

Joint Statement of the Co-Chairs of the Syria Study Group

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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 nine 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.

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.