

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Opening Statement

**Chairman Stephen F. Lynch**

**Subcommittee on National Security**

**Hearing on "The Trump Administration's Syria Policy: Perspectives From the Field"**

**October 23, 2019**

Good morning, everyone. Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to remember my friend, our Chairman, Elijah Cummings, who we lost almost one week ago. Like others on this Committee, I had the pleasure and privilege to call Elijah my friend for almost 20 years as we worked on the many issues that have confronted Congress and our country. Mr. Cummings has bequeathed a legacy of compassionate service to those families in our society who still struggle to receive the full promise of the American dream. While he had an abiding faith in the goodness and kindness of human kind, he was firm in his commitment to use his many talents, and the power of his position, to weigh in on behalf of the disenfranchised and to reduce the suffering that he saw in this world. Elijah lived his life for a meaningful cause – the cause of justice, the cause of liberty, and the cause of equality for all. We and our nation would be well-served to follow his example. He will be sorely missed.

Today we will examine the Trump Administration's sudden decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria and abandon our Kurdish allies. As everyone knows, a little more than two weeks ago, President Trump had a phone call with Turkish President Erdogan. We don't know exactly what was said in that conversation, but we do know that the White House released the following statement about the call, quote:

"Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation, and United States forces, having defeated the ISIS territorial "Caliphate," will no longer be in the immediate area."

Nowhere in that statement is any indication that President Trump tried to delay President Erdogan's planned operation. Nowhere in the statement did the White House condemn Turkey's invasion and the destabilizing effects it would have across the region. Nowhere did the statement warn about the hundreds of thousands of civilians who would be displaced. Only that the United States military would no longer be in the immediate vicinity.

And with that, President Trump ceded virtually all of America's ability to influence events on the ground in northern Syria. He abandoned our allies, the Kurdish-led Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF), who for years were our partner force and the most effective fighters against the Islamic State and Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As a result, the SDF will no longer be able to apply continued counterterrorism pressure against ISIS, which will almost inevitably allow them to re-surge.

Equally concerning is that the power vacuum left by the United States is already being filled by the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iranian militias. President Trump's uninformed, whimsical, and indifferent to loyalty and life decision on the phone with President Erdogan will result in disastrous consequences for U.S. national security and has undermined U.S. credibility on the world stage. According to one Kurdish fighter, "America will never again be able to count on the Kurds to fight ISIS. We don't trust America anymore," end-quote.

This is very important, so let me read the Kurdish view again, "We don't trust America anymore." Trump's betrayal of an ally and what it says about America will inflict severe damage to American diplomacy, military strategy, and foreign policy for many years to come.

But don't take my word for it. Even President Trump's most ardent supporters and former administration officials have criticized his decision.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has described the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria as a "grave mistake." Senator Lindsey Graham has called the decision "shortsighted and irresponsible." Former Secretary of Defense General Jim Mattis said, quote "if we don't keep the pressure on them, ISIS will resurge. It's absolutely a given that they will come back." And last week, 129 of my Republican colleagues voted alongside 225 Democrats to oppose President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria.

Today, we have the great privilege of welcoming Ilham Ahmed, Executive President of the Syrian Democratic Council, and Marty Palmer, a former special forces officer who fought alongside our SDF allies in northeast Syria. Mr. Palmer, I'd like to personally thank you for your service to our nation, and to Ms. Ahmed, I'd like to equally thank you for your sacrifice on behalf of the international community in the fight against ISIS.

We are also joined by Bernice Romero from Save the Children to provide an update on the humanitarian situation in Syria, as well as Emerita Torres, Director of Policy and Research at the Soufan Group and a former U.S. diplomat. We are also pleased to welcome John Glaser, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the CATO Institute. Our nation's diplomats and humanitarians oftentimes aren't recognized for their work and sacrifice in the way that they should be, so I thank you all for your service and for being here today.

A quick logistics note for our Members. As you have noticed, Ms. Ahmed is accompanied today by a translator, which will require additional time to interpret questions and answers between Members and the witness. While I intend to hold Members to the usual

five-minute time limit for questions, I will allow extra time at my discretion if I determine that fairness requires granting a Member additional time to question Ms. Ahmed.

I'd like to again thank all of our witnesses for being here today, and with that, I'll yield to the Ranking Member from Georgia, Mr. Jody Hice.

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