

**THE PATH FORWARD: KEY FINDINGS  
FROM THE SYRIA STUDY GROUP REPORT**

---

---

**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST,  
SOUTH ASIA, CENTRAL ASIA,  
AND COUNTERTERRORISM

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

—————  
SEPTEMBER 24, 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*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,  
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM

MITT ROMNEY, *Chairman, Utah*

TED CRUZ, Texas	CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, Connecticut
LINDSEY GRAHAM, South Carolina	BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, Maryland
CORY GARDNER, Colorado	JEANNE SHAHEEN, New Hampshire
RAND PAUL, Kentucky	TIM Kaine, Virginia

# CONTENTS

---

	Page
Romney, Hon. Mitt, U.S. Senator From Utah .....	1
Murphy, Hon. Christopher, U.S. Senator From Connecticut .....	2
Singh, Michael, Co-Chair, Syria Study Group, Washington, DC .....	3
Prepared statement .....	7
Stroul, Dana, Co-Chair, Syria Study Group, Washington, DC .....	5
Prepared statement .....	7



# **THE PATH FORWARD: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SYRIA STUDY GROUP REPORT**

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2019**

U.S. SENATE,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,  
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:33 p.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Mitt Romney, chairman of the subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Romney [presiding], Risch, Murphy, Cardin, Shaheen, and Kaine.

## **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MITT ROMNEY, U.S. SENATOR FROM UTAH**

Senator ROMNEY. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, will come to order.

Today, we are holding a hearing on the findings of the bipartisan Syria Study Group. The Syria Study Group was established by Congress, with the purpose of examining and making recommendations on U.S. military and diplomatic strategy with respect to the conflict in Syria.

I want to recognize my colleagues, particularly Senator Shaheen, and my friend, the late Senator John McCain, for their efforts to establish this working group.

We also wish to honor the American men and women who have died as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, I want to thank our witnesses here today for their willingness to take up the task of examining an extremely complex problem with no easy solutions. As the report states, quote, "Optimal outcomes were left behind long ago," end of quote. It is never easy to devote time and resources to a task whose main goal is often to prevent worse things from happening.

I happen to believe that this report comes at a very timely point in our Nation's history. According to press reports, ISIS is regrouping, and that there are some 15,000 ISIS fighting individuals on the ground, that there are some 70,000 in refugee camps that are ISIS supporters. Mr. Assad has repeated chemical attacks, despite the fact that we once drew a red line. That red line seems to be more like a green light. Turkey is hostile to the intent toward the Kurd individuals, the Kurd-led Syria Defense Forces, which we

back, and presents a real threat to them. Idlib is apparently a province that is being held by various terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda. Iran has 2500 troops, which are located on the ground there. Russian mercenaries have launched, or did launch, a surprise attack on U.S. troops there. So, there is a great deal swirling around this—at this part of the world.

We have—as a Nation, the administration has announced its withdrawal. And I think one of the questions is whether this is a political interest that is being pursued or a national interest that is being pursued. And, particularly, the recommendations that are going to come forward from this group are of most interest to me and, I am sure, other members of the committee and the administration.

Your report does include conclusive, thoughtful recommendations to address these challenges and how best to adjust our strategy toward Syria to minimize the threats in the future. And I look forward to hearing more of your thoughts today.

And, with that, I will turn the time over to Senator Murphy for his comments and questions.

**STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER MURPHY,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you both for joining us here today.

The civil war in Syria has now raged on for more than 8 years. Huge swaths of the country are decimated, millions have been displaced. Though the crisis may have faded from the headlines, it is, in part, due to the fact that the international community has just accepted these tragic events as the new normal. Syria is now where international law and the rules of war have gone to die. War crimes once considered unthinkable and outrageous—the bombing of hospitals, chemical weapons attacks—are now commonplace.

The administration has declared three goals of our U.S. policy there: the defeat of ISIS, political settlement, and then the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces. But, at the same time that we supposedly want to accomplish these big goals, the administration has cut stabilization into Syria, pulled out nonmilitary officials, such as START-Forward, largely been MIA on negotiations in Geneva, and sought to push off the Syria file on our partners rather than lead. And I think it is an incredibly important time for us to consider this very, very well-timed report.

I also think it is time for us to admit that our policy in Syria, over the course of two administrations, has been a failure, and we need to do some postmortem about the overall lessons learned. It is clear that our policy has failed. And, despite the Obama administration's significant covert military support for forces opposing Assad, the war has continued to rage for over 8 years. Our decision to provide the rebels with enough support to keep going, but not enough to actually defeat Assad, served to drag this war out and kill thousands more innocent people than had we limited our involvement at the outset.

Now, some will argue that our mistake was not intervening sooner, which would have kept Russia and Iran out of the Syrian theater, force Assad to step down, and allowed for a political process

to move forward. It would be nice to think that U.S. military interventions could accomplish these worthy objectives. Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, history provides scant examples of where the U.S. directly intervened in a foreign civil war and achieved its policy goals. These types of interventions always sound good on paper, but often end up getting us bogged down into a quagmire as they confront the messy reality of insurgencies, imperfect partners, unreliable intelligence, and unintended consequences. Sometimes military restraint, though it may feel unsavory in the face of evil, it is sometimes the best policy if our action will ultimately create new problems than it solves. I hope we are able to talk about these broader realities, as well as the path forward inside Syria itself.

We have a lot to discuss today, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Senator Murphy.

We have one panel with two witnesses here today:

Michael Singh, co-chair of the Syria Study Group, is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and Managing Director for the Washington Institute. He is a former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the National Security Council. Previously, he served on the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States.

We also have Dana Stroul, co-chair of the Syria Study Group and a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics. She previously served for 5 years as a senior professional staff member for this committee, and spent 5 years working in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

We will now turn to our first witness. Mr. Singh, thank you for your willingness to testify here today. Your full statement will be included in the record, without objection. If you could please keep your remarks to no more than 5 minutes, we would appreciate it so that we can engage with some questions after that.

Mr. Singh.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SINGH, CO-CHAIR, SYRIA STUDY GROUP, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. SINGH. Well, thank you, Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the committee. I appreciate this opportunity to present the final report of the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group. It was a real honor to co-chair this bipartisan group of experts, along with my colleague, Dana Stroul.

I want to begin by talking about why policymakers and the American public should care about Syria and about this conflict. It is not something our group took for granted, especially in a day and age when all of us face mounting questions, and maybe for good reasons, frankly, about the U.S. role in the world. Then I am going to defer to Ms. Stroul to discuss the Study Group's assessments and recommendations.

To understand U.S. policy toward Syria, I think it is important to reach back to the beginning of the conflict in 2011. It began as a peaceful uprising against an autocratic dictator, one of many such uprisings at a time that made up the so-called Arab Spring, as everyone here will remember. And if it seemed, 8 years ago, that this uprising might usher in some positive change, those hopes have been dashed, to say the least. Syria has turned into a crucible

for a complex series of intersecting conflicts that has reverberated, I would argue, well beyond the Middle East, to Europe, to the United States, and elsewhere.

For years, as Senator Murphy alluded to, the United States helped to shelter ourselves from the fallout of the Syrian conflict. Many of you will remember the notion that was once popular that Syria could be “cauterized,” quote/unquote, that its effects would—could be confined to Syria itself, and that the rest of the region and the world could be spared from the fallout from the conflict. But, what happened in Syria did not stay in Syria, nor could the war’s effects be easily contained.

So, in April 2013, ISIS moved from Iraq into Syria, eventually established its capital in Raqqa. In August 2013, regime forces killed hundreds of innocent people in a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus. In August and September 2014, American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, were brutally executed by ISIS. And in September 2015, the Russian military intervention in Syria began. And obviously that persists till today.

Along the way, nearly 7 million Syrians were driven to neighboring countries or to the shores of Europe as refugees. Today, Syria poses a spectrum of threats to American interests, I would argue. It provides safe haven to some of the world’s most dangerous terrorist groups. Idlib, for example, is home to the greatest concentration of foreign fighters since Afghanistan in the 1980’s, U.S. officials have said. ISIS has been driven from the territories it once controlled, but it is returning now as an insurgency, as you said, Senator Romney.

Iran has exploited the conflict to entrench itself in Syria’s economic and social fabric, and would have turned Syria into a forward base for its missiles, were it not for Israeli airstrikes. But, those strikes by Israel have come with a cost in the increased risk of war between Iran and Israel, and we have seen that conflict between the two spread, in recent months, elsewhere in the region.

Russia, too, has exploited this conflict through its intervention in Syria. Moscow has established itself, brutally and cynically, as a major player in the Middle East for the first time in decades. U.S. partners across the region are taking Russia’s new role seriously, we would judge, and have expanded their ties with Moscow across the board.

The list goes on. The Assad regime and its partners have smashed every norm of conflict by targeting hospitals and schools, deploying chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and using starvation and mass murder as weapons of war. Syrian refugees have roiled politics in Europe and strained economies throughout the Levant and beyond.

At every point at which we hope to shelter ourselves from this conflict’s ill effects, it has only become more deleterious to our interests, and it could yet grow worse. We could see a massacre and new exodus of refugees in Idlib, where you have 3 million people holed up with forces on every side. You could see a new incursion by Turkey that brings it into conflict with our Arab and Kurdish allies. You could see a broader war between Iran and Israel. Or you could see a renewed civil war in the areas where the regime has retaken control, but that control is very tenuous, frankly.

The conflict in Syria matters to America, whatever one's preferred strategic framework, I would argue. This is a conflict where our two great strategic concerns—international terrorism, on the one hand; great-rival—I am sorry, great-power conflict, on the other, come together. It is not a conflict we can simply contain or ignore. Our group was unanimous in that judgment. But, we were also unanimous in our view that there remains much that we can do, as the United States, to help shape the conflict's outcome and protect our interests, which Ms. Stroul will go into in more detail.

I do want to take the few seconds that remain to me just to say thank you, first, to Senator Shaheen, for her leadership in creating this group; to Congressman Thornberry, on the House Armed Services Committee, for appointing me; and to the Republican Caucus, for the honor of being named co-chair of the group. Thank you, to the congressional leadership for naming, frankly, such thoughtful and expert colleagues to the Syria Study Group. And I want to echo, Senator Romney, your thanks to all those Americans, civilian and military, who have fought, and especially those who have died in the course of what I think is an important conflict.

To me, the real value of this report, just to conclude, is that it represents a bipartisan consensus. And, to me, in Washington today, that is no small thing.

Thank you.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Singh.

Ms. Stroul.

**STATEMENT OF DANA STROUL, CO-CHAIR, SYRIA STUDY GROUP, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ms. STROUL. Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting us to present the final report of the Syria Study Group.

Last year, Congress directed the Syria Study Group to form an assessment of the military and political status of the Syrian war and provide recommendations for the way ahead. Today, we are delivering a document that represents the consensus of all 12 members, and, echoing Mr. Singh, that is no small feat. This is a bipartisan plan for action.

Here are our top-line conclusions:

Number one, Assad has not won the war. Areas under his control are riddled with crime and poverty. Civilians are subject to conscription, forced disappearances, and execution. Conditions are set for the next phase of conflict.

Two, the political process is stalled. Yesterday's announcement on the formation of a constitutional committee may hold promise, but it is too soon to tell. To date, Assad has not demonstrated a willingness to make meaningful compromises. His offensive in Idlib makes it painfully difficult to build momentum toward a negotiated settlement.

Three, ISIS is not defeated. The U.S.-led military effort successfully pushed ISIS out of the territory it held, but the group has transitioned to an insurgency. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda is still active in Syria.

Four, the ISIS detainee population is a few prison breaks away from reconstituting the next caliphate. The U.S.-supported Syrian

Democratic Forces are resource-strained in securing this population.

Five, Iranian boots are not leaving Syria, despite U.S. sanctions and Israeli strikes. In addition to its military campaign, Iran is entrenching itself in Syria's economic and social fabric for long-term influence.

Six, Russia has exploited its intervention on behalf of Assad to contest U.S. influence and leadership.

Seven, U.S.-Turkey ties are immensely strained, and U.S. support for the Syrian Defense Forces is a leading factor. A Turkish military incursion into northern Syria will provide ISIS the opportunity to reconstitute. Joint U.S.-Turkey military patrols in a mutually agreed-upon area prevent this scenario for the time being.

Eight, the scale and scope of human suffering over the course of this conflict have set a depraved new standard for the 21st century. The parties responsible—Assad, Iran, and Russia—have faced no meaningful consequences for the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, torture, starvation, and intentional targeting of civilian infrastructure.

In forming our recommendations, our group considered the limited appetite of the American public for significant increases in military or financial investments. Therefore, we propose a strategy that strengthens key elements of the current approach, calls for reinvigorated U.S. leadership, and prioritizes resolving the underlying Syrian conflict.

The tools for this strategy are already on the table—a U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS, limited U.S. forces on the ground, capable local partner forces, sanctions, assistance, and diplomacy—but, effective and appropriate resourcing of these tools are needed to give them teeth.

To start, we recommend the following steps: reverse the U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria; strengthen U.S. sanctions on Assad and his backers, and make them multilateral; lead ongoing diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime; spend the \$200 million in U.S. stabilization funds already approved by Congress; continue to withhold reconstruction aids to the parts of Syria under Assad's control.

Concurrently, the U.S. must continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside of Syria while shoring up vulnerable refugee-hosting partners and host communities on Syria's borders.

Our group acknowledges that this strategy will not lead overnight to the elimination of ISIS, the removal of Iran from Syria, or a political settlement that ends the war. But, this mix of tools, combined with consistent, high-level, and credible American leadership, will provide leverage to shape an outcome protective of core U.S. national security interests when conditions are conducive for a negotiated settlement.

This is the end state for Syria envisioned by our group: a Syrian government viewed as legitimate by its population, capable of ending dependence on foreign forces, and able to eliminate the threat from terrorist groups. Syria citizens would, therefore, need to not fear the Assad regime, Russia, Iran, or ISIS. Such an end state, in

our view, will require an updated political and social compact in Syria.

To conclude, just a few thank-you's. The work of the Syria Study Group would not have been possible without the support of Congress, and, in particular, Senator Shaheen. The 12 Members of Congress who named members to the group put together a panel of deep expertise and committed colleagues. Thank you. My personal thanks to Senator Schumer for appointing me to the Democratic Caucus, for making me the Democratic co-chair. The USIP team facilitating our group has been nothing short of tremendous. In particular, thank you to Executive Directive Mona Yacoubian and her team. And finally, my personal thanks to my fellow co-chair, Mike Singh. He has been a partner, as well as friend, as I balanced my role in this group and welcomed my second child about 12 hours after our first set of meetings. The child was extremely timely. And I thank him for that, as well.

[Laughter.]

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

#### THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SINGH AND DANA STROUL

Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the Subcommittee on the Near East, South East, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, we are pleased to present the report of the Syria Study Group, which represents a bipartisan, consensus assessment of the conflict in Syria and recommendations for U.S. policy.

This report is a roadmap for bipartisan action. Its core assumptions are (1) that the war in Syria is far from over, (2) that the United States retains leverage to shape the outcome of the multiple conflicts still ongoing in Syria, and (3) that the interests and security of the American people are best served by an engaged U.S. policy. Indeed, Syria is a conflict where the two great U.S. strategic concerns—the aggression of revisionist powers and the threat international terrorism—come together.

The Syria Study Group acknowledges the limited appetite of the American public for an increase in U.S. military or financial investment in Syria. Therefore, we recommend that the United States strengthen key elements of the current approach to Syria by investing appropriate levels of resources, while elevating resolution of the Syrian conflict as a U.S. national security priority. The tools are already on the table: a U.S.-led international coalition of the willing, limited U.S. boots on the ground combined with U.S. military enablers and capable local forces, sanctions, assistance, and diplomacy. What is needed is effective support for and appropriate resourcing of these tools.

The Syria Study Group recommends that the U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria be reversed and the military mission set updated; that U.S. sanctions on Assad and his backers be strengthened and be made multilateral to the extent possible; that diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime continue; that U.S. stabilization assistance already authorized and appropriated by Congress for post-Islamic state (ISIS) communities in Syria be spent; and that reconstruction aid to the parts of Syria under regime control continue to be withheld. The U.S. must concurrently continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside of Syria, while shoring up vulnerable, refugee-hosting partner countries and host communities on Syria's borders.

The key to the approach that our Group recommends is U.S. leadership and prioritization of the international response to the conflict in Syria. U.S. allies, partners, and adversaries must understand unequivocally that the U.S. is not disengaging from Syria militarily nor diplomatically. This requires engagement on Syria at the highest levels of the U.S. Government, and consistent oversight from Congress.

Our group acknowledges that this strategy will not lead overnight to the elimination of ISIS, the removal of Iran from Syria, or a political settlement that ends the war. The obstacles the United States and our allies face are formidable: the Assad regime remains adamantly opposed to any compromise which might allow progress toward a political resolution; Russia cannot unilaterally deliver a political win for Assad, but appears to remain committed to its client despite considerable pressure; Iran has suffered setbacks in the form of sanctions and Israeli strikes, but

remains determined to entrench itself in Syria for the long term; Turkey and our allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) may yet renew their conflict despite U.S. efforts to devise a security mechanism to prevent such an outcome, and tensions between the SDF and local populations are reportedly rising; and ISIS, though down, is not fully defeated, and already shows signs of reorganizing as an insurgency.

Beyond these challenges, the scale and scope of human suffering over the course of 9 years of conflict have set a depraved new standard for 21st century conflict—hundreds of thousands dead, millions missing or displaced, and waves of refugees straining Syria's neighbors and Europe. The parties responsible—the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia—have faced no meaningful consequences for their use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, torture, starvation, and intentional destruction of civilian infrastructure.

The United Nations Security Council has been rendered ineffectual in galvanizing international action in response to Assad's atrocities by Russian and Chinese protection. These issues are rarely elevated or prioritized in diplomatic discourse or multilateral gatherings on Syria, but remain profoundly important to the stakeholders in the conflict who have suffered the most: the Syrian people. Without meaningful attention paid to those issues most important to civilians—protection, accountability, justice—Syrian refugees will not voluntarily return home, Syrians remaining in their country will lack the security to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and no political process will be sustainable.

Our group was unanimous in its view that these harsh realities are not simply far-off tragedies, but events that have consequences for U.S. national security today and that will reverberate far into the future, in the Middle East and beyond. We were also in agreement that the United States has compelling interests at stake in Syria and the tools necessary to advance them, and that U.S. efforts can serve not only American national security but also alleviate the suffering of those caught up in this conflict and deter those abetting it. Overcoming the obstacles the U.S. and our allies face in Syria will require patience and commitment; nevertheless, over time, we believe the United States has the tools and influence to achieve progress, and to ensure that it is well-positioned to safeguard our interests even should that progress prove elusive.

The Syria Study Group's report, which provides our full and detailed assessments and policy recommendations, is attached to this statement. We hope that the report can serve as a bipartisan guide for action to those ends.

[The material referred to above and below can be accessed at the following url:]  
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/Syria-Study-Group-final-report-2019.pdf>

As co-chairs of the Syria Study Group, we wish to thank Congress for supporting the creation of this Group, and special thanks to Senator Shaheen for her leadership in ensuring that the Syria Study Group legislation became law. We also thank the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) for its facilitation—USIP plays a unique role at the nexus of U.S. thinking and doing across many of the most complex global challenges.

Finally, we express our appreciation to the members of the Syria Study Group for their collegiality, contributions, and willingness to engage thoughtfully and critically with each other and with our interlocutors on this vital topic.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you so much for both of your comments today.

I am going to ask a few questions, and then we will turn to the Ranking Member, and then Senator Shaheen.

You mentioned briefly what the end view might look like. And I would love to have you elaborate on that. If you do not know where you are going, any road will get you there. And I am not sure we have a sense of where we are headed, where—what we hope to have done, what success would look like. And perhaps there is near-term success and longer-term success, but what do you think is a realistic objective for our involvement in Syria? Because, Mr. Singh, for instance, described the kinds of things that might happen, some calamitous outcomes. What is the positive outcome that we—and a realistic, positive outcome that our involve-

ment in Syria should be aimed to achieve? And you—either one of you can take, and both, can comment on that, if you would like.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you for that question, Senator.

So, first, we should highlight what we are not saying is a realistic outcome at this point in time. What we are not saying is that the removal of Assad as—and his regime in Damascus, is a realistic objective for U.S. policy at this point in time. So, what we are doing is calling, not for removal of Assad, but for meaningful changes in regime behavior as a way to address the underlying causes of conflict. The history of Bashar al-Assad in Syria is collaboration and cooptation with al-Qaeda. We know that he has used extremists, including ISIS, released them from his prisons when it suited his purposes, and, in the past, deployed them against U.S. forces in Iraq. So, that is number one.

And, number two, what we are talking about, in terms of defeating ISIS, is enabling the post-ISIS communities in north and eastern Syria the time and space to demonstrate an alternative model of governance to the Assad regime.

So, some of the clear changes that the Assad regime could implement that would suggest that he was open to meaningful concessions: ending force conscription, revising properly laws so that all Syrians would have access to real estate and to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in Syria, obviously to end arbitrary detentions, torture, release political detainees, and to engage in a meaningful way in the U.N.-facilitated political process.

Mr. SINGH. I would just add to that, Senator, that, you know, I think the only party in this conflict that has a clear vision for how they see it ending is Bashar al-Assad. He believes that he can reconquer all of Syria. I do not think that an independent analyst would say that he has the ability to do that, even with Russia and Iran's help, especially not while U.S. forces and our partners are there on the ground.

So the question, I think, is, How do you persuade him and those backing him that that is not a realistic option for them and that they have to accept compromise? Because right now, it does not seem that President Assad is willing to brook any kind of compromise when it comes to retaking Syria and sort of reestablishing his absolute rule.

And so, the U.S. strategy, as we can see it now, is aimed at trying to put pressure on him to get him to accept that reform is needed. My own view, I think the view of the group, is that that is the right strategy, but it is going to take more concerted efforts and leadership by the United States. As long as there is a question, for example, as to whether we are really committed to doing this, whether we are really committed to maintaining, for example, our military presence, even though it is quite small in Syria, I think that may give him the belief that he can wait us out.

Senator ROMNEY. Is your view that there will—that there—our objective should be, or the realistic objective is, that there would be a unified Syria, with representation of various groups and minorities, and so forth, some kind of a coalition government, of kinds—of sorts? Or is it your view that there need to be, if you will, two parts of Syria—one part held by one group of people, one part held by the other?

Mr. SINGH. Well, I would say, ultimately, Senator, what we would hope is that that choice would be left to the Syrian people themselves, rather than something that is imposed, you know, by us or by the international community.

I think that what we need to do—and this is sort of a—the broad strategy that the report lays out—is to have a strategy in place which aims at bringing Syria back together with a reformed government, maybe a decentralized system of government—so, for example, our Kurdish and Arab allies in the northeast would have a greater say in how they are governed—but that we also need to be postured in a way that allows us to protect our interests and keep and consolidate our gains, even if that kind of settlement proves elusive. That is, sort of, how we think the strategy needs to be pitched when it comes to this question.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Let me turn to Senator Murphy for his questions.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you both for all your work on this. Thanks, to Senator Shaheen, for instigating it.

So, it seems as if, over the course of U.S. policy with respect to Syria, we have had two overarching goals. One is, of course, to end the fighting. This is a war that has absolutely decimated the Nation and the families that live there. And, second, to delegitimize Assad. At one point, our stated goal was his removal. Today, I think you reflect a consensus within the administration that that may be unrealistic, but that we—but legitimizing him comes with great risk, given the abhorrent behavior that he is engaged in.

Those two goals, to me, seem mutually exclusive. And my worry is that the recommendations that you are making to us are just an invitation for the status quo to persist for years and years and years. If you accept that Assad is hanging around, then I am not sure why a limited U.S. military presence, a relatively slight uptick in humanitarian focus and diplomatic engagement is going to correct for his behavior, given that his patrons, who are going to stick with him through thick and thin, are making no such demands on him. And, in the foreseeable future, it does not appear as if we are going to have the ability to change Russia and Iran's mind. I have heard before this panel, over and over and over again, that Putin does not really care about Assad, that ultimately he will get him to do the right thing. That has never proved to be the case.

And so, address my worry that your report is just a slight variation on U.S. policy, that there is no real pressure point in your proposals that will change Assad's behavior, and, in the end, we are faced with a decision: we either apply enough pressure to overtake the Assad regime, or we accept that Assad is going to control this country and we pursue a policy to make the inevitable happen sooner rather than later to preserve the lives of thousands of people who will lose them if this just drags on and on.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator, for that question.

So, the first thing that—we asked ourselves the same questions about the policy. So, first of all, in advocating for continuing the military presence in northeastern Syria, we see this as a decisive form of leverage—if not right this minute, down the line—because northeastern Syria, which we hold through the SDF, is resource-rich, both from hydrocarbons and agriculture; and, number two, an-

other factor to consider here is, What are Russia's objectives? And Russia's objectives, as we understand them in our very wide consultations, is not the status quo, but actually to legitimize Assad and rehabilitate and reintegrate him into the international community, and to demonstrate to the international community that Syria is normalized by refugee returns and economic recovery. None of that can happen with the current U.S. tools on the table.

Most governments are not returning embassies to Damascus, given the status quo. Most that would engage in reconstruction contracts in Syria are not going to do that, for threat of U.S. sanctions. Russia knows that they need reconstruction assistance and aid that comes not just from the United States bilaterally, but from European governments, from international financial institutions, all of which, at this point in time, are following the U.S. lead in holding the line on those issues.

So, what we are saying is, over the time horizon, at this point in time, unlikely to change Assad's calculus, but does Russia tire of him and his regime and its current behavior at some point when it wants to be done, when Putin wants to be done with this current state of play in Syria? Perhaps.

And we also considered the alternative, which is, if we—that the withdrawal of U.S. forces, or of just allowing—acknowledging that he is going to stay, and not insisting, through our nonmilitary tools, on regime behavior change, would that actually save lives? And our conclusion was no, it will not. If U.S. forces leave northeastern Syria, we think Assad will go in with his security forces, with Russia and Iran, so we would have another Idlib-type situation on the local partners—have fought and bled and died in the counter-ISIS fight with us. And, number two, all of the Syrians living under his control right now also are not looking to him as a legitimate form of government.

I am going to give the rest of the time to Mike.

Mr. SINGH. I would just say, Senator, I want to—I would agree with one of your premises, but challenge another, which is to say, I think you are right that the Syria Study Group did not look at the administration's strategy and say, "This is a fundamentally flawed strategy. We need a new one." We looked at the alternatives, things like let us just throw up our hands and leave, let us accept Assad somehow and kind of just, you know, reengage with him and accept that he is there to stay. And we found them wanting. We found them worse than the strategy that we are pursuing.

What we did say about the strategy, though, is that, number one, it is hampered by our own seeming kind of hesitation about it, you know, this kind of—these sharp reversals and twists and turns, where, you know, today we are withdrawing, now we are back, and so forth. That has led other countries, which actually also support the strategy—and we heard from Europeans, from our allies in the region was, they also think it is the right strategy, they just wonder if we are committed to it. That is a problem. Second was the sort of matching of ends and means. You know, if we have these goals to, say, keep ISIS from returning to northeastern Syria, we have got to spend the stabilization money.

Where I would challenge your premise, Senator, though, is that I do not think our goal is to delegitimize Assad, per se. I think Assad has delegitimized himself. We did not take any territory from Assad. He lost it to his own citizens, in many cases, or it was taken—or it was lost because he could not govern it legitimately.

Senator MURPHY. I—

Mr. SINGH. I think what we are doing is, we are saying, to Russia, to Assad, and so forth—they want us to recognize his legitimacy, and we are saying, “Here are the conditions. We, the—not just the United States, but United States and our allies elsewhere, under which we would be doing that.”

Senator MURPHY. Yes, that, maybe, is not put well. I think our purpose is not to be seen as endorsing the illegitimate actions that he has taken.

My only quick comment is that I agree that both of the alternatives—withdrawal or engagement—are unsavory. I just worry that we will be back here with another Study Group Report recommending another slight variation on U.S. policy after thousands more have died.

And, to Ms. Stroul’s point about Russia, again, I have heard this before, that Russia wants to engage, wants to legitimize, wants to allow for Syria to reenter the global community. I think their actions in Venezuela, in Ukraine, and in Syria speak more likely to their goal of constant chaos than the reintegration of their partners into the world community. And I worry that this may be a misread of their intentions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, first of all, thank you both very much. Thank you for your great work as part of the Study Committee, and for the leadership that you have provided after—it took a very long time to get the report underway, so it is very satisfying to see the actual product and to hear you all talk about the recommendations in the report.

One of those recommendations, I am pleased to see we are, hopefully, in the process of actually accomplishing. There is language in the defense authorization bill for a Syria—for a—an ISIS detainee coordinator, which is something that is recommended in the report. So, hopefully, that will get through without any trouble. And I think it is sorely needed.

Last year, when Senator Graham and I visited, we—Syria—we went to several ISIS detention facilities in Hasakah, Ayn Issa, and Manbij. And—actually, it was Kobani, not Manbij—and, at that time, there were an estimated—between 500 and 1,000 foreign fighters in those camps. Today, the number has jumped to over 200—2,000. And that does not include all of those folks who are in detainee camps; the largest one, close to the Iraqi border. I was in Iraq in April, and they are very concerned about what happens in that camp, with—not just with any fighters who may be in the camp, but with all of the women and children who are being radicalized. So, what happens with those detainees is a huge concern, and what we have heard from the Syrian Democratic Forces

is that they do not have the will or the resources to continue to take ownership of the detainee facilities.

So, can you speak to what happens if the international community continues to refuse to repatriate the foreign fighters that have come from the West, and what the potential consequences of that are? Either one of you, or both.

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

One—the issue of ISIS detainees was exceptionally alarming, across the board, to all members of the group, and we explicitly dedicated a significant part of the report to raise the alarm on this issue.

You asked a question, Senator, about the 2,000 foreign fighters. And if they are not repatriated, there are two options. They either stay to fight another day in Syria, or they go to another theater of war to fight another day there. Those are the two options. The Syrian Democratic Forces not only lack the will, but they lack the capability. They have never dealt with a challenge like this before. We are providing some technological assistance.

Senator SHAHEEN. Right.

Ms. STROUL. So, the bottom line is, this is a threat that is only going to get worse. There is no possibility that they stay indefinitely in super-max-like facilities in northeastern Syria, especially given the uncertainty about the U.S. military commitment, going forward, and whether or not the SDF will stay together and committed to protecting these facilities.

And I would just like to add, since you raised this, the al-Hol IDP camp is family members of ISIS detainees, and that still does not count the tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian ISIS fighters—

Senator SHAHEEN. Right.

Ms. STROUL.—in other pop-up facilities all over northeastern Syria under SDF control. They do not have proper facilities. Often, these are repurposed schools or other civilian structures. Populations are being mixed. The situation, when some of these fighters are repatriated to Iraq, is not positive. Human Rights Watch has done incredible work on what happens when they go back to Iraq. And in Syria also, it is just regenerating this issue for another day if we do not have a consolidated and internationalized strategy now.

Senator SHAHEEN. And let me just—before you continue, Mr. Singh, let me just point out that, at least when we were in Iraq earlier this year, the Iraqis were not anxious to take back those Iraqis who are being held in the camps, because of all of the problems that they bring with them.

Mr. SINGH. So, Senator, I think that is a very important point, and it sort of gets to what I think is a larger issue. I mean, I served in the George W. Bush administration, and I do not think anyone wants to see a repeat of the Guantanamo experience. We all had, obviously, a very difficult time with that issue. But, the fact is, I feel as though we do keep running up against this type of issue, where we have these detainee populations, we know that we are, sort of—you know, that dangerous people are under detention, but our options for prosecuting them, repatriating them, are limited, and we are approaching it in an ad hoc way.

I will just say that I think this issue requires a sort of broader look, not just by the United States, but by the United States and our allies, because we have—despite having dealt with it now since, really, 9/11, we do not really have good solutions to it, I would say.

The other thing we do not have good solutions to, just very briefly, is this question of deradicalization. You have these 70,000 mostly women and children—most children, frankly—in the al-Hol camp, who have grown up in the worst possible conditions. And the fact is that we do not really know how to conduct this process of deradicalization. And that is, I think, again, something that is—that behooves us to get on top of.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Senator KAINE.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you for this report. Very important topic.

I want to ask you a question about a recommendation that is contained at page 47. One of the recommendations deals with trying to reduce or end Iranian influence in Syria, and eventually expel, in phases, Iranian influence in Syria. And you have a recommendation, “More specifically, the United States should continue to support Israeli strikes on Iranian assets inside Syria.” Talk to—explain that phrase. So, talk to me about what you guys know about U.S. participation in Israeli strikes in Syria, and what you mean by the recommendation that we continue to support those.

Mr. SINGH. Thank you, Senator.

So, yes. Look, the Israelis believe, and I think that we agree, having sort of gotten some briefings from them, that these strikes have been pretty important in limiting Iran’s activities inside Syria.

Senator KAINE. And describe the strikes. Because we have not had any testimony, in this committee or the Armed Services Committee, about U.S. participation in Israeli strikes in Syria. This is not a classified report, and I am just curious as to describing what you know about those.

Mr. SINGH. Right. And all I can tell you is what I know from open sources, Senator, chairman we were not privy to any classified information. I should say that from the outset. But, it has been pretty clear that the Israelis have focused on striking systems, trying to prevent the Iranians from creating a sort of missile network inside Syria that would allow them to create what they—the Israelis would consider a second or third, even, missile-to-missile—surface-to-surface, rather, front against them from Iran.

When it comes to U.S. support, Senator, I think what we mean there is more diplomatic support, political support. I do not know of any actual—what any kind of technical or military support we may have, or may have not, provided. But, I think the idea that, you know, we are not asking the Israelis, for example, to back off their coordination with Russia, we are not asking them to back off these strikes, because we see these as, frankly, probably the only way, so far, that Iran has been successfully deterred in Syria. I think sanctions can play a role. I think political pressure can play a role. But, there is—it seems to me that Iran is pretty determined

to entrench itself as deeply as it can in Syria—not just Syria, of course, also throughout the region, in Lebanon and Iraq and elsewhere.

Senator Kaine. So, other than public-source information, you have not been briefed on U.S. support—military support for the strikes that you referenced?

Mr. Singh. We have not, Senator, no.

Senator Kaine. Let me ask you about the humanitarian situation—the horrible humanitarian situation in Idlib. We have, from this committee, a bill that is pending on the Senate floor, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, that I hope—and it is bipartisan, and it is strongly supported by the committee—I hope we might move to act on it within the Senate. But, what additionally might we do in Congress to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and try to ease civilian suffering?

Ms. Stroul. Thank you for that question, Senator.

So, first of all, just a note on the Caesar bill. This bill is incredibly important to the Syrian and Syrian-American community who are invested in U.S. leadership on this—on the issue of Syria. And what the Caesar bill does that is different from the existing laydown architect of sanctions is, it would impose secondary sanctions on those that back the backers of the Assad regime. So, we are getting at those who knowingly assist Iraq, Russia, Russian mercenaries, like Wagner, Iranian militias, et cetera, those who may be considering investing in Syrian telecommunications, reconstruction, et cetera. If that bill passes, it sends a signal to all of that secondary and tertiary community to not engage. And it, again, holds the line against normalizing, rehabilitating, or legitimizing Assad and his regime or his backers.

And, in terms of the humanitarian situation in Idlib, number one, our report calls for stepped-up diplomatic pressure and leadership. Clearly, through the Astana process or through Russian-Turkish negotiations, there has been no pressure on Assad compelling enough for him to stop his offensive. There are 3 million civilians plus a “Dog’s Breakfast” of terrorist groups in Idlib. The consequences of continued offensive or a decision to take the entire province would be a new humanitarian catastrophe. Our report also talks about the reliable and credible threat of military force, not unilaterally, but in partnership with allies and partners, if the assault on civilians and civilian infrastructure continues.

Mr. Singh. I am—I would just add to that, Senator, that it seems to me that we face a situation where, should the Assad regime and the Russians press their attack on Idlib, you could have a new exodus of refugees. I am not sure that those NGO’s and aid organizations that are there across the border in Turkey or in Idlib are sufficiently funded or positioned to handle that. I think that that is going to require more funding from the international community. I think it is going to require some pressure on the Turks to let people through, not just the Turkish border, but there is also that Turkish-controlled region of Syria next to the Idlib Province. And that is something where I think Congress can play a role.

And then, finally, as we pressure countries like Turkey, which have taken a huge burden of refugees, I think we have to do our part, as well, here in the United States. And I am pretty concerned

at reports that next year's refugee admissions might be even lower than this year's refugee admissions. I think that is something that is just in our national interest to reverse.

Senator Kaine. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator Romney. Thank you.

We have time, I think, for another round of questions.

The real Chairman has—of the entire Foreign Relations Committee, has arrived, but he wants to listen in for a while before he might ask any questions, or just to make sure I do not totally mess up. So, I will begin with another round, here, of my own.

First of all, you speak about ISIS regrouping, about the 70,000 or so that are in camps that are being radicalized. I sometimes wonder why they are successful in radicalizing and we are not successful in normalizing, and why we do not have the capacity, apparently, to take a group of young people and parents, and so forth, and help them decide to become more accepting of others, more willing to provide freedoms to their fellow individuals.

But, my question is whether you have perspectives on how we can, if you will, help prevent ISIS from regrouping, as you suggested, and reestablishing itself, not necessarily based upon territory, but reestablishing itself as a weapon against the United States, against our citizens, against our friends around the world. What can we do—what should we be doing differently that we are not doing to combat the reemergence of ISIS?

Mr. Singh. Well, Senator, I think there are a few things we can do. And there is—I should say, that there is an Iraq part to this answer, which maybe I will leave aside, since we are the Syria Study Group. But, it is important to note that, I think, for ISIS's purposes, ISIS considers Iraq and Syria sort of part of one contiguous theater of operations. And so, what happens in Anbar, what happens in Iraq, and what the Iraqi government does is also important. And I think that is something that this committee will need to pay attention to.

Inside Syria itself, I would point to, let us say, three things that we need to, perhaps, do better than we have, or keep doing and make sure we do not stop. One is just keeping up the counterterrorism pressure on ISIS using U.S. forces. And so, that requires maintaining a military presence that can also then serve as an enabling presence for the air campaign which we have been carrying out. If that pressure eases, every military brief or every counter—every sort of CT brief or—who we spoke to, I would say, that will give new life to ISIS. And so, we need to keep that pressure on, keep the military presence.

Second, I think stability in northeastern Syria, stabilization, reconstruction in northeastern Syria, is very much in our interest, because that will help keep ISIS from returning. I think one reason that we are not good at deradicalization is that it really needs to be done by the communities themselves in northeastern Syria. Those communities are smashed to bits. And if there is not some stability and reconstruction, I do not think they will be able to take people back and sort of help them with their reintegration/deradicalization process. And they are the ones who really need to do it, with the help of some outside organizations.

Third, I do think we need to put pressure on our allies in the SDF, who are great, sort of, fighting partners for us, to now transition to be great, sort of, governing partners, not for us, but for the local communities there. There are reports of Kurdish-Arab tension that we received. There are, I think, some things that we need the SDF to do to really sever and disavow its links to the PKK, for example, to be inclusive in the way they govern so that you do not have discontent among local populations that ISIS can capitalize on.

Senator ROMNEY. Yes, thank you.

Ms. STROUL. I am just going to add a few additional things to what Mike said.

So, one consistent success across the previous administration and this administration is that the International Coalition to Defeat ISIS would not—was not just about U.S. military pressure and activities by the SDF, but all these other lines of effort, as well: counterterror financing, working on foreign fighters, shoring up information-sharing in intelligence and law enforcement channels across Europe, looking at the borders, where ISIS fighters come and cross and return, these issues, and also combating ISIS ideology, use of the Internet, and media operations. So, these are other—in addition to just looking at the Syria file, if we are talking about ensuring that ISIS is not able to reconstitute, we need to keep up pressure through the coalition that already exists on all of these other lines of effort, as well.

And finally, it goes without saying that the—one of the reasons that ISIS was able to move so fast across Syria is because it is a weak, ungoverned area without a legitimate government in Damascus. So, again, this goes back to, if the underlying causes of the conflict in Syria are not, at some point, addressed and resolved, ISIS will always have a pool of recruits in Syria.

Senator ROMNEY. Yes. Thank you.

I would note that, when there is a tragedy which occurs, where—in a different theater altogether, which is with regards to the Gaza Strip, for instance, where perhaps there is a—an attack that leads to a civilian death, or deaths, that that makes world news, that there are visual images of this. And yet, Assad is continuing to use chemical weapons to attack his own people in large numbers. This goes on and on and on. According to your report, it has not ceased. It is perhaps even greater than it has been in the past. What do we need to do to stop the chemical attacks, the weapons of mass destruction, which are being applied to the people of that country?

Mr. SINGH. Well, thank you, Senator.

In a way, yes, the chemical attacks are alarming; in part, not just because of the people they kill, but because they break the international taboo, which now has been thoroughly trodden on in Syria, against the use of chemical weapons in warfare. But, I think we have to acknowledge that sort of—it is not just the chemical weapons attacks; it is the barrel-bombing, it is the deliberate targeting of civilians, hospitals, schools, and so forth. And I think that it is important that the Assad regime, Russia, which is complicit in this, as well, pay a price for what it is doing. The United States, I think, under President Trump, has undertaken a couple of strikes in response to chemical weapons. I think that is good, frankly. I

think that practicing deterrence is necessary. But, it is probably not enough, at the end of the day. I think that exposing, especially, the complicity of other actors, like Russia, in these war crimes is important, and we have not done enough of that. And then ensuring that we have sanctions and other measures in place that can exact a price on these parties for what they have done is important, as well. And then, as we look to the future, there will need to be some process of accountability for what has happened.

I will say, I think it is also important to keep that deterrence in place. There has to be at least that concern, in the back of the minds of the Assad regime forces, that we may be willing, with our international partners, to strike again, should they target civilians en masse.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

My time is actually up.

Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Stroul, maybe wanted you to comment on something that Mr. Singh talked about, which is the effort to turn the STP into political partners, as well as military partners. It was striking to me that, for large periods of this conflict, while we had thousands of American soldiers on the ground, oftentimes we had one single State Department official on the ground. And we have had officials from START-Forward there, but they were withdrawn recently, and there are no plans to send them back. If we have learned anything over the course of the last 10 years, we have learned that our military, however capable fighters they are, are not particularly good at achieving political reconciliation in the Middle East. And so, how do we resource our personnel in Syria to make sure that we are effectuating the kind of political cooperation we need? I just think we have to come to the conclusion that 20-year-old soldiers are not likely going to be the ones to be able to figure these difficult questions out. We have got to get some experienced diplomats on the ground.

Ms. STROUL. Thank you, Senator.

You will be pleased to know that the Syria Study Group agrees with you. There is an entire section on this exact issue. We attempted to shed light very much on the need for more—an increased civilian engagement in the areas where our military is working with the SDF. We highlight specific issues with governance. The SDF needs to do better at allowing NGO's to operate freely, to allow independent media to conduct whatever oversight in reporting and journalism it wants to. There are a lot of issues here.

And one issue that I thought was great that we discovered in our consultations and briefings is that our U.S. military actually wants increased civilian engagement in northeastern Syria, so they would be happy to have more diplomats and more development practitioners and civilian experts working with them. Some elements of START-Forward have already returned. For sure, this platform needs to be expanded. The more civilians we can get in there, the better.

Two things that can happen right now:

One is, those civilians working on governance issues in north-eastern Syria are under a stabilization set of activities, not the humanitarian activities. We need to turn our stabilizing assistance back on, both for our resource reasons and also from a leadership perspective.

And, number two, there is a security issue here. So, we need to look at flexible ways in which our diplomats can work—and our development experts—can work safely and security with the—with our military on the ground.

Senator MURPHY. I appreciated the focus of the report on that question.

Mr. Singh, two Iran-focused questions for you:

One, what are the outcomes measurements we should be looking at as we foresee the role that Iran would play in a politically settled Syria, right? What—obviously, we know we cannot expel their influence, so what do we look to as to decide whether they have too much impact and input versus right-sized impact and impact?

And, two, I have heard some concerns that we are perhaps too hyperfocused on al-Tanf when thinking about preventing this land bridge through Syria. The expectation that by just controlling this, you know, one outpost, we are going to be able to stop the Iranians from moving people and goods through the country does seem to be a little farfetched. And so, speak to that concern, as well.

Mr. SINGH. So, on the second point, Senator, I guess all I can tell you is that I think U.S. officials and other officials around the region consider the U.S. presence at al-Tanf to be of strategic importance. I think, not just for blocking the land bridge, although it does play that role, to some extent, but also just for maintaining a kind of presence in that, sort of, swath of Syria which might otherwise be one where our adversaries would be able to do more than they are doing now. I would, I guess, encourage the committee to get a fuller briefing on that from U.S. officials who could go into more detail on it.

On the question of what are the right metrics for Iran, I think it is a tough question. Iran has had influence in Assad's Syria for a very long time. And, I think, realistically, they are going to maintain that influence. I think it is right, though, to think that we certainly do not want to see Syria dominated by Iranian forces or Iranian proxy forces. You have seen a real uptick, as far as I can tell from the reports I have seen, in, say, Hezbollah's presence there, in the creation of new Iranian-backed militias in Syria. And so, to insist that if—you know, as part of some political settlement, foreign forces are required to leave, that those be included as foreign forces, I think, is entirely appropriate.

In the near term, why—one of the reasons we focus on the Israeli action is, I think that at least we do not want to see Iran be able to turn Syria into sort of a forward military operating base, you know, to turn the Syrian-Israeli border into the kind of militarized border that the Israeli-Lebanese border is, for example, to forward-place missiles or missile factories in Syria. It is a—that is a more modest goal, but that is why we argue that it has to be approached in phases. Stop it from getting much worse, and then, as part of the political settlement, try to ensure that those forces they put there are forced to leave.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Singh.  
Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. I want to go back, I think, Ms. Stroul, to your comment. I think you said that some of the START-Forward team folks are beginning to move back into northeastern Syria. So, does the Study Group have an accurate—what you believe is an accurate understanding of the current status of our forces and the international forces in northeast Syria, and the stabilization funds in that area? And, if so, can you describe what that is?

Ms. STROUL. We will do our best.

As we understand it, there have been some security arrangements agreed upon between the Department of Defense and the Department of State to allow some elements of the START-Forward team to go back into Syria for specific periods of time to do civilian engagement. The issue, going forward in expanding that platform, very much relies on security and also availability of funding to do the projects that we would—that would make sense to do if we are going to have a civilian element of engagement.

Senator SHAHEEN. And when you say “the funding,” is that the stabilization funds that Congress has already appropriated?

Ms. STROUL. Yes. So, Congress has appropriated, as you very well know—

Senator SHAHEEN. And the administration has not spent—

Ms. STROUL. Correct.

Senator SHAHEEN.—and has put a hold on.

Ms. STROUL. Correct.

Senator SHAHEEN. Correct?

Ms. STROUL. \$200 million, yes. And when that \$200 million was put on hold, there was an aggressive diplomatic effort to encourage other governments to provide funding for stabilization activities. Two—three governments that did that were the Government of Saudi Arabia, the Government of the United Arab Emirates, and the German government. A lot of that money will run out very soon.

Senator SHAHEEN. So, one of the things that I am struck by in the report is that it says, and I am quoting here, “Throughout the Syria Study Group’s briefings and interviews, no one argued that withdrawing U.S. troops would make ISIS less likely to regroup or Iran less likely to entrench itself.” That is a quote.

So, I just want to put myself on record again as saying I am one of those people who believes we need to leave the footprint that we have of United States troops in northeast Syria, that we need to provide the stabilization funds, that that is an important step for us to reassure all of those people who are with us in this fight that we are committed. And, as the Study Group points out, our leaving does not help with ISIS regrouping or Iran’s presence there or Russia’s presence there, it makes it more likely that we are going to totally cede influence in Syria to those actors who we have committed to try and get out of the area.

So, that is a convoluted way of saying, I do not understand the current administration policy at all. And so, I very much appreciate what—the recommendations that you have in the report. And one of those, on page 48, is about Turkey and suggesting that one of the things that we could do, because Turkey is putting pressure on

northeast Syria, on that border, as you all pointed out—that one of the things that we could do is to help encourage Turkey, who has legitimate issues with the PKK in Turkey that have been historic, but they had been working on those issues, and to encourage them to continue those peace efforts to try and provide for some reconciliation there. And I have actually had some conversations with Turkish leaders that have suggested they might be open to that. Can you tell me if we have tried to do any of that, and where—who might take the lead in trying to facilitate some of those peace talks or open—reopening those talks?

Mr. SINGH. So, I can speak to that, Senator Shaheen.

I want to say one thing about your point about the stabilization funding and the military presence before I do, though, and that is to say I sympathize with the administration's desire to promote burden-sharing. And I think many people do. I am sure many people on this committee do. I think, though, the question is, How do you successfully do that? And I think the way you successfully do that is by providing some basic assurance to allies about some minimal level of U.S. commitment to being there—

Senator SHAHEEN. Right.

Mr. SINGH.—and, I think, being there militarily, most importantly. And I think that helps, then in their domestic debates, our allies make the case that we, too, should contribute to this. I think that is a harder case for them to make when they cannot be sure if we are going to be there tomorrow. That is just a fact. I think you have to pair leadership with the request for burden-sharing.

On the Turkey—

Senator SHAHEEN. I agree.

Mr. SINGH. On the Turkey PKK talks, I think a lot of it boils down to the politics inside Turkey and where, for example, President Erdogan sees, sort of, his best, kind of, advantage, in terms of the political forces within Turkey. And exactly where that would stand right now, I do not have a good answer to. But, we do have people, you know, like Ambassador Satterfield in Ankara, like Jim Jeffrey, our Syria Envoy, like the folks at EUCOM, who are very much following this issue, I think, on top of this issue, and are—and have the relationships and the expertise to followup on it. And I have confidence, frankly, in Ambassador Jeffrey and Ambassador Satterfield and our folks on the ground that they agree with this and will be pushing this, as well.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator ROMNEY. Senator Kaine, you are going to be the last questioner today. And, following your questions, we will dismiss so that we can go vote.

Senator KAINE. Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I was going to ask questions about Turkey. And I appreciate Senator Shaheen doing it. Let me just ask a question about one topic.

The—you used the phrase “Dog’s Breakfast” group of—groups in Idlib, and I wanted to come to that. So, we are—work primarily with the SDF, which the U.S. estimates is sort of split between Kurds and Arabs and Assyrians. And they have been very good partners for us. There are also anti-Assad elements that are not

partners with us—ISIS and al-Qaeda. And so, they are anti-Assad, but we have been battling them because of their terrorist connections.

What is your level of concern about the funding of those groups by Gulf State allies of ours? Is foreign funding of the terrorist groups in Syria still a problem? And there are not recommendations about how we deal with foreign funders of terrorism in Syria, but should we be concerned about that, or is that no longer a concern?

Ms. STROUL. Thank you for that question.

We should always be concerned about foreign funding for terrorist actors. As you know, the SDF and those partners are in northeastern Syria.

Senator Kaine. Right.

Ms. STROUL. They are not present in Idlib Province.

Senator Kaine. Right.

Ms. STROUL. And it is clear that both Haras al-Din and HTS are at Tahrir al-Sham, both present in Idlib process. One is more focused on galvanizing anti-Assad support, the other one sees the lack of a legitimate government in Idlib as a viable or fertile ground for external plotting. Right? External attacks both against the United States and our allies and partners. And clearly, that threat is of such a concern to the U.S. Government that Central Command has announced, in the past several months, two separate strikes on al-Qaeda in Syria leadership. So, we know that they are still there. And if they are as active, enough for CENTCOM to continue taking military strikes against them when it is possible, then they are still receiving foreign funding. And this, as I understand it, is a constant area of engagement between U.S. officials and all partners in the region. And it is not necessarily foreign-government-funded, and a lot of this is about foreign governments tightening up their own domestic laws and learning the technical expertise to look at that—those monetary transfers and put technical—

Senator Kaine. If the—

Ms. STROUL.—barriers—

Senator Kaine.—funding is not coming from foreign governments, but, instead, from individuals or groups within other nations, what is the sources—what are the nations that we have to be most concerned about and lean on to crack down on foreign funding of terrorist groups in Syria?

Mr. SINGH. I will say, Senator, my impression that is—is that a lot of these groups—I am sure there are foreign funding streams. I, frankly, do not have a lot of specific information on that to share with you. My impression, though, is that both ISIS and these groups in Idlib, because they have managed to take and hold territory—I mean, you know, Idlib is effectively controlled by HTS. And, to a lesser extent, you have got Haras al-Din and groups like that. But, that puts a lot of resources at their disposal that—you know, so they are less dependent on those outside sources of—

Senator Kaine. I understand. But—

Mr. SINGH. Yes.

Senator Kaine.—can you—in your consultation in writing this report, did you dig into the issue of to what extent these terrorist

groups that are counter to the interests of the United States receive foreign funding? Was that something that you looked at or consulted—

Mr. SINGH. We did more for ISIS than we did for those groups in Idlib. And so, I would say that, for the groups in Idlib, the extent to which they are currently receiving foreign funding, I do not—I just cannot speak to that in any great detail.

Senator KAINE. And then, how about ISIS?

Mr. SINGH. But, ISIS—I mean, our impression is that they are not very dependent at all on foreign funding, that, basically, by taking all that territory, robbing banks, you know, extorting citizens—

Senator KAINE. Right.

Mr. SINGH.—and so forth, they built up a financial, kind of, you know, cash that they still, to some extent, have access to today, amazingly enough. And so, this is a concern, that they not only have those people inside prisons and elsewhere that could serve as the new core of a new ISIS, essentially, but they have the money, as well.

Senator KAINE. All right, thank you.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Thanks, to our witnesses, for providing us with the benefit of your testimony, responses, and for this extraordinary Study Group Report that you provided to each of us. And I appreciate the work that has gone into it, and the effort that you all have made over such an extended period of time, and to your entire team for the work that has been performed. It is of great service to this committee, and hopefully to other members of the Senate, to our Foreign Relations Committee in total, but also to the administration.

For the information of members, the record will remain open until the close of business on Thursday, including for members to submit questions for the record.

And so, with thanks of the committee, the hearing is now adjourned. Thank you so much.

[Whereupon, at 3:35 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]