



STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT MENENDEZ

August 17, 2018

RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

M. President,

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on “Russia’s Role in Syria and the Broader Middle East,” that had been scheduled for last week has been postponed. Therefore, I rise today to raise awareness on the danger and urgency of the moment, given the impending humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib, Syria and the refusal of the Trump Administration to impose meaningful costs on Russia for protecting Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

On Syria, Congress again finds itself in a situation where we often hear more from the press than we do directly from the Administration. Last week many of us read with interest in the Washington Post a report that President Trump agreed to a new strategy for Syria that indefinitely extends the U.S. military presence and supports a major diplomatic push to end the conflict. This same article also indicated that the Administration views the military campaign against ISIS as nearly complete, and that U.S. goals have now shifted to Iran’s presence in Syria given the doubts that Russia is willing and capable of ejecting Iran from Syria.

Congress and the American people deserve to hear directly from the Trump Administration whether in fact this is our new strategy. When this hearing is rescheduled, I expect the Administration to explain in detail its proposed diplomatic engagement and the plan for U.S. forces in Syria after ISIS is defeated. I also want to know what specific tools the Administration proposes to use to:

- (1) Ensure the removal of Iran from Syria,
- (2) Compel the Assad regime to cease, and Russia to cease support for, the bombing, torture, and gassing of Syria civilians, and
- (3) Hold Assad's brutal regime to account for its crimes against the Syrian people, as well as consequences for the Kremlin's support of this brutal regime.

In my view Russia is fully culpable for perpetuating the war in Syria and rendering that country persistently unstable, a magnet for violent extremists and a direct threat to Israel.

Now more than ever we must shine a light on Russia's role in perpetuating the conflict in Syria, as well as Russia's role in the region. And while we still await details on the disastrous and embarrassing Helsinki summit between

Presidents Trump and Putin, I am deeply concerned that for the Syrian people Helsinki made a bad situation worse.

I fear that President Trump did not raise Russia's war crimes in Syria, such as Russian aircraft dropping Russian bombs in densely populated areas of Syria.

I doubt that President Trump called Putin out for violating the de-escalation agreement in southern Syria, agreed to last year by the United States, Russia, and Jordan.

I am skeptical that President Trump pressed Putin to commit to delivering Assad to participate in good faith at the UN-led process for a negotiated settlement along the lines of Security Council Resolution 2254.

I doubt that President Trump insisted that Russia break its sinister alliance with Tehran that has enabled the survival of Assad in Syria and threatened the security of Israel.

And I see no indication that the Administration is using any of the tools Congress has given it - including mandatory sanctions provisions in the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 (CAATSA)—to change the status quo in Syria or prevent the looming assault on Idlib province, where Russia is already engaged in a bombing campaign alongside its client Assad.

It seems to me that the Administration is taking a backseat – or maybe has gotten out of the car entirely – while the Assad-Russia-Iran alliance is left unchallenged to starve, torture, and bomb the Syrian people into submission.

And while the humanitarian dimensions of this tragedy are reason enough for the Administration to take a different approach, there are significant strategic consequences for allowing or enabling an Assad-Russia-Iran partnership to solidify as a salient feature of the landscape of the Middle East.

But instead of U.S. leadership shaping the region we have instead Vladimir Putin – the man who has long ensured Bashar al-Assad’s survival – flying around the Middle East completing deals for base access and weapons sales. And rather than utilize the threat of CAATSA sanctions to compel U.S. partners in the Arab world to cease significant purchases from the Russian defense and intelligence sectors, the Administration instead sought a national security waiver for this provision of the law.

While the United States has backed away from its key leadership role in addressing the region’s conflicts, governments in the Middle East rolled out the red carpet for Putin and flocked to Russia during the World Cup to sit by his side and sign agreements for increased cooperation.

Putin can only take away one message from this posture by the Trump Administration – Russian activities and influence in the Middle East will not be challenged in any meaningful way by the United States.

With so many vital U.S. national security interests at stake in the region—including the safety and effectiveness of our troops fighting ISIS—this leadership vacuum risks outcomes that serve only Russia’s interests, not our own.

While President Trump may believe that Russian hegemony in the Middle East and Russian partnership with Iran is not a cause for concern, I am deeply alarmed that we are on the road to a series of outcomes in Syria that will be as catastrophic in human terms as they will be strategically ruinous for U.S. interests and values for years to come.