Statement

of

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before the

Subcommittee on National Security
Committee on Oversight and Reform
United States House of Representatives

October 23, 2019

RE: The Trump Administration's Syria Policy: Perspectives from the Field

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the privilege of having me here to speak today.

The United States became directly involved in Syria early in the civil war. The focus then was on undermining the Bashar al-Assad regime by providing aid to various violent opposition groups. That mission was and remains a failure. The next major impetus for greater US intervention, and the primary security rationale for our increased involvement in Syria, was to destroy ISIS (aka the Islamic State). Through coordination with clients on the ground, including but not limited to Kurdish militias, and an aggressive bombing campaign, that objective has largely been met. I say largely because while ISIS has been substantially curtailed and has lost most or all of its territorial claims, some adherents remain and continue to engage in guerilla/insurgent tactics in Syria and over the border in Iraq.

But if total, complete, irreversible destruction of ISIS was ever a US objective, it was a profoundly unwise one. ISIS represents an ideology that cannot be completely extinguished by the application of military force. Actually, there is reason to believe that a foreign military presence can actually aid in recruitment for these groups. Recall that ISIS is an outgrowth of the Sunni insurgency that rose up to fight US forces in Iraq. Without the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, we very likely would never have seen ISIS emerge. This should serve as a useful lesson for the unintended consequences of US military action, which then often justify further military action.

Whatever remains of ISIS today should not be an inherently American problem to solve. ISIS is surrounded by enemies and the regional actors, arguably with US help, should take the lead in ensuring that ISIS doesn't reemerge with the strength it had in 2014. In short, with most of the heavy lifting in destroying ISIS finished, the United States should withdraw while engaging with

local actors to continue counter-terrorism efforts and maintaining our ability to monitor the situation from off-shore.

Unfortunately, as conditions changed, the Trump administration adopted new objectives to justify a continued, and perhaps indefinite, US military presence there. The number of missions the US military has been tasked with in Syria have proliferated in recent years. It went from defeating ISIS to securing oil fields, protecting the Kurds, pushing back against Russian and Iranian influence in the country, serving as a buffer to protect Israel from regional enemies, and helping usher in a post-Assad Syria. This is a classic case of mission creep. It's very easy for us to intervene in a given situation, but getting out is always much harder. In this case, it is a very dangerous trend. It amounts to letting the United States slip further into another Middle East war without clear objectives, without serious scrutiny about what is actually achievable and without a public debate that includes a vote in Congress authorizing the mission. This last point is critical: outside of preempting an imminent attack, it is Congress's responsibility to determine this nation's involvement in hostilities abroad. It should startle both Congress and the public that the US military presence in Syria, which both parties have largely supported, has never had any legal sanction.

There have been a number of contradictions in our Syria policy. We knew undermining the Assad regime and creating a power vacuum in significant portions of the country was probably the best way to generate more instability and enliven a dangerous rebellion, yet we continued to gently pursue this policy. We knew that there were substantial numbers of jihadist terrorists within the various rebel opposition groups, but we continued to aid them until recently. Turkey is a NATO ally who sees the Kurdish population along the Turkish-Syrian border as a serious security threat, and yet we pursued a tactical alliance of convenience with the Kurds to battle ISIS. Aiding, arming, and allying with two adversarial entities is not only a contradiction of sorts, but seemed destined for an inevitable and bitter transition away from it. It was a mistake to have offered or even implied any promises to the Kurds that we weren't fully prepared to deliver. A fully autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria was never a plausible scenario and to the extent that we led anyone to believe that was our objective, it was a grave mistake that actually put the Kurds into more danger.

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Any change in strategy or tactics in a conflict like the one in Syria by any of the major actors is going to result in some potentially adverse consequences during the transition. There are risks inherent in every such withdrawal. But a responsible withdrawal that would reduce the chaos and avoid unnecessary suffering was available.

As it turned out, withdrawal was undertaken hastily, without sufficient planning or coordination with local actors and allies, and without a coordinated inter-agency process. On the one hand, the president is blameworthy for trying to make foreign policy by Twitter declarations, but his principal advisers on Syria policy seem to have worked directly against his stated wishes to withdraw. They failed to guide the president towards his preferred policy goal, opting instead for

trying to remain in Syria indefinitely and hope the president would change his mind. This made a hasty order to rapidly withdraw more likely.

In addition to a failure of the executive branch's policy-making process, the administration failed to employ sufficient diplomatic muscle to carry out a responsible withdrawal. A more deliberate and calculated dialogue with Turkey, for example, should have taken place long before any withdrawal announcement. It would have been wise to clearly communicate to Ankara the negative consequences of an attack on Kurdish forces in Syria and to try to work out an arrangement by which Turkey's most pressing security concerns were addressed and US forces could leave. Instead, Turkey received multiple, often conflicting signals from Washington.

As distasteful as it may be, the US should have worked with Damascus to facilitate a formal arrangement with the Kurds that would allow Damascus to reassert its sovereignty over those territories. This could have helped satiate Turkish concerns of a PKK safe-haven over the border while also deterring Turkish military action into Syrian territory. Given the brutality of the Assad regime, this might have been hard to swallow, but if humanitarian concerns are the highest priority, it may have been better to accept the reality that the Syrian regime has essentially won the civil war and is not going to be overthrown any time soon. As it happens, just such an arrangement between the Assad regime and Kurdish forces is now falling into place, but if the United States had pursued it or facilitated it 6 months ago or more, the withdrawal could have produced less instability and greater protection for the Kurds. Reports indicate that in fact the Trump administration actively discouraged the Kurds from engaging with Damascus along these lines, presumably because some policymakers still cling to the prospect of regime change, an objective that is effectively unachievable at any acceptable cost and actually at odds with the anti-ISIS mission. One need only look to recent history to appreciate the dangers inherent in state collapse in the Middle East.

As former commander of US Central Command Joseph Votel and Elizabeth Dent, who worked on counter-terrorism at the State Department until 2019, put it: "To ensure the success of the SDF and whatever elements of the regime end up managing this problem, the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS may need to open a limited window of rapprochement with the Syrian regime or the Russians." They write that the United States should "support, as well as facilitate" discussions between Turkey and elements of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups that have good relations with Ankara.

The United States also should have sought some kind of general agreement and cooperation with Russia. Diplomacy is supposed to take advantage of overlapping interests. Although the US-Russia relationship is more tense than it has been in a long time, the two do have some shared goals in Syria. Both want stability, both want to prevent the reemergence of ISIS, and both have reasons to oppose Turkish military incursions into Syria. As an important backer of the Assad regime, Moscow could have used its leverage over Damascus, as we could have over Ankara, to reach some kind of Turkish-Syrian-Kurdish agreement (See, e.g. 1998 Adana Agreement.)

The bottom line is that active and skillful diplomacy was the best tool for serving US interests in Syria and allowing for a smooth and responsible withdrawal. Unfortunately, this is not the route the administration took.

It is important to address one other issue that has come up in the debate over the Syria withdrawal. There is a claim that by withdrawing from Syria we have handed both Russia and Iran a huge geo-political victory, which alone should be enough to dissuade us from leaving. This is confused thinking. Russia and Iran do have interests in Syria, but those interests are limited and it is not clear they have gained anything tangible from our decision to withdraw. Syria is still engulfed in a simmering civil war and Damascus is now a much weaker ally, and thus a dwindling strategic asset, than it was in 2011. Both Moscow and Tehran are likely to continue to be on the hook for mediating a political settlement, funding reconstruction efforts, and backing a disgraced war criminal that is now more of an international pariah than he ever was before. Those are costly burdens for our rivals. Both Russia and Iran have finite resources and many competing priorities. To depict them as clear winners here is dubious.

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Going forward, the United States should pressure Turkey to refrain from aggressive tactics in Syria. Washington should lend quiet support to the Astana process, but not seek to be an active participant. Given its previous position and conflicting interests, the United States is no longer a credible broker in Syrian peace talks.

The bipartisan sanctions that Congress is prepared to impose on Turkey perhaps send an appropriate signal, but largely a symbolic one. Sanctions alone have a poor track record of altering the behavior of the target state and no one should expect them to have much tangible impact in this case.

The United States has other points of leverage over Turkey, however. We should coordinate with the rest of our NATO allies on an appropriate course of action, up to and including a threat to reconsider Turkey's membership in the alliance.

Should the United States determine a future military deployment to Syria as necessary for US security and interests, it is incumbent upon this body to openly debate it and ultimately to vote on authorizing the use of force. A unilateral decision by the executive branch to either keep residual forces there or redeploy at a later date is subject to Congress's constitutional prerogatives and, more recently, the War Powers Resolution of 1973.

I look forward to answering your questions.