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Regional Implications of Syria Conflict  
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## INTRODUCTION

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, Members of the Committee—thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the civil war in Syria and its regional implications.

Now in its sixth year, the crisis has destroyed the fabric of life in Syria, killed at least 400,000 people, triggered the worst human displacement crisis since the end of World War II, put neighboring countries of first asylum under enormous pressure, exacerbated regional tensions, and helped swell the ranks of violent extremist organizations, most notably Daesh and al-Qaeda.

The conflict continues to be fueled by patrons and proxies with divergent interests and priorities at a time of unprecedented upheaval across the wider Middle East, as governments pursue new models of political rule and vie for new positions of regional influence. In short, the Syrian conflict presents one of the most complex challenges we have faced.

There is no way to look at what is happening on the ground in Syria and not feel profound grief and horror. In the midst of such tragedy, it is tempting to want a neat answer that ends the civil war and eases suffering overnight. But the challenges before us defy silver bullet solutions.

The United States is clear-eyed about our role and responsibility. The civil war in Syria is not about us, nor can it be solved solely by us. But it challenges our security and strategic interests—and moral values. So we are leveraging our country's unique capacity to mobilize others to end the civil war and contend with its consequences, even as we lead the international coalition to counter and ultimately defeat Daesh. We are also harnessing the power of diplomacy to facilitate aid to millions of Syrian civilians and reduce human suffering in any way that we can.

## DEFEATING DAESH

Our primary task is to defeat Daesh, which poses the most immediate threat to our citizens, our country, and our allies. We built an international coalition with 67 partners. We devised a comprehensive strategy to attack Daesh at its core in Iraq and Syria; dismantle its foreign fighter, financing and recruitment networks; stop its external operations and confront its affiliates. We are aggressively implementing that strategy. And we are succeeding.

Two years ago, Daesh was expanding its territory, building its status online as an irresistible magnet for budding violent extremists, and threatening to overrun even Baghdad and Erbil.

Today, momentum in the fight to defeat Daesh has shifted dramatically.

Our comprehensive campaign is systematically liberating territory from Daesh and denying its sanctuaries, cutting off its financing, stemming the flow of foreign fighters, combatting its narrative on

social media, allowing citizens to return home, and gutting the twisted foundation on which Daesh's global ambitions rest.

Daesh has not had a major battlefield victory in well over a year. We've eliminated tens of thousands of fighters and more than one hundred mid-to-senior level leaders. We've destroyed thousands of pieces of equipment and weapons. We've deprived Daesh of about 25 percent of the territory it once controlled in Syria and more than 50 percent of the territory in Iraq.

Now, we face a moment of strategic opportunity and urgency.

The opportunity is to effectively eliminate Daesh's geographic caliphate by taking back the last big pieces it holds: Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa and Dabiq in Syria. With support from the coalition, local forces are preparing to launch these operations in the period ahead. It will not be easy. The enemy is dug in and desperate, but the consequences for Daesh will be devastating—practically and psychologically. It will lose critical havens from which to organize, plot and prosecute attacks. It will be deprived of critical resources that finance its activities. It will be denied key destinations for foreign fighter recruits. And it will lose the entire foundation of its narrative—the building of a physical caliphate.

This opportunity is matched by urgency. As the noose around Daesh closes, we've seen them try to adapt by plotting or encouraging indiscriminate attacks in as many places as possible: a market in Baghdad, a nightclub in Orlando, a promenade in Nice, a cafe in Dhaka, a bustling airport in Istanbul. Potential recruits are being told to stay home and attack there. Surviving foreign fighters are being pushed out of Iraq and Syria and back to where they came from. This puts a premium on destroying Daesh's external operations network—especially in Raqqa, where many of these operations are plotted, planned, and directed.

In Iraq two weeks ago and in Turkey this week, I held discussions with our partners on the campaign plan to liberate Mosul, Dabiq, and Raqqa. It requires extraordinary coordination not only militarily, but also to ensure that we meet the humanitarian, stabilization and governance needs of newly liberated territory.

Moreover, the fight to hold ground, rebuild cities, restore services, clear schools and clinics of IEDs, care for displaced children, help families return home, hold Daesh accountable, provide genuine security, re-establish the rule of law—in other words, the fight to provide for the basic needs of a nation and prevent the emergence of Daesh 2.0 is only just beginning. The way we're doing this—working not only with a broad international coalition but also with local partners on the ground who know the territory and have a stake in stabilizing and governing it—helps ensure that Daesh's defeat will be sustainable and lasting.

As Iraqi forces and humanitarian workers prepare for the liberation of Mosul, this task must be matched by steps towards inclusive political and economic progress. We strongly support Prime Minister Abadi's leadership on reform and reconciliation. He has begun critical outreach to Sunnis, announced "zero tolerance" for human rights abuses, and reached an agreement with the Kurds to restart oil exports from Kirkuk.

All Iraqis—be they Sunni, Shia, Christian, Arab, or Kurd, or any other—have to be convinced that the state that they've been asked to fight for will stand up for their rights and their equities, that they can advance their interests more effectively as citizens of a united Iraq than as supplicants of other regional

powers or members of isolated competitive blocs in a fractured and weakened state. It will be this effort that ensures that Daesh once defeated stays defeated.

## RESPONDING TO SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Ultimately, we will not succeed in fully destroying Daesh until we resolve the civil war in Syria, which remains a powerful magnet for foreign terrorist organizations that thrive in the war's ungoverned spaces and draw strength from Asad's brutal destruction of his own nation.

We know from history and experience that civil wars end in one of three ways. First, one side wins. That is unlikely in Syria because as soon as one side gets the advantage, the outside patrons of the other side intensify their engagement to right the balance.

Second, the parties exhaust themselves. Typically, that takes a decade—or longer when a multiplicity of actors are involved. The civil war in Syria is entering year six, and it features a broad array of internal and external actors with different priorities.

Third and finally, civil wars end when external powers intervene either militarily or politically. But military intervention typically adds fuel to the fire, extending before ending the conflict and suffering. In the case of Syria, short of a wholesale invasion that no outside power has the interest to undertake, military intervention is not likely to be decisive. That leaves a political intervention, with key outside powers and patrons shaping, supporting and imposing a resolution. That is the effort we have been engaged in with Russia and other members of the International Syria Support Group, building on the foundation of the Geneva communiqués and U.N. Security Council resolutions.

The objectives and the processes we agreed to earlier this month were and are the right ones: a renewal of the cessation of hostilities, the immediate resumption of unhindered aid deliveries, the degradation of and focus on Daesh and Al-Qaeda in Syria, which is also known as Nusra, the grounding of the Syrian air force over civilian populations and the beginning of a Syrian-led negotiating track that can provide a pathway out of the conflict and make possible the restoration of a united and peaceful Syria. The United States, as Secretary Kerry has said, will make absolutely no apology for going the extra mile to try to stop the violence and ease the suffering of the Syrian people. It would be diplomatic malpractice to close the door on our larger goal of keeping alive the prospect of a political accommodation.

Tragically, the actions of the Asad regime and Russia, aided and abetted by jihadist spoilers, now risk fatally undermining this initiative—destroying the best prospect for ending the civil war. The September 19 attack on a UN humanitarian aid convoy in Big Orem near Aleppo was unconscionable. It has been followed by the regime and Russia renewing a horrific offensive in Aleppo that includes the killing of hundreds of innocent civilians and apparently intentional attacks on hospitals, the water supply network, and other civilian infrastructure.

Yesterday, Secretary Kerry informed the Foreign Minister of Russia that unless Russia takes immediate steps to end the assault on Aleppo and restore the cessation of hostilities, the United States will suspend U.S.-Russia bilateral engagement on Syria – including the establishment of the Joint Implementation Center. At President Obama's direction, we also are actively considering other options to advance our goal of ending the civil war and starting a political transition in Syria. We continue to maintain close links to the moderate opposition to support their viability.

## RESPONDING TO HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

The humanitarian catastrophe is a direct outgrowth of Asad's vengeance against his own people, and the human and financial cost of the conflict rises every day—for the region, for Europe, but most of all, for Syrians.

Eighty-one percent of Syria's population requires humanitarian assistance. 6.5 million Syrians are displaced in their own country. And 4.8 million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries—straining the capacity of generous host communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

Across the region, more than three million children are out of school, and many of their parents do not have access to legal employment. As a result, refugees are putting themselves at risk and traveling farther and farther afield in pursuit of a hope shared by parents the world over: a better future for their children.

The United States—as the world's leading humanitarian donor—has worked with heroic partners on the ground, including UN agencies and NGOs, to help strengthen the resilience of refugees as well as the communities that host them.

Since the start of the crisis, we have provided over \$5.9 billion in humanitarian aid to the response inside Syria and across the region, in addition to development assistance to Jordan and Lebanon, and we have worked with the World Bank to develop new types of affordable loans for middle-income countries grappling with protracted crises. We have provided nearly \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance to Iraq since 2014—including a recent tranche of funding to preposition food supplies and basic relief items ahead of Mosul's liberation.

Last week, President Obama convened 52 countries and international organizations for a summit during the UN General Assembly, where the nations made measurable commitments to increase humanitarian contributions by \$4.5 billion; double the number of refugees who are offered resettlement or other legal forms of admissions; and increase the number of refugee children in school globally and refugee adults working by one million each.

Galvanizing these resources is vital to helping shore up an international response system that, for all its extraordinary efforts, is overstretched, overburdened, and overwhelmed.

## CONCLUSION

It is important, as always, to remember how the crisis in Syria began—not with barrel bombs and chlorine, but with peaceful protests of citizens calling for change.

When nations squeeze out moderate voices, they create a vacuum filled by extremists. When people feel shut out, their sense of alienation and marginalization sharpens divisions that extremists love to exploit.

That is why the United States is working for a settlement in Syria that will give people viable choices other than supporting Asad for fear of terrorists or terrorists for fear of Asad.

That is why we support a peace process for Yemen that reunites the country rather than deepening sectarian divisions that have already left the nation vulnerable to exploitation by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Daesh.

It is why we are supporting Prime Minister al-Sarraj's efforts to achieve national reconciliation and build a unity government that represents all Libyan people and unites them against Daesh. Under Prime Minister al-Sarraj's leadership, Libyan ground forces have made significant progress against Daesh in recent months. The United States responded to the Prime Minister's request for help in this effort, conducting over 170 counter-Daesh airstrikes under Operation Odyssey Lightning. Daesh now holds less than one square kilometer of Sirte's city center.

It is why we have urged greater space for peaceful dissent in Egypt, as we offer assistance to increase Egypt's capabilities to counter a Daesh-affiliated insurgency in Sinai.

It can be hard to look back on the events in this region in the last few years and feel a great deal of optimism. But we must persist, and we intend to work with the coalition we've built to defeat Daesh, end the civil war in Syria, and bring about the political transition that the Syrian people want.

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