

STATEMENT OF
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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
“THE PATH FORWARD ON U.S.-SYRIA POLICY: STRATEGY AND
ACCOUNTABILITY”

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Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee. It is an honor to testify before you today, alongside Assistant Secretary Leaf, to discuss the Department of Defense (DoD) mission in Syria and how DoD’s activities align with the United States’ whole-of-government Syria policy.

In Syria, the Department is committed to maintaining its military presence to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS. DoD works by, with, and through vetted, capable partner forces in northeast Syria and in the vicinity of al-Tanf Garrison in southern Syria to fulfill this mission. DoD also remains capable of rapidly deploying forces to conduct operations in other areas of Syria, exemplified by the February 2022 raid that resulted in the death of former ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. In both Syria and Iraq, the United States operates as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which brings together 80 nations and five international organizations to provide an array of military capabilities, funding, and political support.

Even as much of global attention has moved on from ISIS since the defeat of its so-called caliphate, ISIS remains a real and potent threat. The group operates primarily in small rural-based cells focused on conducting ambush attacks against security forces and plotting periodic high profile attacks in urban areas. ISIS also tries to infiltrate population centers by exploiting

sectarian and other demographic tensions, including by targeting community and tribal leaders for assassination. ISIS maintains the intent to direct, support, and inspire attacks across the globe and continues efforts to rebuild its organization and re-establish a viable insurgency to regain territorial and social control.

In northeast Syria, the Coalition partners with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who have proven a capable and dependable partner to maintain pressure on ISIS. The SDF continues to demonstrate increased capabilities to plan and conduct unilateral Defeat (D)-ISIS operations, including disrupting smuggling networks and conducting capture/kill raids on improvised explosive device (IED) facilitation and assassination cells, clearance operations, wide-area security operations, and route clearance activities. Coalition presence and support remains critical to enabling SDF operations. In particular, the SDF relies on Coalition air support, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and benefits from Coalition advice and support to maintain pressure on ISIS.

DoD is authorized to provide assistance to vetted partners in Syria under Section 1209 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, as amended, and through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) appropriation. CTEF remains an essential tool for enabling the SDF and other vetted partners to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS. Current CTEF support to vetted Syrian partner forces include basic life support services, stipends, detention facility construction support, guard and security force training, and sustainment.

Despite the Coalition's progress in maintaining pressure on ISIS, military tools alone cannot achieve the group's enduring defeat. DoD's counterterrorism activities are a critical pillar nested within a State Department-led whole-of-government and Coalition strategy to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. The international community must do more to stabilize areas liberated

from ISIS, by addressing the economic and social conditions that facilitated ISIS's rise. Moreover, long-term solutions are urgently needed for the over 10,000 ISIS fighters in SDF custody and the approximately 60,000 displaced persons in al-Hol and al-Roj camps. Through its military presence, DoD supports civilian-led humanitarian and stabilization efforts to address these underlying causes of instability.

The Department is placing urgent emphasis on enabling the SDF to provide for the humane and secure detention of fighters in SDF custody. Seeking to reconstitute its ranks, ISIS executed a complex attack in Hasakah in January 2022 on the largest SDF-managed facility for detained ISIS fighters in northeast Syria. The SDF was able to foil ISIS's efforts due to its swift response to the attack, which resulted in numerous SDF casualties. Congressional support on this issue is critical – particularly the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act waiver for select funding caps that otherwise limit the amount DoD can spend on D-ISIS related construction projects in Iraq and Syria. The goal is to ensure that the SDF can securely and humanely maintain custody of ISIS detainees, instead of relying on re-purposed school houses and other buildings in which a majority of detainees are currently held. DoD is also working with the SDF to grow and professionalize the guard force responsible for securing these facilities. These new facilities will also help enable critical U.S. stabilization priorities, to ensure detainee access to medical care, and provide youth detainees with distinct programming and facilities to address their safety and rehabilitation.

Regarding al-Hol, the Department continues to work with the SDF to disrupt ISIS activity and networks that threaten the camp's residents as well as the broader population of northeast Syria. This support includes efforts to reinforce the camp's physical security architecture, increase the number of security forces operating in the camp, and ensure those forces are

appropriately trained to provide security. These improvements will also enable greater access and services for camp residents, ameliorating the acute humanitarian crisis. As part of this effort, DoD is working closely with interagency partners, including the State Department, to facilitate coordination with camp administration and nongovernmental organizations.

The most durable solution to the challenges at these detention centers and displaced persons camps is for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and where appropriate, prosecute their nationals residing in northeast Syria. To this end, DoD supports State Department efforts by providing logistical support to countries seeking to bring their nationals home. Furthermore, recognizing that Iraqis comprise a majority of the population at al-Hol, DoD continues to support State Department efforts to work with the Government of Iraq to accelerate the pace of its repatriation efforts.

Syria is one of the most crowded and contested military operating environments in the world. Numerous potential spoilers could slow or jeopardize progress on the D-ISIS campaign in Syria, including attacks from Iran-aligned militia groups, escalation with Russian forces, and the potential for a new Turkish offensive in northern Syria.

First, Iran enables its aligned militias in Iraq and Syria to conduct indirect fire and unmanned aerial system (UAS) attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces. Attacks against DoD personnel are unacceptable and the Department will not hesitate to take necessary and proportionate action in self-defense to protect our service members. Iranian forces and their partners and proxies play a destabilizing role in Syria and also threaten the security of our allies and partners, including Israel. The United States recognizes Israel's inherent right to take actions necessary for self-defense. Until the presence of the Iranian military and its weapons is reduced, regional instability will persist.

Second, Syria remains the one area in the world where U.S. and Russian forces operate in close proximity on a daily basis. The Coalition maintains air and ground de-confliction channels with the Russian military to protect Coalition forces and reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation or miscalculation. The United States continues to urge Russia to adhere to mutual de-confliction processes and not to take any provocative action. Movements and interactions that are not properly de-conflicted are a concern, but the professionalism of U.S. service members in Syria has been essential to preventing these interactions from escalating. Russia's military campaign in service of the Assad regime has enabled brutal violence and human rights abuses against the Syrian people, including the deaths of innocent civilians, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, and the destruction of large parts of the country.

Finally, Turkish senior leader comments regarding renewed operations in northern Syria risk a negative impact to the D-ISIS mission. The United States expects Turkey to uphold the October 17, 2019, Joint Statement, in which Turkey committed to halt offensive operations in northeast Syria. Any escalation risks disrupting D-ISIS operations, impacting the safety of the civilian population, and jeopardizing the security of SDF-managed detention facilities holding ISIS fighters. The United States recognizes Turkey's legitimate security concerns – and regularly communicates to all sides the need to deescalate tensions. However, any new offensive could further undermine regional stability and put at risk U.S. forces and the Coalition's campaign against ISIS.