

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Sub-Committee on the Middle East and North Africa

U.S. Policy Toward Syria (Part II)

Statement of

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey

Special Representative for Syria Engagement

November 29, 2018

Chairmen Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished Members of the Sub-Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. The Syrian conflict has raged for over seven years, fueled by the Assad regime's despotic treatment of its own citizens, Russia's enabling of Assad's brutality, and Iran's malign influence in the region. The war and the many people impacted by the regime's ongoing horrific treatment of its citizens contributed to the most serious global terrorist threat since 9/11 – ISIS. The war has driven over 11 million of Syria's approximately 20 million people from their homes, killed more than half a million men, women, and children, and witnessed repeated use of horrific chemical weapons—despite Russia's pledge to guarantee Syria's elimination of these weapons. The regime continues to devastate its own country.

The United States is pursuing three mutually supporting strategic objectives in Syria. The military's specific mission in Syria is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS – and our civilian agencies are working closely with the military to consolidate these efforts. The United States is also using a whole of government approach to achieve other strategic objectives in Syria, such as countering Iran in Syria and resolving the Syrian crisis in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254. As the Secretary said in his speech at JINSA on October 10, we see these as mutually reinforcing objectives, and the State Department is engaged in the diplomatic processes aimed at making headway on each of these simultaneously.

Such a strategy if successful will help create a Syria that meets minimum standards for international normalization – one that surrenders its chemical weapons, no longer poses a threat to its neighbors, including Israel, severs its ties with the Iranian regime's forces and their military proxies, no longer sponsors terrorism,

holds accountable those guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and creates the conditions for the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of refugees. In support of that strategy, on October 29, the Syria Small Group, consisting of Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom met in London and discussed recent developments in Idlib, the need to move forward with convening the constitutional committee as soon as possible, and continuing to push for progress in the political process in line with UNSCR 2254. We hope to meet again soon.

Today, major combat in the conflict has largely abated, but the regime controls only half the country's population. Military forces of five outside states, the United States, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Russia, along with Syrian and various opposition forces, are operating in close proximity, raising the risk of accidental conflict, such as on September 17, when Syrian regime forces, responding to an alleged Israeli attack on Iranian assets in Syria, shot down a Russian aircraft.

In Syria, Russia seeks to keep the Assad regime in power to preserve its own military and economic interests, undermine U.S. influence in the region, assert Russia's role as a global power player, and reduce Moscow's international isolation. Although our objectives and Russia's are not aligned, we seek common ground with Russia in order to resolve the conflict in Syria. Our confidence in Russian promises is greatly weakened after Russian and Syrian regime forces violated the southwest de-escalation area this summer, needlessly disrupting a successful ceasefire to which President Putin publicly committed with President Trump in Da Nang, Vietnam. Such breaches have strategic consequences. Despite our low level of trust, we must engage with Russia to come to political solution in Syria. This is a challenge best managed by assessing their actions and follow-

through on their commitments, starting with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, while urging Russia to press both Damascus and Tehran to remove all Iranian-commanded forces and proxy forces from the entirety of Syria, and therefore removing a major spoiler to stability in the region.

Russian support for our three goals has been mixed, with the most positive coordination being our mutual de-confliction of the battle space against ISIS. We have made significant progress against ISIS since 2014, when the terrorist group swept across Iraq and Syria, causing violence and chaos, inflicting suffering on millions of civilians, and threatening the region and beyond. The U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has been instrumental in clearing the terrorist organization from almost all the territory ISIS once controlled in Syria and Iraq.

I would be remiss not to mention the tensions that have spiked between our partner forces in northeast Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Turkey in the midst of this mission. Turkey points to links between the SDF and PKK, and these unfortunate incidents detract from our efforts to defeat ISIS and coordinate other elements of our overall Syria policy.

Turkey is a NATO Ally and a key partner in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The United States remains committed to working with Turkey to address Turkish security concerns, including along its borders, and we support Turkey in its fight against the PKK, while attempting to reduce tensions.

And as we have said before, uncoordinated, unilateral military action into northeast Syria by any party, particularly where U.S. personnel are present, is of great concern, and any action that endangers U.S. personnel is unacceptable.

Right now, the SDF are working to liberate the last ISIS-controlled pocket of territory in Syria and operating throughout northeast Syria to clear ISIS cells. Although we are nearing the end of ISIS's territorial control in Iraq and Syria, our job is not done, and we remain focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qa'ida, ensuring they do not return. However, an enduring defeat cannot be achieved as long as Syrians continue to suffer from regime oppression, which contributed to the rise of ISIS in the first place.

On behalf of the State Department, I want to take this opportunity to thank my Department of Defense colleagues for the extraordinary efforts of the U.S. military in bringing the fight to ISIS and in ensuring the safety of the diplomats and civilian assistance experts working to stabilize the communities no longer under ISIS's control. I also would like to express our appreciation for the 79 members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

Russia has de-conflicted its operations in support of the regime from coalition combat operations against ISIS. Russia has exchanged information with the Coalition about its support to limited regime operations against ISIS -- although that has not been the central priority for Russia, Iran, or the regime. At the same time, Russia also presses for a premature withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces from Syria.

Such an untimely U.S. military departure from Syria would enable ISIS to return, allow Iran to fill the vacuum, place Iraq's stability at risk, and increase the threats to Syria's neighbors such as our key allies Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. Our presence enables us to prevent ISIS's resurgence, consolidate gains, stabilize

liberated areas, and alleviate human suffering. It also indirectly helps galvanize diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. Our presence also has the ancillary effect of blocking further Iranian expansion. By virtue of our presence, we are making progress toward these goals, foremost among them the enduring defeat of ISIS.

The Russians have provided only intermittent support to our second goal – a political process in line with UNSC resolution 2254 to resolve the underlying causes of the Syrian tragedy. Russia has worked in the “Astana Group” with Turkey and Iran on drawing up lists of participants for a constitutional committee, an important step in the Syrian-owned, UN-led process to implement UNSCR 2254. In the past, Russia has delayed the convening of the committee in order to appease the Syrian regime, apparently in response to Assad’s refusal to cooperate with the UN process. However, the Russians have now stated their support for the meeting of the Constitutional Committee before the end of the year. Therefore, there should be no reason not to convene the UN-organized constitutional committee imminently. We believe that convening this committee will help strengthen and prolong the de-escalation in Idlib.

In Idlib, Turkey and Russia have taken steps to avert a military offensive by the Assad regime and its allies. We hope de-escalation in this area that is home to over three million persons is made permanent. Secretary Pompeo continues to tell Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov that the United States would consider any Syrian regime offensive on Idlib a dangerous escalation of the conflict. As President Trump noted in the UN General Assembly, the order he has given his senior officials is simple: “Don’t let it happen.” If this agreement succeeds in preventing the Assad regime from attacking Idlib and reestablishes a durable cease-fire that the Russians and Assad will honor, it will be an encouraging step forward.

We remain concerned, however, by the pattern of previous behavior by the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran that destroyed earlier de-escalation agreements, and we will be watching developments in Idlib closely to gauge Russia's commitment to this agreement.

Additionally, Russia has undercut the UN-led political process with an intensive diplomatic effort focused on securing recognition of the regime, soliciting reconstruction money, and pushing Syria's neighbors to send refugees home long before it is safe to do so -- essentially sweeping the crimes of the past seven years under the rug.

U.S. policy is steadfast – there will be no U.S. reconstruction assistance in Syria, nor U.S. support for such assistance from other nations, absent a credible political process in Geneva within the context of the 2254 process that leads unalterably to a new constitution, free and fair UN supervised elections, and a political transition that reflects the will of the Syrian people. Our allies agree on this point.

Concerning our third goal, Iran, the President made clear while we maintain a presence in Syria to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS, we are also committed to the strategic goal of the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria.

The Iranian regime's malign behavior has left us no choice but to pursue this latter goal. Iran has taken advantage of regional conflicts and instability to aggressively expand its influence and threaten its regional neighbors. Nowhere is this threat clearer than it is in Syria, where the Iranian regime has sought to establish a highly

destabilizing power projection platform and use it against Israel and others. Already Iranian forces have used bases inside Syria to launch attacks against Israeli forces and the Golan Heights earlier this year. We strongly support and fully back Israel's sovereign right to defend itself, including against Iranian threats in Syria. Iran's attitude of reckless hostility and disregard for the laws and norms that underpin the international order makes it dangerous, and the vast majority of the international community agrees. We want to work with our partners to constrain this dangerous influence, for the benefit of international peace and security, regional stability, and the Iranian people.

The President has made clear that the Iranian regime must cease its behavior and policies that undermine peace in the Middle East. The Iranian regime exports violence, terror, and turmoil. It illicitly procures sensitive items to advance its ballistic missile program and proliferates these missiles all across the Middle East. Iran's support of the Assad regime, particularly the use of sectarian militias guilty of abuses against the civilian population, undermines legitimate processes to resolve the conflict in Syria. As Secretary Pompeo stated in his May 21 speech outlining a new security architecture for the region, "Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria."

If Russia wants to work with the United States to bring an end to the Syrian conflict, as it claims it does, Russia must join efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing actions and influence in Syria to remove all Iranian-commanded forces from the country. Russia continues taking steps to the contrary, such as announcing the deployment of an advanced S-300 air defense system to the Syrian military that could provide military cover for Iranian forces and dangerously escalate the situation.



The United States and our allies have come to Russia with a path toward a Syrian political solution many times. This path is enshrined in UNSCR 2254, which the UN Security Council adopted unanimously in 2015, which lays out a step-by-step political process involving a new or reformed constitution and national elections, as well as UN mechanisms to support and expand ceasefires. Despite our differences, we believe Russia's own interests are themselves not served by a return of ISIS, by a murderous Syrian regime rejected by its people and the international community, or by Iranian power projection with Syria as a platform. Thus, our goal is for Russia, as the regime's protector, guarantor, and enabler, to join the international community to support a political solution to resolve the crisis in Syria.

In my closing, I want to again express my condolences to the families of Mr. Raed Fares and Mr. Hamod Jnaid. Mr. Fares and Mr. Jnaid conveyed to the world the aspirations of the Syrian people in their struggle for freedom from the forces of tyranny and falsehood. We were very saddened to hear of their deaths. Their courage, energy, and creativity were inspirational and continue to inspire throughout Syria and beyond.

Thank you for the privilege to testify. Chairmen Ros-Lehtinen, my colleagues and I at the State Department want to thank you sincerely for your support throughout your career and we wish you well as you move forward.

I welcome the opportunity answer your questions.