

# Chairman Menendez Opening Remarks at Hearing on Syria Spillover, Ukraine Update

**WASHINGTON, DC** – U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, delivered the below statement, as prepared for delivery, at today's hearing on "Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East and Ukraine Update."

"This hearing will come to order. I want to thank Deputy Secretary of State Burns and all of our panelists for being here to provide their perspective on the increasingly violent spillover from the ongoing conflict in Syria, and to hear from the Deputy Secretary on the implications of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. We appreciate you accommodating the Committee to address both issues.

As we enter year-three of the Syria crisis, headlines coming out of the region are no longer limited to the violence within Syria – but to the increasing spread of violence across Syria's borders – especially into Lebanon and Iraq.

Of great concern is the proliferation of Al Qaeda affiliates and splinter groups, and the increasingly sectarian rhetoric fueling the increased violence that offers new opportunities for Al Qaeda to gain footholds in local communities. It opens the door for an Iranian sponsored terrorist network to justify their presence as the protector of the region's Shias while bolstering the Assad regime and antagonizing Arab states.

The spillover from Syria is dangerous and troubling. In Lebanon there's been an alarming uptick in high-profile bombings – many claimed by the Al Qaeda affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades. At the same time, Hezbollah, purportedly protecting the Lebanese Shia community, is now overextended in Syria, protecting the Assad regime.

From where I sit, the region is becoming increasingly unstable, increasingly violent, and increasingly sectarian.

Having said that, if Syria is the 600-pound gorilla in the room, Ukraine is the 800-pound gorilla – and we can't ignore it, nor can we ignore that Russia is common element in both countries.

Russia's support for Assad in Syria and the Russian invasion and occupation of parts of Ukraine make clear that Putin's game isn't 21st century statesmanship, but 19th century gamesmanship.

The brave protestors in Maidan Square – having lived under Russia's mantle for years – stood their ground because they understood that their fight wasn't just

with their government's corrupt leaders, but with Vladimir Putin for the very future of their independent nation.

Putin's has cast aside both international law and his nation's own commitments to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

We need a policy that checks and counters a Russia intent self-centered nationalistic and imperialist policies and that adheres to no law – not international law nor even those commitments it has made personally.

Today our concern is for Ukraine. Tomorrow, it could again be for Georgia or perhaps Moldova, two nations waiting to finalize their Association Agreement with the European Union, a process Ukraine was engaged in too to the displeasure of the Russian government.

I welcome the Administration's expeditious response to the situation in Ukraine – the pledge of assistance in the form of loan guarantees – which this Committee intends to endorse in legislation next week – and today's Executive Order restricting visas, freezing assets, blocking property under U.S. jurisdiction, and preventing American companies from doing business with any individual or entity identified by the administration that threatens the peace, security, stability, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of Ukraine or contributes to the misappropriation of state assets of Ukraine; or purports to assert governmental authority over any part of Ukraine without authorization from the Ukrainian government in Kyiv.

This flexible tool will allow the U.S. to target those directly responsible for the Crimean crisis and will further put Putin and his allies on notice that Russia's actions are not without consequence. The Committee is prepared to codify this action and potentially provide the President with further authority to respond to this situation as it develops.

Putin's game of Russian roulette has pointed the gun at the international community's head. I believe this time Putin has miscalculated. And I believe it is essential we do not blink.

The unity of purpose displayed at the U.N. Security Council, by the European Union, and the G-7 nations in support of Ukrainian autonomy and in opposition to Russian authoritarianism demonstrates the world's outrage and I believe serves as a call to action.

Before I introduce our panelists, let me turn to Senator Corker for his opening remarks.”

## **First Panel**

“On our first panel we are pleased to have with us Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns. We look forward to your testimony, Mr. Secretary.

And we welcome our third panelist – Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Derek Chollet.

Also with us is Director for the National Counterterrorism Center, Matt Olsen.

Thank you all for being here today.”

### **Second Panel**

“Let me introduce our second panel.

We have with us Daveed Gartenstein-Ross for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute of Near East Policy.”