREY. The YPG, which was the Kurdish militia that we joined up with, as I said, that has ties to the PKK, as it spread out into Arab areas with our encouragement in the fight against ISIS down along the Euphrates into Manbij, renamed itself in 2017 SDF, Syrian Democratic Forces, to reflect the fact that it is now an Arab, as well as Kurdish force. But, yes, their motivation was to take out ISIS. In the process, they wound up with a lot of territory which is not uncommon in war.

Senator JOHNSON. Precisely. But is that going to be a festering problem when we hopefully at some point in time stabilize Syria? Now you have 5 million refugees trying to return to Syria. Some are going to be basically squatting in their homes?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That was on our top 10 list of festering problems, the idea that we had a largely Kurdish-led force over a pretty significant Arab population, but it was not one of our top five festering problems.

Senator JOHNSON. One of the things I was concerned about is are we going to maintain a no-fly zone, in effect. According to your testimony, it sounds like we are willing to do that. Is that true?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We are doing that at the moment. We still control, as they say in military terminology, the airspace at least over our forces, which is much of the northeast. How the thinking is in the Pentagon and what we are going to do in the days ahead I am not fully abreast of, but when they have sifted out their options, they will share them with us.

Senator JOHNSON. Well, I would certainly encourage the administration to maintain that no-fly zone. I think that would be one of the ways we could prevent ethnic cleansing and further slaughter.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Senator RUBIO. Senator Coons?

Senator COONS. I would like to thank Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez for convening this important hearing, and I would like to thank both of you for your service.

No one wants to see American troops continuing to serve and to fight in the Middle East and Southwest Asia indefinitely. But President Trump's abrupt, premature, and ill-considered withdrawal and utter lack of a strategy for the path forward in Syria I think will prove to be both a tactical and strategic blunder, and I think his abandonment of the Kurds will long stand as a stain on America's reputation.

I am principally concerned, Ambassador Jeffrey, if I can, initially in asking you about ISIS because one of my core concerns is not

only have we ceded territory and control to Assad's forces, supported by Russia, to Iran and Iranian irregulars, but we also may have breathed new life into ISIS.

I was struck that in your prepared testimony you said—and I quote—U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain the enduring defeat of ISIS, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence, and the resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms favorable to the United States. On all three of those vectors, I think this decision makes us worse off.

Let me first ask about ISIS. Do we know how many hardened ISIS fighters escaped detention?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We do not have hard numbers, but it was very few so far but that could change. But for the moment, very few.

Senator COONS. Is “few” dozens or hundreds?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would say dozens at this point.

Senator COONS. There were press reports that put it in the hundreds. Do we have any idea how those escaped ISIS fighters will be tracked, accounted for, and recaptured?

Ambassador JEFFREY. At the moment, we do not.

Senator COONS. How many ISIS fighters do you believe are still in detention in a detention facility that is managed either by Kurdish fighters or otherwise?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Essentially the numbers we had before, Senator, about 10,000.

Senator COONS. About 10,000. So how secure are those ISIS fighters?

Ambassador JEFFREY. As long as the situation remains relatively stable and we think we have returned it to something like stability—

Senator COONS. Would you describe this as a stable situation?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Since Thursday when we got a ceasefire, yes.

Senator COONS. So what confidence do you have that those 10,000 ISIS fighters are secure and are being appropriately monitored even as the SDF is in full retreat, the United States is largely retreating, and a combination of Turkish, Russian, and Syrian forces are flooding into an ill-defined area?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Once again, throughout the vast majority of northeast Syria, SDF forces are in control of the terrain and the detention centers that are located. Most of them are below a 32-kilometer east-west highway.

With this new Russian agreement, there may be some detention facilities in that area. And as they are calling for, the Russians are claiming that they will work, facilitate trying to get the YPG elements out. We will have to see how that goes on. But for the moment, these detention facilities are being maintained. We have commitments by the SDF, and we have learned to have faith in their commitments.

Senator COONS. Should the SDF have faith in our commitments?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We gave them a commitment that we would do everything in our power to forestall any Turkish incursion into northeast Syria. We did not succeed in that, obviously. What we did succeed in doing is very quickly bringing it to a halt

by the negotiations we did and the ceasefire achieved on the 17th of October.

Senator COONS. Would the press report today that Kurdish civilians are pelting our departing troops with rocks and food suggest that we have won over their enduring trust?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That was in Qamishli. The troops were withdrawing, because this is our priority, from that area, which is far to the west. Whether those were Kurdish children or those were Arab children and whether the regime is also there we would have to look into whose idea that was. That is the only place I have ever seen stones and fruit thrown at our soldiers anywhere in the north-east, and again, as that is an area that the Assad regime has forces in, we need to look into that in more detail.

Senator COONS. Well, Ambassador, there is fairly broad reporting that American troops who served alongside our Kurdish partners, that military leaders, that intelligence community leaders, and that the leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurds themselves, have all agreed that this was a tragic mistake, that this was a betrayal of the trust that they put in us.

I will close by asking what you see as the future of NATO's role in Turkey and the United States-Turkish relationship. In a previous exchange with another Senator, the way I heard you characterize it was essentially our President got rolled by an aggressive President Erdogan who said I have got my troops on the border. I am ready to go. And after months of our asserting they should not do it, they simply went ahead and did that. This is supposed to be our NATO ally. What do you see as the future of our alliance with Turkey?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We need to have some serious conversations with Turkey over this.

But the President did not get rolled per se. As soon as the Turks came in, the President enacted a very, very—

Senator COONS. He enacted a prompt and speedy withdrawal?

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, a prompt and speedy set of sanctions against Turkey followed up by even stronger ones from the U.S. Congress and pulled from the table various, if you will, incentives for Turkey to behave better and set into motion the diplomacy that led very quickly to a ceasefire.

Senator COONS. Well, given what I think is the unreliable, undisciplined, and inappropriate actions by our President in abandoning our Kurdish allies, I am grateful that the majority—the chairman and the minority leader of this committee have joined in introducing legislation, which I hope to join. Whether it is that bill or other bills, I think we in Congress need to demonstrate our ability to advance sanctions legislation that may endure beyond the next tweet or phone call.

Thank you, Ambassador.

Senator RUBIO. Senator Portman?

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you, Chairman.

First, thank you for your service. Jim Jeffrey, you have been a stalwart on foreign policy issues, including trying to figure out the most complex and muddled part of the world. It is not easy. It is a messy situation. No question about it.

I see it pretty simply, which is that we had a small number of troops there, mostly special operators, who were keeping the peace. And it was not perfect. It never is in that part of the world. But we were avoiding some of the problems we have seen, and that includes not just the Iranian-backed forces and the Syrians coming in, but the Russians coming in. And that video of the Russian journalist the day after walking through our base haunts me.

And then, of course, what we have done with regard to the Kurds. And I want to ask you a question about that in a moment. But to me this is about the Kurds, but it is also about our allies and our potential allies in the future and what impact that will have.

And then, of course, finally the displacement of more refugees. I mean, that area has already seen its share of refugees. Has it not? And now there are many more.

And then I guess finally, ISIS. And you said that you think only dozens of ISIS fighters have been released. I have heard larger numbers. But the point is we have unfortunately found ourselves in a situation where because of the unsettled nature now of that buffer region, much of what the Kurds were doing to restrain the ISIS fighters and family members and so on has now been disrupted.

I guess I will not ask you to agree or disagree with me on that assessment because I do not want to put you on the spot. You have been an able reporter here on what you think is happening. You avoided expressing your own personal views. But those are mine.

On the issue of what does this do to us going forward, I think about Iraq, and I think about the role that the KRG has played in supporting our efforts there. Ever since 1991, we have relied on the Kurds. Have we not? And what is this going to do with regard to our relationship to the Kurds more broadly particularly in Iraq and to those communities, those Arab and Kurd communities, in that part of Iraq and in the parts of Syria, northeastern Syria? What will our withdrawal and our actions here do to affect our relationship with those forces? And can we continue to work with them?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That may be a good analogy, Senator. As you know, our partners for many years, the PUK and the KDP, Kurdish parties in northern Iraq, decided to have an independence referendum without properly consulting us or getting our views. Well, they got our views. We thought this was a big mistake in the fall of 2017.

When this happened, the Iraqi army moved into an area, a mixed area, where the Kurdish regional government had extended its sway after Saddam had fallen in the Kirkuk area and, through some fairly significant fighting, took back the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. That was a huge blow to the Kurds. They felt that we had abandoned them. Our argument was we never promised you a military guarantee for that area. Rather, we tried to work out—and I was involved in that, as well as people right here with me today—trying to do oil deals and other things between the Kurds in the north and the central government in Baghdad.

Again, we did not succeed in stopping a conflict from occurring. We did succeed very quickly in bringing that conflict to a halt and then bringing the two sides together. So I would say that is an ex-

ample of how not using military force but using diplomacy and economic and energy tools we can keep a relationship with the Kurds. I know Masoud Barzani very well. We have a good relationship with him today.

Senator PORTMAN. I hope you are right. I do not mean to cut you off, but I hope you are right. But I cannot imagine there is not an impact here on the Kurds more broadly and to other allies, as I have said, around the world and future allies who we would want to turn to.

You have used the word “incentives” a lot today to talk about what was on the table previously. I do not know if you feel that you are able to talk about those discussions with Turkey, but I had always hoped that part of the way we could resolve the problems with regard to Turkey and the Kurds was through commercial activity, specifically trade and their interest in a trade agreement. And I had reason to believe, based on some reporting in fact from folks at the State Department, that that was a possibility.

What happened? Why did the Turks not take us up on our offer to expand trade? We do quite a bit of trade with them in steel already. I know there are new sanctions now in place there and new tariffs. But why did those incentives not work, and how could they possibly work better going forward? Is that what you are referring to when you say “incentives”?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely. In a nutshell, this was a very attractive package. And the issue is not with the Kurds. Some 15 to 20-plus percent of the Turkish population is Kurdish, and in some elections, a high percentage of them actually vote for President, formerly Prime Minister, Erdogan’s party. It is all about what the Turks see is a terrorist organization, the PKK, and the offshoot of that in Syria, the Syrian wing of that, if you will, the YPG, which became for very good reasons that I agreed with at the time and agree with today our ally against ISIS. They were the only people who could fight effectively against ISIS at the time. And as part of the deal with us, they agreed not to take any actions against Turkey, and they have lived up to that agreement.

But they were still seen as a latent threat on Turkey’s border just like Israel sees Hezbollah as a latent threat on its border, even though there has only been one incident—it was very recent—since 2006 with Hezbollah on Israel’s border.

So that is the point I made in my oral testimony that major states in a region neighboring an area where we have forces have their own vote in any conflict, and they will look to their existential concerns. We think they made the wrong assessment. We think that they could have eventually had a better relationship with this wing of the PKK. In fact, they had been in negotiations or discussions with them up until 2015 in Ankara. We wanted to see if they could get back to that level. Thus, we did this joint patrolling with the Turks inside Syria in these YPG areas with the YPG pulling back. They were basically the silent third partner. We had a deal going.

In October, President Erdogan or the Turkish Government in a sense decided we are not going to go with this anymore. We do not care about the incentives. We want to go in and deal with this problem.



We are looking into, of course, why they decided to do that. We think it was a big mistake. And as I said earlier, they are not more secure today. We are not more secure today. Nobody is more secure today because of that action.

Senator PORTMAN. And none of the incentives were implemented.

Ambassador JEFFREY. The incentives now—they are in play. We will have to see how our relations with Turkey continue on. I think we have the fellow who has the enviable job—I have the enviable of Syria. He has the enviable job of Turkey.

Mr. PALMER. Thank you for that, Ambassador.

To add to that, Senator, the Turkish Government, President Erdogan is certainly interested in expanding the trade relationship with the United States. They have made that very clear. We have had talks with the Turks about enhancing, building on the trade relationship targeting \$100 billion a year in annual trade. That is a very ambitious target. But there were conversations in play about how it is that we might approach that target. At the end of the day, as we would look at it, Turkey, although it was very interested in this package, also felt that what was going on in northeast Syria represented a significant security threat and made a decision that was a security decision rather than an economic, commercial decision.

But we do look forward to the opportunity to restore a sufficient measure of balance to the U.S.-Turkey relationship that we can go back to discussions about the mechanisms through which we could expand and strengthen the trade and commercial relationship.

Senator PORTMAN. I would like to think that is on the table to try to resolve this issue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Udall?

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you both for working hard to get us this hearing. I appreciate your service, both of you.

I want to be up front. I had major concerns with our Syrian deployment when it began under the prior administration, and I opposed the decision to arm the Kurds and other groups in Syria.

For one, this deployment and action was not authorized by Congress. I voted for the 2001 authorization and never dreamed it would be used to justify U.S. forces deployed in the middle of a Syrian civil war 18 years later.

In addition, this deployment carried obvious risks of entangling us in a situation where there would never be a good way to get out. It was never in U.S. interests to invade en masse and resolve the Syrian civil war.

The Turkish concerns with Kurdish militants using Syria to launch terrorist attacks against them was not going to go away. So the problem we face today was foreseeable.

What was not foreseeable was the strange and sudden way this withdrawal was carried out. Our troops had to withdraw very quickly, placing them at increased risks to enemy or inadvertent friendly fire as they departed. Now the Russians are broadcasting propaganda from our former bases.

The President had a year to work out the details of this withdrawal but instead, his hasty order put our troops at risk and strained both the relationship with our partners in the region and our ally, Turkey. Instead of a well-executed end of operations in Syria, we are now guessing what the President will decide on any given day and what his actual motivations are while crossing our fingers that he has been adequately briefed by policy experts like yourself.

In this context, it is appropriate to remember that President Erdogan attended the ribbon cutting for a Trump Towers project in Istanbul in 2015. The Trump family reportedly receives several million dollars per year in licensing fees for these two buildings. But we do not know for sure because the President refuses to reveal his financial information.

President Erdogan has threatened the President's financial interest in Istanbul before. In 2016, when then candidate Trump was calling for a ban on Muslim integration to America, the "Wall Street Journal" quoted President Erdogan as saying "they put that brand on this building and it must be swiftly taken down."

Does it concern you that the President of the United States has an active business interest in Turkey at the same time that our Nation, including you, are engaged in very high stake, tense diplomatic engagement and the President of Turkey has already threatened that business interest at least once that we know of?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I am comfortable with my role working on Syria, Senator. I will just leave it at that.

Senator UDALL. You do not want to answer the question.

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, but I note that we do have the officer responsible for Turkish affairs here.

[Laughter.]

Senator UDALL. Mr. Palmer, please.

Mr. PALMER. The issues that you raise, Senator, have never been part of any conversation with Turkish officials of which I have been a part.

Senator UDALL. And has anyone ever discussed the Trump organization's business interests in Turkey with either one of you?

Mr. PALMER. Not with me, Senator, no.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Never.

Senator UDALL. Ambassador Jeffrey, you have written in the past that the United States and Turkey need each other, and I believe we need to return to a dialog that addresses the rift that occurred as both countries got pulled into conflict in Syria. How do we repair that rift, and will sanctions against Turkey in your opinion lead to a solution or continue to increase that rift? And will sanctions on Turkey help or hurt the U.S. effort to counter Russian and Chinese interests in the Middle East and Europe as well as Iranian ones?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Having just spent—let me see—the weekend before last night and day, again with the people here with me, imposing a set of sanctions on Turkey, I am not against sanctioning Turkey. We sanctioned Turkey because of its actions against our better judgment in going into Syria 2 weeks ago.

But we do believe that sanctions are a blunt instrument, and the best way to use them is to effect changes in behavior. It is my be-

lief—and I was there in the negotiations with Vice President Pence—that the potential additional sanctions to be levied almost immediately and in particular the sanctions that were being prepared in Congress were a major factor on the achievement of a ceasefire by another name the day after the entire Turkish leadership in press comments had said there would be no ceasefire. Well, then there was a ceasefire. That is a good example of what you can do with sanctions. But sanctions, as they are being levied, also if behavior changes, as we think we see today, have to be lifted. That is how I see sanctions being used, Senator.

Senator UDALL. Mr. Palmer, do you have anything to add?

Mr. PALMER. No, Senator. I agree absolutely with what Ambassador Jeffrey said. Sanctions are an important tool in the arsenal. The more flexible that they can be and the easier it is to put them in place and then remove them, the better it is as a tool for us to use in influencing behavior. The goal of sanctions should be to affect the behavior of the target state.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator RUBIO [presiding]. Senator Paul?

Senator PAUL. Thank you for your testimony.

Ambassador Jeffrey, do you believe or do you agree with the statement that the Syrian civil war has largely stalemated and that in all likelihood Assad will continue to be in charge of the Syrian Government?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is stalemated, but because it is stalemated at extraordinary human cost—and we heard the statistics which were right. Half the population has fled him. They are getting no money. It is basically a pile of rubble. I think that it is open to question whether Assad personally is going to lead that country indefinitely.

Senator PAUL. You know, I would disagree. I think Assad is there to stay barring something extraordinary happening. I think Assad is there to stay. And I think that one of the things that is going to happen from this that I do not know if anybody could have necessarily predicted, but one of the reasons why we have not been able to have a peace agreement is sort of our position through the U.N. agreement is fair elections which probably does not mean Assad wins a fair election. So in a way, one of our goals has been regime change. If you take the U.N. resolution to be fair in elections, which are not going to happen, the thing is that now we have disrupted things. As we have disrupted things, the Kurds now are talking and actually fighting alongside of Assad.

I actually think that the Kurds have a much better chance—we were never staying forever. It never really was our goal to have a Kurdish area. I think there are parallels to the Kurdish area within Iraq that could happen within Syria. But I do not think we are going to be of any use to it if we still maintain that regime change has to come before we get any talks.

That is why I think we are going to be largely bypassed, and in some ways it might be a good thing actually that we are largely bypassed and we have less of a role in Syria because the Russians do have the ability to talk to Erdogan, and they also have the ability to talk to Assad.

If Erdogan can be convinced that his border can be controlled by a real government—that is the problem. There has not been a real government and there has not been anybody able to control the territory. As Assad, the Russians, and perhaps the Kurds ally to control that territory, then it is really a matter of now two people talking: Assad and Erdogan.

And so I actually think that the chance for peace actually occurs and has a better chance now than it has ever had, but I do not think we will be a part of it as long as we will not have a discussion with Assad because I think Assad is going to remain barring an assassination or some internal upheaval within his government. I think he does remain.

And it is not because I want him to. I have about as much use for Assad as I have got for Erdogan. To me they are both authoritarians. But I do not see our role forward if we are adamant that this U.N. resolution 2254 basically to Assad and others means Assad has got to go before we can even engage Assad.

Is it still our government's position and you as part of our government that we do not talk to Assad and that Assad can be part of no negotiations?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is our position that we do not talk to Assad. But Assad is part of the U.N. negotiations that we support under 2254. And having been involved in one or two regime change adventures in my career, this is very different. This is not our idea to overthrow Assad. In fact, President Trump has sent on to the NDAA a classified position to Congress on 1 March of this year laying out our policies and it is explicit that it is not to overthrow Assad.

The idea of free elections is a decision taken by the entire international community because of the unique threat this guy poses. Erdogan does not believe if Assad got on the border he would protect the border. Erdogan thinks that he would use the Kurds against him or at least the PKK Kurds.

Senator PAUL. I am not saying it is easy. I am saying it is an impossible opening. And I think until someone talks to Assad, there is no opening. So the war goes on forever until someone begins to talk to Assad or Assad is gone.

And I think that that is the realism of this. The realism of this is we have to see the world as it is, not as we naively paint in black and white and Jefferson is going to come riding in on a horse. And I know you see the world that way. But I think we have not yet gotten there in Syria to see the world in a realistic way knowing full well that there are things we do not like about the authoritarianism of most of the people over there. And yet we deal with them on a daily basis. But really, I think peace is prevented. I think Assad is staying and peace is prevented until someone talks to him.

I think it is now going to happen without us. I agree that there are disagreements between Assad and Erdogan, and they do not right now trust him. But I think there is the possibility because, see, the Russians are also going to be an influence in this. And the Russians are actually becoming players. And we have this hysteria, this political hysteria, that if anyone talks to Putin, that somehow you are a supporter of his or somehow you do not love your coun-

try. But yet, the Israelis talk to the Russians. I mean, everybody else over there seems to have a more realistic understanding of the world than we do and particularly in our politically motivated world.

But my only advice is to keep an open mind with regard to Assad and with regard to negotiation, and perhaps it is something that happens without us getting in the way.

Thank you.

Senator RUBIO. Senator Murphy?

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

We have such amazing respect for the work that you have done throughout your career and particularly the job that you have taken on most recently.

That is why I think some of the most stunning testimony that we have heard here today came in answer to Senator Menendez's early questioning when he asked whether you had been consulted prior to this momentous decision being made. I do not really know why we have someone with the title "Special Representative for Syrian Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS" if they are not consulted before the President takes the most significant single action affecting U.S. interests in Syria and the future of ISIS during his presidency. And I think it speaks to the utter chaos of American foreign policy today that you were not consulted or talked to about this decision prior to it being made.

I had a recently retired general who commanded or oversaw American troops in Syria in my office last night. He was distraught in part because he tells me that the word that our soldiers are using as they are moving out of their positioning is "betrayal." They have been embedded with the Kurds, with the STP, and they feel that they have been part of a betrayal of the forces that they have been supporting and fighting alongside.

One of their specific grievances is that we convinced the Kurds to dismantle some of their defenses along the border with Turkey in anticipation of the United States and Turkey being able to work out some joint patrols. But in tearing down those defenses, it left the Kurds much more susceptible to the inevitable attack that came.

In retrospect, do you think that it was a good idea for the United States to press the Kurds into dismantling these defenses?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Of all the things that I have experienced in this particular portfolio and particularly this subsector of it with the Turks and the Kurds, the thing that I am most disturbed about is the fact that after having agreed to a way forward with us in August—Turkey—to do these joint patrols and the dismantling of fortifications, then suddenly inexplicably from my standpoint and many others', the Turkish leadership decided that they would just march in and do it all themselves.

The requirements of the August agreement were for the YPG to dismantle fortifications in what we call the safe zone but essentially the zone we are talking about. The truth is that was the one thing they do not do a very good job of. Perhaps they felt they could see what was coming. And this was a major bone of contention between us, the Turks, and the SDF.

Senator MURPHY. Listen, I certainly think that we can draw issue with the Turks' decision to abrogate the agreement we made with them, but it would have been an additional reason for us not to sell them out by removing our forces given that we had asked them to take this extraordinary measure, which they took in anticipation of us remaining the bulwark between them and the Turks.

A part of your testimony that I am having a little trouble understanding is your belief that the President has not green-lighted or did not green-light the actions by Turkey. On Sunday night, the President sent out a press release in which he said that he had just gotten off the phone with the President of Turkey and that they would now be moving forward with their long-planned operation into northern Syria. He took the one action that was a precondition to the Turks mounting an offensive, which was the removal of our forces.

And since then, he has defended Turkey's actions. He said, quote, they have got to keep going at each other. It is artificial to have these soldiers walking up and down between the two countries. He said, like two kids in a lot, you have got to let them fight. I mean, the world read that statement on Sunday night. It has listened to the President defend the decision of Turkey to enter Syria, listened to the President talk as if it is a good thing that the two sides are now fighting each other without the United States in the middle of it.

How is the world not to read all of those actions as a clear green light to Turkey to come in? The President is defending the decision that he made.

Ambassador JEFFREY. A couple of points. First, the President did say those things. He also said many other things, including I will crush the economy because Erdogan has released or actually we released the letter to President Erdogan. You can see that the President took very tough language with President Erdogan on this issue, advocated some kind of an agreement or arrangement with the SDF leader, General Mazloum.

But in addition—and I think it is a very important point here—this idea of betrayal and giving a green light—it is as if our troops in northeast Syria were like our troops along the Korean DMZ, to hold off a force from the north. They were not. That is not where they were. There were two outposts, each of 12 people, along that whole area of 140 kilometers. And we had told the Turks—I was involved in telling them that—that is simply to observe whether the Kurds are shooting across the border at you or you are shooting across the border at them. That was not a security perimeter of any sort.

The forces that we eventually did move were way west of any of this fighting, and they were moved—again, DOD can explain why, but looking at it on the map, it was clear that pretty soon they would have been cutoff as the Turks came down to the main east-west highway. And that is my understanding of why the decision was made.

But I repeat from having followed obsessively Turkish, including the intelligence I cannot get into here, views on this. Of all of the things I saw—and they are all over the map, Senator—I never once saw any Turk in any way in a position of responsibility saying, gee,

what are we going to do about those U.S. military forces. They knew that they did not have an order to defend the Kurds—well, the——

Senator MURPHY. You do not think that our forces were a deterrent?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely not. And I will cite Ash Carter Sunday on—I think that was with Stephanopolous when he was asked that specifically, and he said we never—this was the last administration. We never told the Kurds that we would defend them militarily against Turkey, and that means we did not tell Turkey. This was followed up in Face the Nation by General Tony Thomas, who said essentially the same thing to Margaret Brennan.

Senator MURPHY. I think our soldiers on the ground were led to believe something fundamentally different. And so query as to how our soldiers who are carrying out the mission felt that they were betraying the Kurds if ultimately part of the reason for being there was not to protect them against the very nation on their border that was seeking to destroy them.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Senator Kaine?

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to the witnesses.

The hasty Trump retreat produced vivid pictures of U.S. troops being pelted by stones and rotting vegetables as they walked away from their Kurdish battlefield allies. And the consequences of the Trump retreat are at least the following: one, empowering Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Turkey is a very complicated ally that is now sliding toward adversary. Iran is an adversary. Assad is a pariah, and Russia is an adversary.

The second consequence is likely to leave, based on all of the military testimony that I am hearing on the Armed Services side, the other committee on which I sit, to a renewed threat of ISIS posing a threat to the United States and other nations. And we have already seen prisoners escape. The numbers are in some dispute, but in the chaos that is to follow, the worry is that it would be more.

We have abandoned a United States ally who fought valiantly with us. And it is more than abandoning them. When the President goes out of his way to say the Kurds are no angels, why trash them on the way out the door? Why trash them? And if you have to do this because Turkey is coming across the border, then you could just say that. We do not want to face off against the Turks. But why trash the Kurds and sort of name-call them and make them sound like they are not the partner that the United States has been the most successful working with in the battle against ISIS?

It has paved the way for ethnic cleansing against the Kurds. Already the reports are that 176,000 Kurds—half of them are children, more than 80,000 of whom are children—have been displaced just in 2 weeks in the Turkish incursion across the border.

And then finally, a consequence of sending a very bizarre message about what U.S. priorities are, we are pulling troops from the region. We are going to put troops around oilfields. We want to protect oilfields from ISIS, but we are not interested in protecting Kurds from Turkey. We are pulling out of the region, but we will put a couple thousand more troops in Saudi Arabia to protect their

oil assets. Why? Well, the President says, well, because they will pay for us to do it. Okay. So are U.S. troops mercenaries now? Is that what kids like my son who are in the Marines are? They are just mercenaries and will just go to whoever pays for them to be there?

The question that is raised by all of these consequences from the Trump retreat is what would anybody think about partnering with us if there is a tough battle ahead against a non-state terrorist force or someone else and we go and ask. If ISIS resurges and we go back and ask the Kurds to help us again, I think I know what the answer is going to be.

Ambassador Jeffrey, you have been blunt and I appreciate it. I was astounded as well, but I appreciate your candor in your response to Senator Menendez's question about whether you, who have been specifically tasked by this administration with the responsibility of helping manage this admittedly very difficult situation and certainly manage the Global Coalition Against ISIS—if you were not consulted with—if you were not consulted with about this withdrawal, that just speaks volumes about its chaotic and ad hoc nature.

One of the achievements that you, I think, get some credit for in the last few months is you convinced Britain and France in July to increase their presence in the region to try to help us deal with the ISIS threat. My understanding is it was not just you who were not consulted with by the administration before this, but Britain and France who just 3 months ago had agreed to some increase in their troop levels in the region and try to protect against ISIS and work hand in hand with the Kurds. My understanding is they were not consulted with either.

Do you have any reason to doubt what I am saying to you?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Thank you for giving me a chance to try again with Senator Menendez's question. I was telling the truth when I was not consulted. As charge in Iraq in 2005, then President Bush took decisions concerning Iraq where I was not consulted. Then again in the same city, Baghdad, when I was Ambassador under President Obama, including the withdrawal of U.S. forces, he took decisions without consulting me.

I will say that in my current job, I feel that my views through Secretary Pompeo have been brought repeatedly and frequently and I think in many cases effectively to—

Senator KAINE. I mean, just kind of professionally are you indifferent to not being consulted about the matter that is in your life-long expertise, to which you have devoted your entire public service career? You have come out of retirement to do a very difficult job, and a decision is made and you have sacrificed to come out of retirement. And you are not even asked what you think, and that does not cause you any concern whatsoever?

Ambassador JEFFREY. A, had it been the first time, it might have, but as I said, it has happened repeatedly in senior positions. But again, you have to—

Senator KAINE. Well, I would hope that no matter how long you serve that you would retain enough of a moral compass to have a sense of outrage about things that are outrageous.



Look, I will just conclude and say this. If the administration had come to us with this as the plan 4 months ago, here is what we think the solution is, we want to empower Russia, Turkey, Assad, Iran, we want to run the risk of ISIS reconstituting, we want to walk away from the Kurds, we want to make other allies wonder about whether we will be loyal to them, we want to send a mixed message about whether oil is more important than people, if they had come to this committee and said this is what we want to do, what do you think, the entire committee would have laughed them out of the room. That is where we have arrived at by an ad hoc decision without consulting with the committee.

I mind not being consulted with. Whether you mind it or not, whether you are so used to it that it seems like it happens, I mind not being consulted with. I mind not having an administration come and propose some plan for Syria and let us ask questions and maybe make suggestions. But we are finding out by tweet as well, and that really, really bothers me.

Mr. Chair, I return it to you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Cruz?

Senator CRUZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thank you for your testimony.

You know, this is a discussion and debate that I think sometimes gives way to caricature, gives way to two different extremes in polls, that there are some in the political world who seem to advocate that we should stay in Syria forever and attempt to remake that country as a democratic utopia in our image. There are others who seem to advocate that we should immediately and precipitously withdraw.

I tend to think the American people agree with neither of those polls, that neither of them are right or accurate and make sense, and that the touchstone of our foreign policy should be the vital national security interests of the United States.

I think it is worth pausing to recognize that the defeat of ISIS, taking away their so-called caliphate, is an extraordinary national security victory for the United States and something for which the Trump administration and the brave men and women in our armed services deserve enormous credit for winning that victory.

I also agree with the President's ultimate objective of bringing our soldiers home. I think the American people have a limited time and patience for our sons and daughters being in harm's way.

That being said, I think the way this decision was executed was precipitous and risked very serious negative consequences. The two that are most problematic in terms of how this decision was executed is, number one, I am concerned there is a substantial possibility of ISIS returning. There are right now some 15,000 ISIS fighters who remain in Iraq and Syria, and pulling out without an effective counterterrorism strategy, presence, and platform to combat those fighters risks those fighters ultimately attacking United States citizens and endangering our national security.

Secondly, I think the way we announced the withdrawal risked abandoning the Kurds to military onslaught and potentially even the threat of a genocide. I think the Kurds have a long history of standing with America against our enemies, of risking their lives

to stand with America against our enemies, and were the United States to sit back while Turkey attempted to slaughter the Kurds, I think that would be nothing short of disgraceful.

So given that, Ambassador Jeffrey, I want to ask initially do we know right now, since this announcement was made, how many ISIS fighters have been released or are at jeopardy of being released.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Again, a relatively small number appeared to have escaped of actual detainees as opposed to people that we worry about who are internally displaced persons, mainly adult females that were married to ISIS fighters. So the number is relatively small. We are always worried—

Senator CRUZ. Can you quantify relatively small?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would say in the dozens at this point. I mean, there are various accounts out there, but there is a lot of propaganda both from the Turkish side and from the other side.

Senator CRUZ. Dozens of ISIS fighters?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Dozens of ISIS fighters. I can think of one incident where five supposedly fled, and there have been a couple of other rumors that we are looking into. The problem is that under these circumstances, we do not have the same eyes on that we normally did.

But I want to be clear. All ISIS detainees are in jeopardy if things go south in northeast Syria of somehow escaping or overwhelming their guards. That is one of the key priorities—

Senator CRUZ. How many ISIS are we talking about?

Ambassador JEFFREY. About 10,000.

Senator CRUZ. About 10,000.

Let me ask you about the Kurds. Do we know how many Kurds have been killed since Turkey began the onslaught?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I think there have been hundreds of casualties, but we do not have direct numbers because communications are not all that great between the people in the field and—

Senator CRUZ. By casualties, do you mean injuries or deaths or—

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would put it as killed and wounded.

Senator CRUZ. Killed and wounded.

Let me ask what happens—as I understand it, the ceasefire expires in 9 minutes under the terms of it. What happens in 9 minutes?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It expired 2 hours ago. What happens under the agreement is, first of all, we cannot call it a ceasefire for Turkish sensitivities vis-a-vis the other partner, which is not a state but a sub-state organization and in their eyes a terrorist one. So we call it a pause. And at the end of that pause, if both sides, the Turks and the YPG agree that everything that was agreed has been accomplished, then the pause goes into a halt of Turkish forces. And then we then lift our sanctions that we levied when the Turks went in 2 weeks ago. So that is our plan.

Senator CRUZ. So, Ambassador, when this decision was announced, I was traveling in Asia and was in Japan and Taiwan and India and Hong Kong. And repeatedly, traveling amongst our allies, I faced the question. I faced the question in Taiwan. I faced the question in India that if America will not stand with the

Kurds, that if we will not keep our word to the Kurds, why should we, other friends and allies, trust that America will stand with us. How should we answer those friends and allies?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I have heard that too, Senator, and everybody around me has.

I would put it this way, and it gets back to the consultations. I was consulted by President Trump on what to do after this happened, and I was one of the people who put together the plan, supported fully by President Trump, to impose these very harsh sanctions on Turkey immediately; secondly, when you talk about a green light, to green-light the action by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to impose even stronger sanctions.

Senator CRUZ. Let me ask a final question just because my time has expired. What confidence can we have that America will not abandon the Kurds who have stood with us repeatedly at great peril to themselves?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We have used dramatic diplomatic, political, and economic tools, which are normally the right tools short of war, to reverse this decision, and at this point, as we look at the ceasefire, I think we have done a pretty good job in bringing this attack to a halt.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you.

Senator RUBIO [presiding]. Senator Markey?

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Palmer, I want to raise the question of nuclear weapons with you in the context of Turkey. We now know from public statements according to the President that there are 50 nuclear weapons in Turkey at the Incirlik Air Base that are American. They are part of the NATO defense.

On September 4th, President Erdogan said that he cannot accept Turkey's lack of nuclear weapons. So my question to you, given this profound ambition which he stated, did Vice President Pence raise that issue with Erdogan in his conversations with him just last Thursday?

Mr. PALMER. I have no information to that effect, Senator, in terms of the specifics of the Vice President's conversations with President Erdogan. We have, of course, seen President Erdogan's statements with respect to nuclear weapons.

I would underscore that Turkey is a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It has a comprehensive safeguards agreement in force with the IAEA. It has accepted an obligation never to acquire nuclear weapons and to apply the IAEA safeguards to all peaceful nuclear activities.

Senator MARKEY. Given his conduct over the last 2 weeks, I think that we should consider that all of those documents are no longer relevant in terms of how he will be operating.

Have any top level U.S. officials had conversations with Turkish Government officials since he made that statement about his ambition now to procure nuclear weapons?

Mr. PALMER. I know of no such conversations at the highest levels, Senator, but I would underscore that neither have we seen activity that would be consistent with those aspirations. This is a political position.

Senator MARKEY. So you are an expert in this region. Do you think that the United States negotiating with Saudi Arabia on a nuclear program for Saudi Arabia could have any impact upon Turkish ambitions to also be able to obtain the nuclear materials which are needed for a nuclear weapon, given the fact that the Saudi prince said that they may develop nuclear weapons? Do you think that that is a factor in what is going on at this particular time in Turkey?

Mr. PALMER. I do not want to try and read into the motivation of the President of Turkey, but certainly Turkish authorities pay considerable and very close attention to developments in their region, yes.

Senator MARKEY. I would think so, and I think that would give us an additional reason why we have to be very careful about any enrichment capacity which we would allow the Saudis to be able to possess on their own territory because that would, without question, trigger in Erdogan a demand that he be given equal privilege to do so.

And from my perspective, I think that he is already emboldened dramatically—Erdogan—in this direction. He capitulated to Turkey only weeks after Erdogan had made his nuclear goal public. And we just walked away from the defense of the border in Syria. He failed to apply mandatory sanctions for Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defense system. He openly undercut our other non-proliferation sanctions stating publicly that as President he wants his own Treasury Secretary to let North Korea sanction evaders off the hook.

So all of this is pointing in a very bad and dangerous direction. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are in a deadly escalation from my perspective, and I think the President is setting the stage for a very bad, even bigger problem coming down the line in a very short period of time.

And if I may just turn to the 50 nuclear weapons that we now have stored inside of Turkey, I think it is pretty clear that if we were making a NATO deployment decision today, that we probably would not be putting 50 of our weapons in Turkey. Have there been conversations with the State Department, Department of Energy about a removal of those weapons from Turkey?

Mr. PALMER. Respectfully, Senator, I am not in a position to talk about nuclear force posture at this time.

Senator MARKEY. You are not able to do so.

Mr. PALMER. I am not able to do so. That is probably a question that would be most appropriately directed to the Department of Defense.

Senator MARKEY. Okay. I appreciate that.

Ambassador Jeffrey, I thank you for your service. And I think in each instance where you are not consulted but asked after the fact how do you handle the situation that has been created throughout your career without having consulted you, that you come in and do a very good job after the fact. I just wish that with each administration that they had listened to your advice at the beginning because you should always try to start out where you are going to be forced to wind up anyway. And that is why we have career dip-

lomats, just to explain to administrations the messes that they are creating. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator RUBIO. Senator Graham?

Senator GRAHAM. I would like to echo what Senator Markey said about my admiration for you. We have to play the ball as it lies in golf and foreign policy.

So, Ambassador Jeffrey, do you believe that the threat of congressional sanctions have helped the negotiations with Turkey?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I saw the effect on the Turkish negotiating team. The sanctions legislation that you had co-authored landed on the table.

Senator GRAHAM. Well, I just want to echo to Turkey, in case you are watching this, I would like a good relationship with your country, but we cannot have it this way.

So can we turn this around, Ambassador Jeffrey?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We believe we are on a path to turning it around.

Senator GRAHAM. I hope so and I think so. Turning it around would include a resolution between Turkey and the Kurds that is sustainable. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Over the longer term, that would be a necessary—and again, it is not with the Kurds. It is with this element of the Kurdish population.

Senator GRAHAM. The YPG.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Right.

Senator GRAHAM. So the way I envisioned this is that Turkey's legitimate security concerns about YPG armed elements have to be addressed. We have to have a demilitarized zone. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. We think that the way we addressed it in August was actually a very good way—

Senator GRAHAM. What happened here in August, we had a plan. We get it. The YPG heavily armed forces along the Turkish border is a non-starter for Turkey. I get that. I have gotten that for years. But I also told our friends in Turkey that the YPG, along with others, were there to help us with ISIS. We cannot abandon these people, and we are not going to allow ethnic cleansing in the name of a buffer zone. Do you think agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Senator GRAHAM. So the goal is to have an international force that we all trust—does that make sense—to police this safe zone.

Ambassador JEFFREY. In theory, yes. The problem is finding an international force that we can all trust.

Senator GRAHAM. Okay. Well, to the international community, get off your ass and help us. We have been doing a lot. You have been doing a lot with us, but help us. You know, I do not like what President Trump did, but it has been frustrating for months to try to get hundreds of troops, not thousands to take a little pressure off us and end this fight between Turkey and the YPG.

So, number two, do you agree to put this back together we have to continue the operations against ISIS with the Kurds?

Ambassador JEFFREY. With the SDF, absolutely.

Senator GRAHAM. If we do not continue to partner on the ground in Syria with the SDF forces, ISIS is for sure coming back.

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would say it will be easier if we are on the ground. One way or the other, we have to partner with them.

Senator GRAHAM. Okay. Highly unlikely that without ground components—put it this way. Ground components working with SDF has worked in the past. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Senator GRAHAM. It would be a high risk to abandon that strategy?

Ambassador JEFFREY. If that is your only goal, it is better to have some American or other—

Senator GRAHAM. We need to control the area. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I do.

Senator GRAHAM. Do you agree that we should not allow the southern oilfields in Syria to be taken over by the Iranians?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I agree that it is very important to have a presence, be that American or allied in that area to ensure stability and security as a prerequisite for our other goals in Syria.

Senator GRAHAM. Do you agree it is important strategically for the United States to maintain the al-Tanf base so that Iran cannot flow weapons into Lebanon through Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. For many reasons—

Senator GRAHAM. That is important for Israel. Right?

Ambassador JEFFREY. It is important for all of our partners and allies, including Israel.

Senator GRAHAM. Let us go over it from the top. What we need to turn this around is to have a buffer zone between Turkey and the Kurds policed by people we all trust. Right?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That would be one solution that I would support.

Senator GRAHAM. We want to continue a successful partnership to make sure that ISIS does not come back. We have had a successful partnership with the SDF regarding ISIS thus far. Do you agree with that?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely.

Senator GRAHAM. So how do you turn this around? You make adjustments. So I am asking the administration to adjust. I understand what you are trying to accomplish to reduce our footprint, but I do believe you are on the right path. We are going to continue to support your efforts.

What Senator Cruz said is important. If we leave the Kurds behind, in their mind and the eyes of the world, good luck having anybody help us in future to fight ISIS. This is the most important decision the President will make anytime soon. I stand ready to help him. I think we are on the right track, but I will not legitimize a solution that is not real. We are playing with people's lives. So we have to have a real solution.

Thank you both for what you have done.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Senator Merkley?

Senator MERKLEY. Mr. Ambassador, what forces did we rely for liberating Raqqa?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That was SDF forces with, again, advice, assist, and accompany by U.S. special forces and some other—

Senator MERKLEY. The Kurds did the heavy fighting there in a very difficult assault. They lost a lot of people. And their vision for why they were fighting—was it because they hoped to have an autonomous area in this northern Syrian triangle that might essentially give them some sense of ability to govern themselves?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Their main motive I believe was to destroy ISIS because they had almost been destroyed by ISIS themselves back in 2014. I have talked to many of their political cadre who have ideas of an autonomous area in northeast Syria, but that is part of the political process that we are working on on another channel.

Senator MERKLEY. There was, to be fair, a widely circulated vision of Rojava, or however it is pronounced—it is difficult I think for English speakers—which would be that self-governed autonomous area with a whole philosophy of democratic control. I mean, they were fighting for a vision of the future.

I know you just had a discussion with Senator Graham about reversing this decision. Right now, that whole triangle that is northeast of the Euphrates River what would on a map very recently have been yellow for Kurdish control is now essentially occupied by Syrian governmental forces, Russians, and Turks. And Iraqis are fleeing into—not Iraqis—excuse me, but the Kurds who were in that triangle are fleeing to the east. The vision of Rojava of an autonomous zone of self-government—it is crushed. Is that not a fair thing to say?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I think it is too early to judge what the political outcome of what is happening in northeast or frankly anywhere else, what is happening in the northwest in Idlib—

Senator MERKLEY. It is possible to observe many pictures that have been coming over of the advancing Russians, Syrian Government forces, and Turkish forces. So the facts on the ground have changed dramatically. I do not see how this decision gets reversed, how you restore, if you will, the Kurdish triangle northeast of the Euphrates River.

Do you think that that is a real potential outcome or that is just a conversation to say maybe somehow everything is not lost in terms of what was?

Ambassador JEFFREY. One, I think that the Kurdish population is an important population in Syria and that it does have a future. Two, you are right—

Senator MERKLEY. As an autonomously self-governed area?

Ambassador JEFFREY. That is one possibility. That is the possibility we see next door in Iraq.

But, two, I want to emphasize that this vision, which is the vision of our partners, was never the American vision. Again, I cite General Tony Thomas who said that in his discussions with them in the last administration—and that has been consistent in both administrations by everybody—we did not get involved in what their political future would be other than we were trying to find through the U.N. resolution that was relevant here, 2254, a political solution where they would have a role like all other Syrian citizens. We did not have a special—

Senator MERKLEY. Let us move on because I think there was a lot of implicit support for supporting the Kurds and the vision that were carrying. So I think you overstate your case on that.

Now, you said that you were not consulted by the President in terms of the impacts of a precipitous withdrawal, not on ISIS prisoners, not on the impact on Kurdish civilians, not on the impact of Kurdish fighters, not on the impact of the Syrian Government coming into the space, not on the impact of Russian influence, not on the impact on other allies. You were not consulted, but you said you felt you were well represented through Pompeo. Are you saying in the 2 or 3 days before Trump made this decision or in the week before that, that you fully briefed Pompeo on all these implications of a precipitous withdrawal?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Sir, we briefed the Secretary and through the Secretary on the implications of that after the December 2018 decision. In fact, that led to a partial reversal of that withdrawal decision with the President's commitment to a residual force in northeast Syria that he took in February. So, yes, there was an iteration—

Senator MERKLEY. So that was December, but we are not in December. We are talking about that week before the President made this decision. Whether the President did not turn to you, did he turn to Pompeo and Pompeo turned to you and said you are the expert, how do things stand now? Were you indirectly briefing the President in that week preceding this decision on October 6th to green-light the Turkish invasion?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Again, beginning when the President took his first decision in the spring of 2018 to order a withdrawal, which was reversed, one of the most active discussions inside this administration which I was involved in—

Senator MERKLEY. I am going to be out of time. I am asking you about that week before, did the President turn to Pompeo, got fully briefed, you fully briefed Pompeo? You were indirectly represented at that time, not what you did months before. The President, we probably collectively understand, would have forgotten whatever he was told months before about this kind of situation. So was Pompeo as caught off guard as you were is may be another way to put it?

Ambassador JEFFREY. You would have to ask him, Senator.

Senator MERKLEY. But he did not call you up during that period and say the President is on the verge of making this decision. I would like to get an update and make sure I represent the impacts.

Ambassador JEFFREY. No, but in innumerable discussions with the President, I know that Secretary Pompeo had deployed all of these concerns about the future of the de-ISIS campaign, detainees, and all of that. This was, again, something that was discussed all of the time within this administration at the highest levels.

Senator MERKLEY. If we had more time—and I am out of time—the thing I would find interesting is if you had been called—so I will state the question, but I am afraid I will have to defer to the committee for their—if you had been called and said the President is considering this, he wants you to come brief him, he wants to get our troops out of Syria, do you feel you could have laid out a plan that did not result in this advancement of the interests of Iran



and Syria and Russia and ISIS that would have gotten our troops out of Syria?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I would have tried.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Rubio?

Senator RUBIO. Thank you.

Again, I want to thank you both for being here, the Ambassador in particular. You have gotten a lot of the questions. I think you have done an admirable job of outlining your thoughts on it and the way forward.

I do want to say you have expressed a level of—I do not even want to call it optimism, but hope that some of this is still salvageable. And I am puzzled by that only because the—I mean, the situation to understand it at its best, the Turks are pushing down into Syria with the goal of driving the Kurds out. And whether they are going to wait 5 days or X number of days, they expect them out of there. They have now cut a deal with the Russians who have basically said we are going to help you move the Kurds out of this area, and then we are going to jointly patrol the area with you. So the Kurds have been pushed into areas that they have now had to invite the Assad regime to come up and they are aligned with them. So you basically have almost a Turkish with the Russians and now the Kurds with the Assad and the Russians obviously in between.

And you say we are going to continue to cooperate with the SDF forces on these issues. How? Where are we plugging in on this? And with who? Our troops—we have moved a thousand across the border to Iraq. The Iraqis are saying you cannot really stay here. You are not allowed to stay here. I am trying to understand. You are saying we are going to plug in and work with them on the anti-ISIS campaign. I just do not know where we are going to plug in. Are we going to go join them down there deployed with the Assad elements?

And the other question that I have is you answered Senator Graham by saying that the ideal outcome would be a buffer zone controlled by elements that we trust. Well, that buffer zone is now patrolled by the Russians, which I do not think we should trust, and by the Turks who we should not trust because they have already broken a deal to jointly patrol the buffer zone. They had a good deal that was in place. Everybody was complying, and they said it was not enough for them. So we do not have that. How do we reverse the buffer zone given the facts on the ground now? And more importantly, where do we plug in?

Ambassador JEFFREY. This is why one has to be hopeful in this complex situation. But let me sketch out where we are tonight.

One, we have American forces on the ground with the leadership of the SDF. We have American diplomats on the ground in the same room with these people continuing to do the job we have been doing since 2014. And over much of the northeast, the SDF, with our support, with our air cover, is still in operation.

Two, the Turkish offensive has been halted since the 17th. It has taken a swath of territory that is fairly small. The YPG voluntarily withdrew from that area and is now out of that area, but by and large, most of its forces are still intact. I underline “still intact.”

There is an agreement that I have been reading all afternoon between the Turks and the Russians, and having done two agreements, one of which did not work with the Turks, in the last 2 months, I have a fairly good layman's acquaintance with these kind of things. And it is full of holes. All I know is it will stop the Turks from moving forward. Whether the Russians will ever live up to their commitment, which is very vague, to be feasible methods to get the YPG out of their areas, I do not know. We did get the YPG out. They volunteered to as a condition of stopping the offensive.

So right now, the situation is frozen. The YPG as a military force down on the Euphrates against ISIS or even up in the north is still largely intact. We are there. We are reviewing our options on what we are going to do in terms of a withdrawal right now.

Senator RUBIO. I am confused by that answer. My understanding from what has been reported in the press is that we have withdrawn or are in the process of withdrawing all of our military presence in that part of Syria. So you are saying here today that as of this moment tonight, there are areas in Syria controlled by the YPG in which U.S. diplomats and military forces are embedded alongside them, and these are areas that the Turks do not consider part of their agreement, and that are not collocated with the Assad regime.

Ambassador JEFFREY. You have described at least half of northeast Syria tonight, if not more.

Senator RUBIO. And that is a situation that is sustainable given the President's order that we remove the remaining military elements?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Sustainable is something that I do not think I would commit to at this point. It is our job to figure out how to make it sustainable with military, economic, and diplomatic—

Senator RUBIO. The notion that there would be any elements left behind of any military force, in combination with a U.S. diplomatic presence, runs contrary to what we have been led to believe is what is ongoing here from the administration, that everybody is getting out. Right?

Ambassador JEFFREY. The order to the U.S. military was to withdraw all ground forces from northeast Syria, not from al-Tanf. And I am not sure what the decision is on air over that area. But again, we are reviewing how we are going to continue to maintain a relationship with the SDF, how we are going to continue to maintain the fight against ISIS along the Euphrates, and how we are going to contribute in some way to the stability of that region that has just been torn asunder by the Turks going in with the tools available to us. And we have not completed that review yet, but it is ongoing.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Barrasso?

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for being here. I had a lot of questions and you have answered many. I have a couple things. I want to dive a little bit deeper.

A question to both of you. The future of our relationship with Turkey, a longtime NATO ally, I believe is a serious national security challenge right now. You read lots about it. It has been called

a troubled marriage. There are lots of different problems with Turkey's relationship with not just the U.S. but all of NATO. Bilateral relations between the U.S. and Turkey have reached a low point in my opinion. Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system really I think puts the advanced capabilities of the NATO alliance at risk. Turkey's invasion in Syria and assault on our partners in the region have greatly impacted our national security interests.

What are the best tools or the best leverage for us, the United States, to use to demonstrate our concern over Turkey's actions and ensure that there is a change in their behavior?

Mr. PALMER. Thank you for that question, Senator.

And I agree with just about everything that you have said, about how difficult and complex and challenged the U.S.-Turkey relationship is. This is an important relationship for the United States, but it is far from an easy relationship.

Just to zero in on one of the particular issues that you highlighted, Turkey's decision to proceed with acquiring the S-400 missile system from Russia. This is something that we opposed consistently, firmly at the highest levels. Turkey proceeded with that acquisition over our objections and paid a price for that. In particular, they paid a price by being removed from the F-35 program. That includes both the delivery of the physical aircraft and participation in the industrial program, which is being unwound. So there are immediate costs and consequences for Turkey of that decision.

The additional issue of possible cuts of sanctions is under review even as we speak. That is an ongoing deliberative process.

There is a high level dialog that we have with Turkey about the relationship that covers a waterfront of issues, and that includes the relationship with Russia and Turkey's decision to move ahead with the S-400. It includes Turkey's neighborhood, Iran. It includes drilling off the coast of Cyprus, which is something that Turkey has engaged in against the advice of the United States, something that we feel contributes to further instability in the region. It includes a range of issues where the United States and Turkey do not see eye to eye. It also includes the trajectory of Turkish democracy, which is of concern to the United States, the media environment, rule of law. We remind the Turks on a regular basis that NATO is an alliance not just of interests but of values, and that in particular includes democratic values.

So this is a difficult relationship but it is an important one, and we are going to have to work through this problem set and hopefully come out in a better place.

Ambassador JEFFREY. I have lived in Turkey for 9 years and have worked with it for 40 years. I am personally furious at this military move particularly after we had done an agreement with them that was a good agreement that we were living up to by and large in August.

But I will say this. Turkey is not Iran. It is not by its nature, in the terms of its population and its public philosophy, an expansionist country. It is also in many respects a country with shared values. It currently has a government that—Mr. Palmer can go into in far more detail than I because I do not follow it that closely—is violating many of those values. But it is still a democratic sys-

tem in a way that, for example, Iran is not, as we saw in the Istanbul reelection recently. And it is a country that has done a great deal in support of our objectives in NATO, including under President and previously Prime Minister Erdogan, including helping us react to the Georgia invasion in 2008. NATO radar that protects all of NATO against Iranian missiles, very critical. Actions in Afghanistan, and I could go on and on. So it is a mixed bag. And a lot of it is right now with this government we have some very serious problems but not as many with the state as a whole.

Senator BARRASSO. Let me ask you one other question. The Syrian Democratic Forces have been securing about 10,000 ISIS detainees across about 30 different detention facilities in Syria with Turkey's invasion of northern Syria greatly destabilizing the area where these facilities are located. There have been press reports that the Turkey-backed forces, the proxy forces are deliberately releasing ISIS detainees from prisons in northeastern Syria. Can you talk a little bit about it, the accuracy of what some of the press is reporting?

Ambassador JEFFREY. I have seen nothing to confirm that. It would be highly unlikely. Why would Turkey do that? It has had more ISIS attacks on its soil than any other country other than obviously Iraq and Syria.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Barrasso.

Senator Menendez?

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You know, I am the longest serving member of the committee on either side of the aisle at this point in time, and that has given me the benefit of listening to my colleagues on many issues over a period of time. And I must say that if what this administration decided was decided by the Obama Administration, the outrage would be deafening.

And you know, Ambassador Jeffrey, I have the greatest respect for you. But one can try to put lipstick on a pig, but it is still a pig. One can ultimately call capitulation a victory, but it is still capitulation. And one can ultimately have a retreat and say it is strategic, but it is still a retreat. And that is I feel is exactly what has happened here.

You made a statement earlier about being a diplomat not a military person, and I respect that. But in fact, it is military force that has gotten both Russia and Turkey exactly what they want. Turkey went ahead and through its actions and by the agreement that I have been given, the Sochi agreement, and the communique that was issued basically got everything they want. They do not have to fire a single shot.

So here we are in August, as you have aptly said. We made an agreement. We were living up to it. That agreement, as I understand, for security purposes was working well. They violated it after we told the Syrian Democratic Forces to stand down from their defenses. So they got them to stand down on their defenses.

Then we had an agreement, which was working perfectly well. They violated that agreement by now coming in and going ahead and using military force, military force that at the end of the day—

you know, I am concerned about the press reports that has bombs landing near our troops even though they knew their location, that has troop advancement against elements of where our troops were.

So at the end of the day, Turkey gets a 20-mile wide swath through a good part of what was ancestral homes of Kurds in Syria, and they get the sanctions lifted from them, not that I think the sanctions that were placed were the greatest ones because at the end of the day, the stock market went up after the sanctions were announced. So they got everything.

So I do not understand how, at the end of the day, this is in any interests of the United States. I have never said that we were there to defend the Kurds, but we were there to defeat ISIS. And we are by far in a worse position.

Would it not be fair to say—in your testimony, which I actually think your written testimony is more revealing than even the questions we have had back and forth, you talk about the U.S. strategic objective and national security interests in Syria remain being the enduring defeat of ISIS, al Qaeda, and their affiliates, the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence, and the resolution of the Syrian civil war on terms favorable to the United States and our allies and in line with U.N. Security Council resolution 2254.

Is it not fair to say that those strategic objectives and national security interests have been made far more difficult as a result of the decisions and where we are at today?

Ambassador JEFFREY. Once again, that is the reason why we opposed Turkey coming in. We said if you come in, you are going to, as I said, scramble the entire security system in the northeast. That is going to have a big impact on—

Senator MENENDEZ. But they did what they wanted. We retreated. We retreated. We did. They did what they wanted, and we retreated.

I think your statement tells it all on—I guess it is about page 4 or 5 of your statement. You say Turkey launched this operation despite our objections, undermining the de-ISIS campaign, risking, endangering, and displacing civilians, destroying critical civilian infrastructure and threatening the security of the area. Turkey's military actions have precipitated a humanitarian crisis and set conditions for possible war crimes.

Well, all of that does not inure to helping our strategic objectives as outlined in your testimony. I think that is a fair statement.

Ambassador JEFFREY. Absolutely. There is no doubt that Turkey's coming in has threatened all three of our objectives in Syria.

Senator MENENDEZ. So at the end of the day, I question whether or not—we have been talking about Turkey—and you know, Mr. Assistant Secretary, you said in response to questions by Senator Markey that it is an important relationship for the United States. My question is does Turkey see the United States as an important relationship for it because if it does, it just keeps spiting its nose and doing everything contrary to what a good relationship with us would mean.

One final set of questions. You are familiar, Mr. Secretary, with the CAATSA legislation that passed the Senate 98 to 2 and signed into law by President Trump in August 2017?

Mr. PALMER. Yes, Senator.

Senator MENENDEZ. And does CAATSA have a mandatory provision sanctioning any significant transaction with the Russian military?

Mr. PALMER. Yes, Senator, it does.

Senator MENENDEZ. Did Turkey take the S-400 system for delivery this summer?

Mr. PALMER. Yes, sir.

Senator MENENDEZ. Is there any realistic scenario in which the purchase of an S-400 is not a significant transaction under the law?

Mr. PALMER. Senator, that issue is currently under review as part of a deliberative process. I cannot get ahead of any decision by the Secretary of State with respect to sanctions under CAATSA.

Senator MENENDEZ. I did not ask whether the Secretary of State said he was going to sanction Turkey under CAATSA. I asked whether or not the purchase worldwide of an S-400 is not a significant transaction.

Mr. PALMER. Senator, that determination has not been made as a matter of law.

Senator MENENDEZ. Wow. What a message we are sending in the world. That message undermines the actions of the Congress of the United States, which in an overwhelming bipartisan vote, sent to the President legislation to push back on Russia, 98 to 2. If you start opening that door, you will have undermined the very essence of what the law has meant and you will be undermining the congressional intent because I am one of the authors of it. I understand what I meant and what others who joined with me to ultimately pass it meant.

It is not a question of whether that is a significant transaction. That is a significant transaction. If the purchase the S-400 is not a significant military transaction from a country purchasing it from Russia, then nothing is. Then nothing is. And I simply cannot understand that answer.

And at some point, you are all going to have to come up with an answer, including if it is the State Department's or the administration's legal view that such a transaction is not a significant transaction under the law, we need to hear it. The Congress of the United States needs to hear it, but you cannot hide under the guise that you are all—you have been thinking about this for some time. This is not the first time this question has been raised. You need to give us an answer, and we need to force an answer if you fail to give it to us because, at the end of the day, we need to send a global message about what is a significant transaction. And if the purchase of the S-400 is not a significant transaction, then I do not know what Senator Inhofe, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee; Senator Reed, the ranking member; Senator Risch; and myself, who all signed on to a public op-ed to try to get Turkey to go in a different direction—we made it very clear that all of our views on a bipartisan basis, that that is a significant transaction and is sanctionable under CAATSA. So if it is the administrations' view that it is different, we need to know.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. PALMER. Thank you, Senator.

The Secretary has made clear that he is committed to implementing CAATSA. The CAATSA deliberations are multifaceted. They are complex, conducted on a case-by-case basis. The administration, of course, always considers the importance of maintaining CAATSA's credibility as a deterrent to Russian arms sales around the world. During the sanctions deliberations, those deliberations are, as I have noted, ongoing.

Senator MENENDEZ. And that is incredible. If you want to maintain the credibility of CAATSA, then you have got to find that the S-400 is a significant transaction. If you do not, then you have neutered the law, and the Congress should act appropriately therefore.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your courtesy.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Menendez.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for testifying today. We sincerely appreciate your patience with us. It has been long suffering, but we do appreciate it.

For the benefit of the members, the record will remain open until Thursday evening for written questions for the record. And if the witnesses would, as quickly as possible, respond to those questions, they will be made part of the record.

With that, the committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5:30 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

