

Testimony

Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

U.S. Policy Toward Syria Post-ISIS

Statement of

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. We have made significant progress since 2014, when ISIS first emerged, sweeping across Iraq and Syria, inflicting suffering on thousands of civilians in the region and beyond. However, our job is not done, and we remain focused on defeating ISIS and other terrorist organizations, countering Iranian influence, preventing the use of chemical weapons, ensuring the safety of Syria's neighbors, and ultimately resolving the Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis through the de-escalation of violence and a political resolution in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

This Administration is making great strides towards the enduring defeat of ISIS. On December 9, Prime Minister Abadi declared the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq, and although Coalition and Coalition-backed forces are still fighting ISIS in Syria, we have made significant progress against the terrorist organization's control of territory. Coalition-backed efforts have liberated over 98 percent of territory previously controlled by the terrorist organization, and now, over seven-and-a-half million people are free from ISIS terror in Iraq and Syria.

While Russia may consider the fight against ISIS in Syria over, the United States and our Coalition partners do not. ISIS' loss of physical control over towns in Syria and Iraq does not mean the end of ISIS, nor does it signal the end of the coalition. Hard work remains to ensure ISIS' enduring defeat. We will continue to root out - and destroy - the remaining pockets of ISIS and other terrorist groups that threaten our homeland and our allies. The United States is committed to the total and enduring defeat of ISIS, al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups in Syria and the region, ensuring that they cannot return.

While defeating ISIS remains the reason we need to stay in Syria, our continued presence presents additional benefits. A premature U.S. departure from Syria would enable ISIS to return, place the U.S. strategy in Iraq at risk, increase the risk to Syria's neighbors, and enable Iran to expand its malign influence throughout the region, especially to threaten Israel through Iranian backed proxies like Hizballah. Our presence enables us to consolidate gains, stabilize liberated areas, alleviate human suffering, prevent ISIS resurgence, and help enable diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.

In eastern Syria, the State Department and USAID-led early recovery efforts are designed to help consolidate military gains, provide life-saving assistance to conflict-affected Syrians, and stabilize liberated areas. With support from colleagues from the Department of Defense, State Department and USAID programs are addressing humanitarian needs, removing ISIS-placed mines and improvised explosive devices, supporting local early recovery efforts and the restoration of essential services, helping ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS or other extremists, and setting conditions conducive to the voluntary return of displaced Syrians.

As this Committee knows, Syria faces more challenges than Iraq when it comes to stabilizing areas liberated from ISIS. Unlike in Iraq, we do not have a trusted government partner to work with in Syria; we are not working and will not work with or through the Assad regime. Until there is a credible political process that can lead to a government chosen by the Syrian people—without Assad at its helm—the United States and our allies will withhold reconstruction assistance to regime-held areas.

In Syria, our humanitarian interventions save lives while our stabilization efforts seek to address locally identified priorities in areas liberated from ISIS, including clearance of explosive remnants of war, to include thousands of ISIS-laid IEDs, and restoration of essential services and livelihoods. That means re-establishing power and water services, restoring healthcare facilities, and refurbishing schools. State Department and USAID personnel on the ground are working with a variety of local Syrian partners in pursuit of these efforts to enable the safe and voluntary return of Syrians to their homes in the hope that these communities can return to normal life after ISIS.

The amount of improvised explosive devices in Raqqa city is unprecedented. U.S.-funded de-mining teams work with Raqqa residents trained to remove explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices from critical infrastructure in priority areas of the city, while rubble removal teams clear streets. These efforts have allowed water-pumping stations to return to service and schools to re-open, and have paved the way for follow-on stabilization activities. Concurrently, we have supported 110 Syrians in demining training, which will bolster the local capability to support recovery efforts. Because of that work, tens of thousands of civilians have returned to Raqqa already to initiate the city's recovery from ISIS.

Thanks to the generosity of Congress and the American people, the United States provided more than \$1.5 billion in FY 2017 in humanitarian assistance to refugees who fled their countries and those displaced internally by the conflicts in Syria. This funding brings total U.S. humanitarian assistance supporting Syrians in-country and around the region to nearly \$7.5 billion since the start of the Syria crisis. This aid helps at least 4 million Syrians in need every month inside Syria.

On July 9, over six months ago, the United States, Jordan, and Russia made an arrangement to reduce violence in southwest Syria. This ceasefire effort has largely held, resulting in a significant reduction in violence – a necessary condition to increase deliveries of humanitarian assistance. On November 8, the United States, Russia, and Jordan signed a Memorandum of Principles (MOP) in Amman, Jordan, which built on and strengthened this existing ceasefire. This Memorandum further defines three principles central to this effort. First, the MOP gives greater definition to the rules and mechanisms to monitor and strengthen the ceasefire and related efforts like humanitarian assistance, which are essential to its success. Second, the MOP reflects the trilateral commitment that existing governance and administrative arrangements in opposition-held territory will be maintained during the transitional phase, essential to complement a future Syrian political transition. Third and most importantly, the MOP enshrines the commitment of the United States, Russia, and Jordan that non-Syrian foreign forces, including Iranian and Iranian proxy forces, such as Hezbollah, must withdraw from areas within the ceasefire lines. This last principle is key to determining whether we can work with Russia to deescalate violence in Syria and find a solution to the conflict that honors the will of the Syrian people.

But, this third requirement is meant not only to test Russia, but also to diminish the influence of Iran and its proxies in Syria and protect the borders of our allies, Israel and Jordan. We seek to not only diminish Iranian foreign influence in Syria generally, but to protect our allies from the very real threat Hezbollah poses in southwest Syria to our allies.

On November 11, President Trump and President Putin issued a Joint Statement on the margins of APEC in Da Nang, Vietnam, endorsing this MOP and affirming

both the U.S. and Russian commitment to UN Security Resolution 2254, to ensure a unified, pluralistic, and free Syria. The Presidents affirmed their commitment to Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character, as defined in UNSCR 2254, and urged all Syrian parties to participate actively in the Geneva political process and to support efforts to ensure its success. Russia, as a backer of the Assad regime and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, bears the responsibility to uphold Putin's commitments.

On November 29, UN-led negotiations in Geneva restarted for the first time since July with a reformed Syrian opposition representation. Over two weeks, Syrian opposition and United Nations representatives tackled core issues. While Russia had to coerce the Syrian regime to attend the meetings, the opposition came prepared and ready to contribute. Constructive participation by the Syrian opposition delegation contrasted starkly to the obstructionism and procrastination of the Syrian regime delegation. We call on the regime's main supporter, Russia, to pressure the regime to work seriously toward a political resolution to this conflict or face continued isolation and instability indefinitely in Syria.

In the end, these efforts are all in support of full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a new Syrian constitution and UN-monitored elections – elections in which all Syrians, including the 5.4 million refugees in the Syrian diaspora, can vote and have their voices heard.

We believe a stable Syria will require new leadership in Damascus with the departure of Bashar al-Assad and his family, who have inflicted suffering and countless deaths, including the heinous use of chemical weapons, including sarin gas, against their own people. The United States strongly condemns the use of

chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, at any time, whether by States or non-State actors. We will continue to press for accountability for the use of chemical weapons by anyone through all appropriate means, including through the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the United Nations Security Council.

A meaningful and genuine political transition in Syria would provide better lives for the Syrian people and an end to the brutal 47-year dictatorship of the Assad family. Bashar al-Assad is a magnet for terrorism, and is incapable of democratically leading the whole of Syria. Instability, violence, and displacement will only flourish under his regime. To ensure a peaceful departure of power, it can only occur as part of a Syrian-led political process—one that allows the entirety of the Syrian people, including the millions displaced by this horrific conflict, to determine their future free from threat, intimidation, and all foreign interference. The United States and our allies have come to Russia with a path toward a Syrian political solution many times. Because of its influence on the Syrian regime, Russia must join the international community and support this way forward to end the conflict in Syria.

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, Syria is a complicated landscape with multiple stakeholders in and outside its borders, but our policy is very clear. In Syria, we are working to defeat ISIS, de-escalate violence, and support a political resolution through UN-led talks that lead to free and fair elections as stipulated in UNSCR 2254. In doing so, we seek to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and protect our allies. The Syrian people deserve an end to this conflict. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I welcome the opportunity answer your questions.