

**Testimony of
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U.S. Department of State
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“The Path Forward on U.S.-Syria Policy: Strategy and Accountability”
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the Committee, for the past year this Administration has led our allies and partners in crafting a common diplomatic approach to Syria and pursuing concrete actions to improve the lives of Syrians and protect vital U.S. national security interests.

Let me be frank with you. After more than a decade of conflict, prospects remain limited for advancing a political solution worthy of the Syrians who bravely demanded change more than ten years ago. Syrians today are also hungrier and more impoverished than they have been at any point in this conflict, with over 12 million food insecure.

The ultimate responsibility for this continued tragedy rests with Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, who brought his country to this terrible state and remains intransigent, refusing to provide Syrians any hope for a better future.

This Administration has **led international coordination** on Syria in the face of this intransigence. We have focused on bettering conditions for Syrians, pursuing justice for those wronged by the regime, and mitigating the risk to Syria’s neighbors of the effects of this disastrous conflict.

We believe that pursuing the following priorities: defeating ISIS and al Qaeda; increasing access to humanitarian aid; keeping violence down by maintaining ceasefires; and promoting accountability for the Assad regime’s atrocities are critical steps on the path to advancing a just political settlement to the Syrian conflict consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We continue to strongly support UN Special Envoy Pedersen’s efforts to reach a political resolution to the crisis.

And of course, we remain absolutely committed to working relentlessly to bring home U.S. citizens wrongfully detained or held hostage in Syria, to include Austin Tice.

In terms of reducing suffering on the ground inside Syria -- humanitarian needs are higher than ever, compounded by the COVID 19 pandemic, historic levels of drought, decades of mismanagement and corruption by Assad and his cronies, and the terrible effects on global food security of Putin’s war on Ukraine.

Expanding humanitarian access throughout Syria is central to our strategy. Last year, we successfully negotiated with members of the UNSC, including Russia, to adopt UN Security Council Resolution 2585 and keep the Bab al-Hawa border crossing open, allowing the continued delivery of life-saving aid to over three million people in NW Syria. We are now

working closely with Security Council members, UN leadership, and allies to maintain and expand the cross-border mandate before UNSCR 2585 expires this July.

This Administration has also been committed from day one to the enduring defeat of ISIS -- preserving our military presence in the northeast and coalescing international support to increase stabilization funding. We have pressed countries of origin to repatriate their nationals from northeast Syria, including foreign terrorist fighters. In areas liberated from ISIS, stabilization assistance and new economic opportunities will help address growing economic insecurity; restore essential services; bolster livelihood opportunities; and support critical initiatives against malign influence, be it Iran or its proxies

On existing ceasefires – I would note that we are deeply concerned by recent increased rhetoric from Turkey about potential escalation in Northern Syria and we have stepped up our diplomatic engagements to try and continue to de-escalate any tensions. At the same time, I would note that in the past two years, violence in Syria is at its lowest ebb compared to other periods in this decade-long conflict and we have worked to keep it low by pressing armed actors to avoid escalation and keeping ceasefire lines calm, speaking out forcefully against any threat of renewed violence.

The Administration is also committed to **promoting accountability and justice**. An enduring peace and stability in Syria will not be possible without justice for the Syrian people. I am mindful your next panel will include testimony from the brave Syrian whistleblower known as the “Gravedigger,” whom I had the honor to host at the White House and whose harrowing account of atrocities in Syria shook me to the core. We will continue to promote accountability for the Assad regime’s atrocities and to support the brave individuals working to bring Assad and his regime to justice.

Our sanctions, including those under the Caesar Act, are critical elements in the fight for accountability. We are grateful to Congress for the bipartisan efforts to broaden our toolkit. We will continue to use all our tools, including the Caesar Act, to press the Assad regime. In July and December of 2021, we imposed sanctions on groups and individuals who undertook human rights abuses in Syria, including in prisons and detention centers, as well as through chemical weapons attacks.

All of our efforts also support wider security and regional stability, to offset the deleterious effects Assad’s war has had on Syria’s neighbors. Iranian forces in Syria, including the IRGC, as well as Hizballah and Iran-backed armed groups, threaten the security of our allies and partners, including Israel and Jordan, and play a destabilizing role in Syria. The United States wholly supports Israel's ability to exercise its inherent right of self-defense. We know that until Iran’s military and intel networks, its weapons inside Syria, are reduced, the crisis in Syria will continue unabated. Similarly, we recognize and are deeply grateful to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan for hosting millions of Syrian refugees; we remain committed to working with them to mitigate the spillover effects of Syria’s war.

Finally, while I have outlined the necessary building blocks for regional stability and prerequisites to building a road to a political resolution in Syria -- I want to be clear on what we

have not done in Syria, and what we will not do, which is: support efforts to normalize or rehabilitate Bashar al-Assad; lift sanctions on the regime; or change our position opposing reconstruction in Syria until there is authentic, enduring progress towards a political solution.

Bashar al-Assad and the coterie around him remain the single largest impediment to that goal. They must be held accountable for the actions they have undertaken that violate international law, even as we work to find ways to advance our other priorities.

I would be happy to take your questions at this time and discuss any of these points in more depth.