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SECURING SYRIA'S TRANSFORMATION BY DIMINISHING RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Tuesday, February 3, 2026.

The hearing was held from 2:33 p.m. to 3:40 p.m., Room 360 Cannon House Office Building, Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Co-Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Co-Chairman; Senator Jeanne Shaheen [D-NH]; Representative Jake Ellzey [R-TX]; Representative Emanuel Cleaver [D-MO]; **Other Member Present:** Representative Chrissy Houlahan [D-PA].

Witnesses: Anna Borschevskaya, Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Michael Doran, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East, The Hudson Institute; Richard Outzen, Nonresident Senior Fellow, The Atlantic Council.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, CO-CHAIRMAN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Co-Chairman WILSON: Grateful to be here with our colleagues from the Senate, Senator Jeanne Shaheen from New Hampshire. Grateful we have Chrissy Houlahan from Pennsylvania and Congressman Jake Ellzey from Texas, so we cover the country.

With that in mind, the hearing today is "Securing Syria's Transformation by Diminishing Russia's Influence." With that as the topic, we will begin with opening statements by myself and Senator Shaheen, and then we will proceed with the presentation of our witnesses. Each one of our witnesses is really just very distinguished individuals who are knowledgeable on what we are facing today and look at the opportunities that we face today. Then, following your presentations—the five-minute presentations we will have, so I am maintaining the time properly, so this is good—then we will go to questions by each member of the panel.

The fall of the Assad dictatorship was a Berlin Wall moment for the Middle East. For years, Bashar al-Assad, a murderous dictator propped up by war criminal Putin and the regime in Tehran, remained in power only because of their military intervention. War criminal Putin's airstrikes devastated Syrian cities, most infamously Aleppo, creating a refugee crisis that overwhelmed Europe

and served as a rehearsal in the mass murder for war criminal Putin's later destruction of Ukrainian cities from Bucha to Mariupol.

One year after Assad fled to Moscow, President Trump made the decision to give Syria a chance and is producing real and measurable results. Through the leadership of his special envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, and under the leadership of President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria is moving to a relationship with the United States that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. For the first time in decades, for the first time ever, for the first time in 250 years of America and 8,000 years of Syria, there has been a Syrian president visiting the White House.

I particularly have a keen interest. November a year ago, the Assad dictatorship identified me as an enemy of the State. Three weeks later, he fled to Moscow. Then, eight months later, Senator Jeanne Shaheen took me to Assad's office in Damascus to be with the new president. What a change in history, the ultimate change.

I have seen the transformation firsthand. Last August, traveling with Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Ambassador Barrack, the envoy that the president has named as Ambassador to Türkiye, to be envoy to Syria, we met with President al-Sharaa, senior ministers, and religious leaders. Since then, I have met with President al-Sharaa twice, in New York and Washington. I have also hosted the Syrian foreign minister, finance minister, central bank Governor, and economic minister in my office. A highlight for me, in New York, I got to introduce the president to Marco Rubio, our secretary of State. What a rare opportunity.

The direction is unmistakable. President al-Sharaa wants to work with the United States. Under his leadership, Syria has joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and is now working directly with the U.S. military in joint operations against this terrorist threat. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah have withdrawn from Syria. Syria is no longer threatening Lebanon, and for the first time in decades is engaged in direct negotiations with Israel. Syria is also open for business to American companies creating jobs in Syria and America.

None of this would have happened without President Trump's historic decision to engage with the new Syrian leadership, lift sanctions, and pursue a stable and unified Syrian State. I was grateful to lead the bipartisan effort in Congress with Senator Shaheen to repeal the Caesar Act, and I am hopeful that remaining sanctions, including Syria's designation as a State sponsor of terrorism, will soon be lifted.

The fall of Assad presents another historic opportunity. That is the focus of this hearing: Removing war criminal Putin's bases from Syria. Despite Assad's fall, war criminal Putin still maintains two major military bases in Syria: The Khmeimim Base near Latakia and Tartus Naval Base on the Mediterranean. These bases are war criminal Putin's only official military outposts outside of the former Soviet Union and serve as a critical platform for projecting Russian power well beyond Syrian borders. From these facilities as a transit, Russia sustains logistics, command and control, and force projection that enables the Wagner Group operations across Africa and helps prop up the authoritarian regimes of Cen-

tral Africa, often at the expense of U.S. and allied interests, and really just enslaving the people.

President al-Sharaa has already taken meaningful steps to limit their presence. His government has suspended all pre-2025 agreements with war criminal Putin, including those governing the bases, and placed them under review. Russian forces now face strict limits on movement, patrols outside their base perimeters require Syrian approval, off-duty personnel are restricted from nearby towns, and Russian naval vessels at times have been denied access to Tartus. Syria has also canceled a 2019 contract allowing a Russian company to manage the commercial port at Tartus. Just last week, war criminal Putin fully withdrew from all bases and outposts outside of Syria's coastal region, including the Qamishli Airport in the northeast.

Let us all be clear: Removing war criminal Putin's forces from Syria should be done, and it may take time and create security negotiations, but it is achievable. In every single meeting that many of us have had with Syrian government leaders, we have pushed for the full removal of war criminal Putin's bases from Syria, as well as ending the Assad dictatorship's recognition of the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which actually are integral parts of the Republic of Georgia.

In our discussions with President al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Shaibani, I found a clear willingness to expel Russian forces if the United States can provide the right support and protection. Foreign Minister Shaibani told me bluntly, despite the new Syrian authorities' engagement in realpolitik with Moscow, the Syrian people, who suffered from years of Russian airpower devastating Aleppo, will never be friends of Moscow. This view is shared by our NATO ally Türkiye. Last year, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told me directly that Türkiye supports the removal of war criminal Putin's bases from Syria. An increased military presence by Türkiye in northern Syria naturally puts the Russian presence under pressure and on path for total removal, which is dangerously close to the vital American NATO base of Incirlik.

However, Syria will not take the final step of removing Russia without credible military and economic alternatives. Much of the defense infrastructure still relies on Russian equipment, which Moscow continues to exploit for leverage. Russian compounds that pressure by working through remnants of the former regime, including Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, who regularly broadcasts from Moscow promising renewed Russian backing. Russia also maintains ties to former officers and regime elements concentrated on the Syrian coast.

Against this backdrop, sadly, President al-Sharaa last week explored in talks in Moscow whether war criminal Putin could provide increased economic and military assistance, including rebuilding the Syrian army, in exchange for allowing war criminal Putin's bases to stay. To our Syrian friends: This would be insanity. Syrians of all people should know that war criminal Putin cannot be trusted to live up to agreements.

I am confident that closer engagement between President Trump and Syria will naturally diminish Russian influence. With strong U.S. leadership and close coordination with our NATO ally

Türkiye, we can provide Syria with the assurances it need[s] to break from Russia entirely and to negotiate a durable understanding between Türkiye and Israel, one that protects Israel's security while advancing America's strategic objective of removing Russia from Syria.

Unfortunately, not all regional actors understand the urgency of removing Russia. Sadly, some in Israel prefer a weak and divided Syria, and view an extended Russian presence as a buffer against Türkiye. I believe this is suicidal for Israel. We should work to, in partnership with Türkiye, a NATO ally, and other regional allies and partners, and welcome long-term but limited Turkish military and economic presence in Syria. The correct balance of security guarantees would give Syria the confidence it needs to remove war criminal Putin's footprint, and this will only be possible if Israel and Turkey—Türkiye—deescalate and reach a détente in Syria.

I am encouraged that President Trump and Special Envoy Tom Barrack are doing exactly that—engaging both sides, lowering tensions, and working toward a pragmatic understanding that assuages Israeli security concerns while advancing American strategic interests in removing war criminal Putin from Syria once and all.

I am grateful to welcome Dr. Anna Borschevskaya of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Dr. Michael Doran of the very respected Hudson Institute; and Dr. Richard Outzen of the Atlantic Council.

We will now proceed with comments by our very esteemed member of the U.S. Senate, Senator Jeanne Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am between votes in the Senate, so I am just going to agree with your opening statement and look forward to the very important remarks from our witnesses.

Thank you all for being here.

Co-Chairman WILSON: With this, we will now proceed directly with Dr. Borschevskaya.

TESTIMONY OF ANNA BORSCHEVSKAYA, HAROLD GRINSPOON SENIOR FELLOW, THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

Dr. BORSCHEVSKAYA: Chairman Wilson, honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am the daughter of Jewish refuseniks. Many families like mine were living with anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. For us, America was a ray of light, a light that shone through the Iron Curtain. Even as a child, I knew that America was different. Vladimir Putin's message to us for over two decades has been that there is no democracy in America, that Russia is no different from the United States. Even as a child, I knew that could not be true.

Given where I came from, it is a particular honor for me to testify, to speak in front of this legislative body. You play such an important role in elevating human rights.

With your permission, I am submitting my written testimony that I am going to summarize.

We are here today to discuss Russia in Syria. I am here specifically to talk about why it is so important for us to get Syria right.

Of course, I am no longer a child, so I know that the issues before us are highly complex. But as we talk about Syria, I am a reminder that America's unique purpose and position in the world is still to shine that light.

We are now one year into the fall of Assad, and I think we can all agree that the outcome is not quite what many of us had hoped. Russia's position in Syria temporarily weakened with the fall of Assad, but this brief window may now be closing. Assad's fall itself was not the turning point for Russian influence in Syria many in the West thought it might be.

There are things we can do to counter Russia's influence there, and I would like to preface those with three key points. First, Russia is reconsolidating influence in Syria as it plays the long game. Second, there is no indication that Damascus will abandon Russia. Third, it is not too late to take concrete action.

Syria is a vital link between the Middle East and Europe, and we all understand why. Failure to counter Russia in Syria will harm U.S. strategic interests and perhaps for a long time.

Syria has always been heavily dependent on Moscow. Not only has Assad's fall failed to change that, but Russia is looking to deepen those connections. I am talking about military, economic, and diplomatic dependence, and to some extent even cultural ties. I give examples of each one in my submitted written testimony.

As I said, while many were hoping for a different result, there is no indication that Damascus is moving away from Russia. In fact, we now know that Sharaa negotiated a secret deal to keep Russia's foothold in Syria if they abandoned Assad. Russia and Syria need each other, although it is clear that Syria needs Russia more. Leaders may come and go in both countries, but Russia's long game is to hold onto power and influence there.

For years, American policymakers said that Russia cannot profit from war crimes in Syria, but Russia is already profiting from war crimes in Syria. Russia is well-positioned for a resurgence in Syria if nothing changes. In short, despite our hopes, Russia remains part of the problem in Syria, not a solution.

Let me conclude by outlining what the United States can do about this.

First, we need to reexamine what our engagement in Syria looks like. When we think about Syria, we automatically think of military involvement. Instead, we should be focusing on expanding economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties. We need to broaden the scope of our engagement. I think earlier calls for a full-time Syrian envoy, for instance, are wise. If Syria is now heading to a status to be at least a pseudo-U.S. ally, why would we treat it differently than we treat other countries?

I suggest we need to bolster our ties with Syria for a whole host of other reasons, and among those is helping Syria strengthen guardrails to help restrain Russian involvement and to give the Syrian government additional reasons to limit its dependence. For instance, we can bolster the role of Ukrainians in Syria and all across the Middle East. That would help add other alternatives to Russian wheat and weaponry, among others. These are the kinds of measures we can take all across the Middle East and North Afri-

ca to serve as a counterweight to Russia's likely resurgence in this region.

Russia's presence in Syria does not exist in a vacuum. The U.S. cannot and should not cede that space to Russia.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: [Off mic.]

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL DORAN, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, THE HUDSON INSTITUTE

Mr. DORAN: [Off mic]—agree with you, Chairman Wilson, but I do not want to miss this opportunity to speak for five minutes. I have never—I have never missed an opportunity to speak.

I would like to make five points. The first one is that since I began following Syria in 2005, when I was the senior director in the White House for the National Security Council, I noted that the United States has a tendency to—not to see Syria, to ignore Syria. This is sort of deep in our nature as Americans. When I was in the White House, we sent up to the—to the National Security Council about every four or five months the same memo for a decision, and we never, ever got a decision. We would change the memo each time by describing the events that had taken place between the last time we sent the memo up and the last time we did not get a decision. When our Syria director left, the joke in the office was that we would replace—we were asking who should we replace him with, and the joke was we would just replace him with a copy machine.

The experience has taught me since then that this was not something peculiar to the Bush administration; it is really just in our nature, because the—because Syria during the cold war was in the Russian or the Soviet sphere of influence. We do not have a major four-star asset there like oil, and so we tend just not to see it.

What has happened is that this tendency of us not to have a Syria policy has conspired with the geography and the interests of our adversaries to make it the place where they contest our position in the—in the Middle East. We saw that dramatically during the Obama administration when the Iranians and Russians allied to prop up the Assad regime, and they engaged in a major intervention in Syria, and we did not contest them. The results for us were very—were very damaging. They sent—they sent millions of people—of refugees out of the country. Of course, they went to Europe. The Russians and the Iranians weaponized the refugees, and they created tensions in Europe for our allies.

Something else there happened as well, which is that both the Turks and the Israelis were forced to accommodate the Russians on their doorstep in Syria. We felt that dramatically when the Russians went into Ukraine and suddenly Washington turned to our allies—not just to the Turks or the Israelis, but also to the Saudis and others—and demanded that they line up with us against the Russians, and they found that our Middle Eastern allies were reluctant to take as hard a line against Russia as we were because we had—our policy had forced them to accommodate the Russians in the past. I think we need to really remember that experience when we are—when we are thinking about the Russians—the Rus-

sians now because we are—if we are not—if we are not careful we will—we will forget the role that this country plays for Russia. It is absolutely crucial to the whole Russian position in the Mediterranean and, Chairman Wilson, as you said, in Africa.

The Russian Mediterranean fleet is based in Crimea, in Sevastopol. The Russians do not have a Mediterranean fleet without the port at Tartus. It is from Tartus that they moved on to Libya, and it is from Libya that they extended their influence into Africa.

I think if we want to—if international politics today is the United States versus China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—that is the way I see it—then we want to—we want to expel the Russians from the Middle East, as we did at the end of the cold war. The place to do that, really, is in Syria.

The problem we have in Syria today, the difficulty of doing that, is the needs—the tremendous needs of the—of the Sharaa government. The Russians have things to offer them, including arms, including infrastructure, and so on. We also have the tremendous tension between the Turks and the Israelis. I think that we have to see that the—our ability to expel the Russians from Syria in the end is going to be dependent on our ability to strike a balance between the Turks and the—the Turks and the Israelis, and this is going to take a very sustained commitment on our part. I do—as you, Chairman Wilson, believe-I think this is absolutely possible, but it takes sustained commitment at the highest level.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: [Off mic.]

TESTIMONY OF RICHARD OUTZEN, NONRESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW, THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL

Mr. OUTZEN: Chairman Wilson, distinguished members, it is a great honor to be here with you. My experience with the Syria problem set goes back in one sense about 10 years, when I started working Syria policy as a uniformed as a U.S. Army member, and then later at State Department, but really back to 1990 when I was first deployed to the Middle East. It is a wicked problem set.

It is a fragmented country, and there has been a lot going on. The last 18 months have been particularly momentous. Of the various frames or lenses that we can apply to Syria and have been trying to apply for the last ten years, the geopolitical really comes to the forefront now.

My own views on Syria have been shaped by my experiences in the military—deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, also negotiations with the Turks and the Israelis and other folks in the Middle East trying to get a workable set of security arrangements and a working, really, U.S. alliance. In my view, what happened right about the time I came into Army service in 1989 and 1990—it is not my fault; I am not saying that—we had a very workable regional system, and then we stopped making it work. A lot of that was because of overly ideological and overly ambitious, but really because of poor policy processes, in my view, in Washington.

Some of those things have come around now to the point where we actually have the ability to sew together again, to wicker together, the overlapping interests of many of our allies in the Gulf; in Türkiye; with a little bit delicate work, as Mike was saying, with

Israel as well. That really requires that we not rely on the go-to that we have done in Washington for so long with Syria, which is pressure, coercion, and trying to minimize their scope of maneuver. We need to work more through engagement and through incentives.

I did recently complete a doctorate looking at the record of U.S. coercion in the Middle East but globally as well, and the results are not great. I am not saying we should not coerce; there are truly bad actors in the international system that need a poke in the eye and a pinch in the wallet, and that kind of coercion has its place. However, the logic that needs to be applied, especially in stabilizing countries, is one of engagement and one of incentives, because that is the better way for us to actually shape outcomes. When we try to coerce and destabilize, and especially a fledgling government like what we are doing to some extent or have been—and again, I praise the work to get the Caesar sanctions lifted. There are still voices in Washington calling for essentially a fragmenting and a coercing and a punitive approach to Syria. Well, the empirical record of how that has worked out since 1990 is not great. It is especially ridiculous in Africa—that is a whole 'nother conversation for another time—but also in the Middle East. The way that these sanctions should be used and the coercion in general should be used is by exception, with an off-ramp, and always with incentives so that things get lighter as the cooperation gets better. In my view, that is exactly the situation we have in Syria now.

People are right to have their concerns about Ahmad al-Sharaa. His background is checkered to say the least, and he may well have American blood on his hands. That is nothing that should be taken lightly. However, you cannot kill all the terrorists. I think that is another lesson that we have taken away from the history of the United States' engagement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the other places I served. The best path is when you get aggrieved communities that have relied on terrorism to follow a political path and a political process.

Witness what we have seen just in the last—well, really since January-February of last year with reconciliation not just of HTS and, to some extent, the Alawite regions in Syria, but also now with the YPG and the SDF, which, of course, is highly concerning in Washington that we not abandon the Kurds. The way to not abandon the Kurds is not to abandon Damascus. The best way to do that is to remain engaged and to provide pathways to regional roles for Türkiye, for the Gulf, and for others, and not to give in to the voices that say we cannot trust this, this man is untrustworthy, and we need to treat them as if they are all still jihadists running the country.

In that regard, both for Senator Shaheen and Congressman Wilson, I want to really praise the efforts that you have done personally in terms of making sure that it is responsible and engaged U.S. policy that takes the fore.

I want to also add that I think in a sense this shift in U.S. policy is a test case for what I would consider to be sort of a Trump doctrine. The Trump doctrine is in place of long-term occupations, military actions—not that there is not a room for that—but there should be an economic logic that dictates stabilization in some of

these places. Syria is a test case. If, in fact, by enticing and engaging our allies like Türkiye and the Gulf to come in, and also Japan and others, we can get economic investment and economic stabilization and reconstruction going, we start a virtuous cycle that actually lowers the tension among the different Syrian groups, but also among our occasionally fractious allies. I watch with great concern, but also great support, and—as we go through this experiment-it is really important that we do not fall back to the default of just punish and coerce.

With that, I just want to say it is—the geopolitical moment is propitious for Washington. We are wise enough to avoid some of the patterns that we followed in the last 20, 25 years. I think let us remember where we were two years ago, three years ago, with the butcher Assad best buds with the war criminal Putin. [Off mic]—this ends in a way that is very much commensurate with U.S. interests.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Doctor.

We are so grateful that Senator Shaheen is here between votes, and we really appreciate her energy.

Thank you. Senator, would you please proceed?

STATEMENT OF JEANNE SHAHEEN, U.S. SENATE, FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

Senator SHAHEEN: Well, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to go before I have to go back to vote.

My question really follows up on your testimony, Dr. Outzen, because I was proud to have worked on the repeal of the Caesar sanctions. Congressman Wilson talked about that effort in his opening remarks. I think it has been successful. As I am sure most of you know, there is an effort now by some to call for sanctions to be reimposed. I think there are real questions, as you point out, about what that might mean. Can you and others speak to what the risk is of reimposing sanctions now, and what that would mean about driving Syria into the hands of Vladimir Putin and the Russians at a time when we particularly want to see investment flowing from other countries in the Middle East and the West to help them rebuild?

Mr. OUTZEN: Thank you for the question. It is an excellent question. The empirical record shows that countries that we sanction and try to coerce, if they are strong enough, will bandwagon and will hedge against us, and try to find other patrons. That is how Russia has a back door to get in here. I am actually maybe a little more optimistic than Anna, but Anna is more knowledgeable than I am on this issue, about the residual Russian presence now. I think the overwhelming sentiment among Syrians, those I know at least, is that the Russians do not have a real place in the new Syria, or at least, at best, a marginal place. The way we can change that is if we convince Türkiye, who might be under the target of some of the sanctions if they are imposed, as they have been discussed, and other potential investors. If we scare them off, then they are going to look for Chinese money and for Russian managerial or military support.

The second empirical finding in the study of U.S. coercion is that, again, when you take a country that is already sort of fractured and then you further undercut the sole basis for centralized power and the restoration of State legitimacy and sovereignty that we have right now, which is Ahmed al-Sharaa, love him or hate him, what you do is you induce huge new variables that lead to centripetal forces and then renewed violence. We could look at a cycle of sanctions, reimposition, with the naive thought that we can actually get what we want and compliance out of it, that then leads to new cycles of violence and a newly fragmented Syria as we had for over 15 years. That is what I would see as the risk, Senator.

Senator SHAHEEN: Well, thank you very much.

Thank you all. Thank you to the members of the Commission for allowing me to go first so I can go back and vote.

Co-Chairman WILSON: A wonderful situation, you need to be aware, bipartisan, bicameral. This Commission is working together. We have even extraordinary staff, so this is good. We appreciate them.

We have been joined by Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, all the way from Missouri. Thank you for being here today too. What a—it is bipartisan. As we are here, and I will be held in five minutes too. With this, Dr. Outzen and Dr. Doran, both of you emphasize that improved understanding between Turkey and Israel is a prerequisite for pushing war criminal Putin out of Syria. However, when I was in Israel last year, some of the leadership there expressed opposition to a Turkish presence in northern Syria and indicated a preference for Russia maintaining as a counterweight to anchor a NATO ally. Which is startling to me that that would ever occur. In your view, what can policymakers encourage Israel to reconsider this approach and instead explore coordination with Turkey, aimed at reducing the Russian footprint in Syria?

Dr. Outzen and then Dr. Doran.

Mr. OUTZEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had the pleasure to serve as a military attaché in Israel for three years, and then also with something referred to as the Dayton mission, working with Palestinian security forces. I take the security of Israel very seriously. I have many friends in the IDF. I disagree with them on some of the takes that they have had on Syria, because, frankly, many of the security establishment and the strategic thinkers in Israel have seen a fractured, weak Syria as preferable to having a strong Syria allied with Türkiye. That is not everybody in Israel, though. There are folks now that are realizing, and I have heard this outreach from some folks in the think tank world talking with Israeli counterparts, who say, you know, this is too important. We realize that we do not like the Turks right now, and they do not like us, but they are a NATO ally, and they are on very good terms with the Trump administration. We know there has to be a modus vivendi.

I think one of the biggest temptations, if you will, for Jerusalem to say, well, maybe we should keep it broken, was, one, there was this dual specter of both continued fighting between the SDF and the Damascus regime, and the thought that al-Sharaa's government, the Syrian transitional government, might engage in wholesale slaughter or atrocities against the Kurds if and when that part

of the country is reunited. Well, what we have seen since early January is actually a very delicate negotiation. There is some military activity with some loss of lives on both sides, and also still a lot of fear and a lot of anxiety remaining. Also, the offering by Ahmad al-Sharaa's government of the best deal the Kurds of Syria have ever had from a Syrian government-that is amazing. It is a strong reason for both Israel and Türkiye to take notice and say, actually, these forces that are pulling the country apart are not as strong as the forces that are bringing them back together, and on reasonable terms.

I think a dialogue, which obviously we have been trying to—— I think the efforts of the special envoys, I think Tom Barrack, but also Steve Witkoff, have been involved with trying to talk to the Netanyahu folks and say, look, there has got to be a way that you can do this in a way that's consistent with the Trump administration's priorities and policy. I think that needs to be reinforced. I think that the security dialog between Israel and the United States, especially U.S. CENTCOM, which has been so strong as they face the Iranian threat, we need to find a way to also bring together security figures from Israel and Türkiye and say, look, regional security is United States security. We cannot have you guys seeing each other as targets and as enemies if we are part of the same umbrella. Really, leadership within the alliance is what I think both countries need to see now, and Syria is ground zero for it.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much. Dr. Doran.

Mr. DORAN: Thank you. I could not agree more with what Rich just said. I think American leadership in pulling the Turks and the Israelis together and encouraging them—almost forcing them to talk to each other, is, I think, the starting point for solving this problem. In my discussions with Turks and Israelis, I am struck by the tremendous gulf between them. They do not—they no longer have the kind of regular contacts with each other. Of course, they do have the—they do have intel-to-intel relations and so on, but a kind of regularized interaction across the board in the government is no longer there. The expertise on either side is weak about the other, but more than that, the world views are starkly discordant.

When the Turks look at Syria, they want Syria to be France. Meaning they want—you know, the French football team has Africans, and Moroccans, and Algerians, but they all—they all stand up and pledge allegiance to France and sing the French—the French anthem at the games. The Turks want Syria to be unified, and they want all ethnic groups in Syria to be seen as Syrians. They do not care if there is a Kurdish general or a Druze general in the army, but they want them to be—they want them to be Syrians. This is both from a pragmatic point of view, because they do not want a Turkish or a PKK autonomous statelet on their border. It is also deeply ingrained in Turks—in the way that they see their own country and how they think the world should be organized.

The Israelis, when they look at—and, the Turks fear that the Israelis want to crack Syria up and keep it fragmented. This is happening when the—at a moment when the Turks are seeing competition with Israel elsewhere, places like Somaliland and so forth. They are increasingly seeing the Israelis as a rival. The

Israelis, when they look at Turkey, see an ideological Islamist power which they fear is going to take over the vacuum left by the retreating Iran. They see the government in Damascus as an Islamist power that wants to destroy them, and that is also hostile—is hostile to them, the Israelis, in the same way that it is hostile to the non-Muslim minorities, or heterodox Muslim minorities, in Syria.

I think the greatest fear of the Israelis, more than the ideological onslaught of the Islamist against—against Israel and the Syrian minorities, is that Syria will become a Turkish military base, and a front—the front lines in an effort to annihilate Israel. I think we have a major role to play here in getting the two sides to come to an accommodation. I think it is possible to turn Syria into a buffer State, or to help it emerge as a buffer State, much as Jordan is a buffer State between Iraq and Israel. As I said to you in my—earlier in my testimony, this really requires commitment from the White House and a lot of serious work to bring the two together so that they get to know each other better, and learn that they—that, as I believe, they can actually live together in the same neighborhood without friction.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Dr. Doran, thank you. Indeed, they have in the past, so hopefully that can be restored. With that in mind also, I would like to introduce for the record a statement from the Foundation for the Defense of Democracy supporting the Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries Act 2.0. The reason for that is that war criminal Putin is recruiting troops in Syria to be used as human fodder to join the 1.2 million other troops that—Russians—that he sacrificed.

With that, we now proceed to Congressman Ellzey.

STATEMENT OF JAKE ELLZEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TEXAS

Representative ELLZEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here today.

Anne, I am going to start with you. How do we get Syria to move away from—I mean, economic stability is a foundation for how a government—their stability. How we get Syria to stop using Russian wheat and oil? How do we involve Ukraine? How do we involve the United States for a stable food and energy supply?

Dr. BORSCHEVSKAYA: Thank you very much. I think we can start by facilitating, starting conversations, starting to see how we can move forward on exactly that. How can we—what can the United States do, perhaps through U.S. businesses? What, in practical terms, can the United States provide to facilitate Ukrainian wheat, other types of Ukrainian goods? Let us not forget that much of Russian wheat that Russia sells is actually stolen from Ukraine to begin with, and Ukrainians are our best allies. They know Russia. They know Russian military. They know how Russian businesses work. They have so many reasons to serve as a counterweight to Russia. I think the best way to do this is to start conversations. Again, I think at the highest levels, as Michael had mentioned in his earlier remarks.

The point is that Syria needs our attention. We need to prioritize it. We need to understand why we need to do this, that this is in our own long-term strategic interest. We also, I think, need to un-

derstand that this is going to be incredibly challenging, that there are going to be many questions for businesses that come into Syria when there is so little physical infrastructure in terms of how to conduct financial transactions. I think we need to have conversations with the Syrian government as well about how to facilitate that. I think it starts with American engagement at all levels and really prioritizing this issue.

Representative ELLZEY: Thank you for that. Of course, as we have discussed, the war in Ukraine is both a genocide and an imperial action; that is an attempt, and actually have been successful, in stealing 25 percent of the world's wheat supply from the Ukrainians, as well as—the goal is to get their gas fields as well. This is—this is, that that genocide that they are conducting there is about money and power, as it is everywhere else, including Africa, that they go to. We do not have time to address all those things, but getting them out of Syria is absolutely a priority.

Colonel and Doctor, I have got a question about President al-Sharaa. You know, he fought against us in Iraq and Afghanistan. Colonel, I am sure he was in Afghanistan—in Iraq, when you were. Can he be trusted? As you well know, the Israelis referred to him by his nom de guerre al-Julani. It is a—Syria has a lot of different ethnic groups, and we have already seen two of those get attacked from the nominal government as it is. Is he playing both sides against the middle, in allowing, yet condemning, these attacks on the Druze and on the SDF? Can he be trusted?

We will start with you, Colonel.

Mr. OUTZEN: As my favorite president used to say, trust but verify, right? I do not think actually trust comes into play when we are talking about the Middle East much at all. Somebody who has his background should not be trusted in the absolute sense. However, we should trust what we see as observed behaviors. What we saw as the observed behavior with nom de guerre Julani, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is that after spending time, I believe, at Camp Bucca in Iraq, in a U.S. prison facility for having attacked against U.S. forces and Iraqi forces, he came to Syria. Very shortly thereafter joined with al-Qaida in Syria, which then became ISIS over time. He broke with both of these groups because he started to focus both what he was saying internally, and the people who have known him and academically studied him for a long time, he said, my jihad is the Syrian jihad. My jihad is the jihad against Assad. Now, does that forgive him for all his past acts of aggression and enmity? No, but it is an important step in an evolution.

Representative ELLZEY: Well, while it is restrained to Syria, can he be trusted to protect those ethnic groups within Syria, now that he is in charge?

Mr. OUTZEN: I would say that it is not so much whether we should trust his intentions, but his ability to control his forces. Because many of the people that he has working with him, especially the ones that were with him in Idlib, are what we would consider to be jihadists. The quickest way to strengthen and protect the people—the Druze in Suwayda, the Kurds in the northeast, and even the Alawites, who were the oppressors, in many ways, of the Syrian people, at least the leadership was drawn from the Alawites—

the quickest way to protect all of them is to institutionalize and reform the Syrian military.

That comes with a stabilized State. Frankly, it probably comes with the U.S. providing oversight, whether that is U.S. forces or some sort of a contract mechanism, to insist on reforms so that the sort of people that have been responsible for atrocities fighting on that side are weeded out quickly and, if they are not Syrians, are sent out of the country. Then we can trust. We have to verify, and we have to go through this reform process. We cannot take our hands off the wheel.

Representative ELLZEY: Well, I am curious—my time has expired—but I wonder what that kind of a mechanism is. Because there is a whole bunch of folks behind you that are shaking their heads whenever asked if he can be trusted or not. I am concerned about it too, specifically what that mechanism is. What—how do we force them to protect those groups?

Thank you for the answer. It is a great answer.

Chairman, I yield back.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Jake Ellzey.

We now proceed to Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan.

STATEMENT OF CHRISSY HOULAHAN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Representative HOULAHAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you all for your testimony today.

Mr. Doran, you mentioned that international politics now in the U.S. is us versus Russia, us versus China, and us versus Iran. Dr. Outzen, you also mentioned that your thesis, your doctorate, apparently, is on applying less pressure and coercion on Syria and rather engaging them instead. My question has to do with the fact that the current administration has suggested that our oldest allies in Europe should operate with more independence from the United States. I guess what I am trying to find out is how we can do all of these things, which is to address whether or not—how to be more aggressively inclusive with Syria-while also not necessarily engaging our allies in that outreach? What has NATO been doing, if anything? If you all would be helpful in filling in the blanks there.

What more could the United States be doing that would be the opposite of sanctions? Because it seems like sanctions are your collective definition of coercion. You mentioned, Doctor, that you might have forces-I do not know if you meant forces on the ground or what you meant-to be that kind of helpful force. I am looking for meat on the bones of what it is that you are actually talking about when you say that we cannot coerce, but we need to cooperate more with Syria. Also, at the same time, our administration is turning its—itself away from the allies that might actually help us execute on that.

Mr. DORAN: Thank you. I think the European allies, in this scenario, are going to play a secondary role, and NATO as well. Simply because of their capabilities and their history in this part of the world. There has been a pretty clear distinction since the Suez crisis that Europeans take care of European security and the United

States and its Middle Eastern allies take care of Middle Eastern security. The key countries are Turkey and Israel, because the United States is pulling back somewhat from the—from the Middle East. I do not think we are leaving the Middle East, but we want to be less engaged militarily on the ground. I think that has been true of every president since President Bush. There has been this inclination to pull back.

If we still have interests in the region but we are pulling back militarily, then logically all we have to rely on are our regional allies. The two most capable allies in this case are the Turks and the Israelis. The problem is that the friction between them is so significant right now that it could—it could actually end up destabilizing Syria, and offering, as Chairman Wilson said, an opportunity for our adversaries to use the destabilization against us. I think there is the—with regard to the Islamists, extremists that are surrounding Sharaa, this is the—this is the biggest problem I think, more than whatever he has in his heart. He has a cadre of people around him who are quite happy to go out and slaughter minorities. They need to be kept on a short leash. There need to be trained up other forces that can provide security in those areas that are not influenced by them.

I think the key partner here is the Turks. They are the—they are the—they are the arm of NATO into Syria. They have the capability of building those kinds of forces. Given the tensions now between the Israelis and the Turks, and the fears that the Israelis have that the Turks might use this to create forward basing against Israel, that is precisely the area in which I think we need the greatest intervention in the shortest amount of time, to come up with formula that will not provoke the worst fears of the Israelis but will allow the Turks to actually play a mediating role on the ground in Syria. Building up security forces that are NATO-compatible, and not under the control of Islamist extremists.

Mr. OUTZEN: On my research into coercion, it is not that I do not think we should ever coerce. We have given Syria a massive dose of coercion for about the last 15 years. I just do not think that is the right tool right now. Now you want to keep your powder dry. There may be certain things that we should have a snapback or the ability to reimpose if things go off the rails. When you are talking about a stabilizing country, should not lead with that. What do we lead with? I can think of, especially based on my time in Afghanistan, multiple situations where we had actually done a pretty good job. Kabul had 24 hours of electricity for the first time, female education, girls in schools. A lot of progress was made in stabilizing. Now, that was a bigger challenge in the sense that it was a much bigger country. We ended up not seeing that through past the 20 years.

We also did not have the kind of proximate help from countries like Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia that are willing to pour resources, money, and so forth, into the economic development of Syria. What I would like to see is the U.S. embassy open as quickly as possible. I would like to see a major U.S. intelligence operation cooperating and collaborating. I would like to see CENTCOM there. I would also say that security sector reform is incredibly important. I think that we talked a little bit about that with the previous

question. We have countries like Türkiye that can do the shooter training, so to speak. That will go in and do your platoon-level, your tactical training, and things like that. What the United States does that nobody else does as well is security sector reform.

We have a small number of companies in the private sector, and I am not talking about the kind that go in and, again, are doing shooting courses and the physical security. I am talking about how to run a ministry of defense, how to do a budget, how to make sure that you are doing your intake procedures and your human resources procedures so that you are filtering out people with extremist tendencies. We have those skills. We have those companies. There were over 70 companies within the first week that the U.S.—this is a friend at the U.S. Chamber told me—that once the U.S. Chamber restarted a Syria program, 70 companies signed up in the first week. There is a massive appetite. A lot of it is in energy, defense, construction, but massive appetite for U.S. private sector to get involved with Syria. I think that is what we should be looking at: Incentivizing and helping to guide the reconstruction and security.

Representative HOULAHAN: I appreciate the answers, and I have many more questions, but I have definitely run out of time.

I yield.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congresswoman Crissy Houlahan, of Pennsylvania. We can get back to your question, another.

We are really grateful to have Congressman Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri.

STATEMENT OF EMANUEL CLEAVER, U.S. HOUSE, FROM MISSOURI

Representative CLEAVER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to follow through on the discussion you were just having. I happen to agree with you. That is why I have been trying to find out how active USAID is in Syria, if, in fact, it is. Clearly that would be the U.S.' soft diplomacy, and maybe even give us a stronger hand in the future of Syria. Do you have any information about USAID, or anything?

Mr. DORAN: I do not think any of us do. Do you? No, we are USAID knowledge-free zone here.

Representative CLEAVER: [LAUGHS.] Yes. Well, it is all over the world, because I have been able—I have been hunting it down, and I have not gotten any answer. Which is a concern. I just—

Mr. OUTZEN: If I can throw in just one comment, based on my time in Afghanistan. We had a massive USAID presence. Because of the sort of tentative security situation, in many cases we could not get out to check on the projects. That was a—you had power stations and schools that were built in remote provinces that the USAID folks—and this is all laid out in the Special Inspector General's Report for Afghanistan. That model of how to help reconstruction and stabilization had its pathologies.

Of course, under the current administration, there has been a major reform of how we do foreign assistance. I have to admit, I am not certain, since we do not have, to my knowledge, an embassy up and running—fully running in Damascus; I am not sure we

have a mission set up yet for the—and I believe USAID has been resubordinated under a different bureau of the State Department. I do think there needs to be a lot of thought given to that, and I think there is a role. Obviously, I emphasize private sector in my view. There has to be some guiding hand and some rationalization coming from State Department and the aid agencies as well.

Representative CLEAVER: Yes. I agree with that. I am a big believer in USAID. I have seen it in action around the world. It is one of the things that I think we may have pulled back on, to our detriment. What other ways—or are there other ways—for either of you—either of the three of you—for the U.S. to be more engaged in Syria? What do we need to do? We need a larger footprint, economically, militarily; what do we need?

Dr. BORSCHEVSKAYA: Oh, I would absolutely agree we need a larger footprint, and I agree with both—both what Mike and Richard have said. I mean, the fact that the U.S. embassy is not up and running is a problem, because the Russian embassy is still operating in Damascus. It is still open, to my knowledge. I think, you know, I mentioned that we need to reexamine how we look at our engagement with Syria. We need to broaden our definition of that engagement. That should not—that should not be only military, but it should include economic, diplomatic, and certainly cultural. Russia, for its part, has a long history of cultural engagement in Syria, with intermarriages and Russian language instruction. I think more—the more people, full-time staff we have on the ground, the more information we have, the more we have the ability to shape the outcome.

Mr. DORAN: If I can add one specific idea, Congressman. The discussions with our Turkish friends, there's an organization, an industrial organization, called TOBB, the Turk Odalar ve Borsalar Birliği. It is basically a large chamber of commerce-type organization. They have a plan right now to go into northern—mostly on the northern side of Türkiye, and establish industrial zones. They're looking for a signal from the United States that we think this is a good idea. They have lots of companies that want to go in. By the way, one of the things they would do is take Syrians—because there have been four million Syrians living in Türkiye during most of the war. Some of them have gone back. They want to take some of these Syrians with skills, with their own businesses already in Türkiye, and incentivize them to go back to Syria and start a virtuous cycle of job creation and prosperity in those regions. I think the U.S., to the extent that we can do this through State Department or Commerce, and incentivize our companies to jump in on that, to build these industrial zones, would be a tremendous way to have an engine for reconstruction.

Representative CLEAVER: Thank you. Chairman Wilson has great power, strength, and vision. He will be able to do all the things you just mentioned. [LAUGHTER.]

Co-Chairman WILSON: Hear, hear. Thank you.

Representative CLEAVER: I yield back.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you so much, Congressman Cleaver.

We now—I am really grateful that Congresswoman Houlahan has a question. Then I will have a final question. Again, what you

are presenting is so important for the people of Syria. We want them to have opportunity. What a benefit it would be to all of the Middle East. Congresswoman.

Representative HOULAHAN: This is for Ms. Borchevskaya. I was wondering if, with your knowledge of the region and your knowledge of the history of the region, you might be able to prognosticate what might happen. What are you seeing for the future of Syria, and the role and influence of Russia? What can we, the United States, do to counter that? If there is a historical analogy or something that is in the past that looks a lot like this, what would it be?

Dr. BORSCHEVSKAYA: Sure. My concern is that—because Russia is playing the long game in Syria, they are taking their time—my concern is that we will not—we will not sustain this effort to prioritize Syria, to engage with Syria, and Russia will take advantage of that. In the military realm in particular, Syria will have a very hard time weaning itself off of Russian military hardware, in the absence of other alternatives. This is such a deep dependence for which it is—from a very practical level, Syria has no other alternatives. Thus far, this government in Damascus is being very pragmatic. Remember, the Russian forces bombed al-Sharaa, but they had no qualms making a deal. Putin welcomed Sharaa twice in Moscow.

I worry also that if we do not provide other guardrails for the Syrian government, for alternatives in other fields—like printing Syrian currency, economic engagement—Russia's ability also to talk to conflicting sides within Syria and present itself as a mediator. I worry that over time Russia will take over. Perhaps that is why I am a little bit more cautious in terms of my outlook on Syria, and in terms of Russia's position there. I think our best strategy is to also play the long game and to recognize that this is going to take a long time. We need a sustained effort. We need to do what the Russians do. We need to prioritize this country. If we are able to do that—we were able to do that during the cold war—then I—then I think we do have a chance. I worry that we will not sustain this effort.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Houlahan.

A final question from me for Dr. Doran and Colonel Outzen. Since February 2022, Russian forces have suffered nearly 1.2 million casualties in Ukraine, more losses than any other major power in any war since World War II. Its economy is actually less than two-thirds of the Baltic republics in Poland, just those four countries. Just two-thirds. I wish Congressman Ellzey was here; it is also less than Texas. With a small economy, which I believe can be collapsing with international sanctions being enforced, we know that these are the factors that led to the collapse of the Assad dictatorship in 2024, and the Soviet Union in 1990. How does the war in Ukraine continue to affect Russian operations in Syria? Also, it is misleading, but there is online advertising by Russian recruiters to bring Syrians to die on the battlefield in Ukraine. And they are transiting through the Russian bases. Again, reminding us how bad this is and what a tradition Putin has. We know he sent his troops into Ukraine with their dress uniforms because they were

going to be welcomed by the Ukrainians. In fact, he was sacrificing young Russians to die for his power.

This week, I will be introducing a bipartisan Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries Act that will designate the successors of the Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization. Are you aware of these reports? If accurate, what implications do they have for assessing the strategic importance of the Russian Syrian bases? How can we work with our Syrian friends to—for the best of the people of Syria? Dr. Doran.

Mr. DORAN: Thank you. I think it is vitally important that we understand the strategic connection between—from the Russian point of view—between Ukraine and Syria. If the Russians do not succeed in Ukraine, if they fail in Ukraine, then Russia is no longer an empire. It becomes a—it becomes something closer to being a Russian ethnic nation-State. Ukraine is really the key element that allows it to function as an empire. It is through Ukraine, through Crimea, that it has access onto the Mediterranean. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there is a bridge—a naval bridge from Crimea to Syria. We should see this as Vladimir Putin does, as a complex, and work in both areas simultaneously.

Having said that, we do also have to be very much aware of the fact that the Sharaa project in Damascus is very, very fragile, and it could go wrong in many—in many ways. I think Sharaa himself is fearful that the Russians may become a destabilizing force. He has made a clear distinction between the Iranians and the Russians. He defines Iran as an absolute enemy, and he will not have any—any thought of negotiations with the Iranians about their position in the country, but not so with—not so with Russia. As Anna mentioned, he is dependent on the Russians for equipment. That is not just, you know, hard military equipment. Just radars that you need to run a normal—a normal airport. It is all Russian—it is all Russian equipment, so there is the fear of destabilization. There is the desire for aid on infrastructure, also military equipment.

If I could say one issue—one point on a different subject before I close. I just want to emphasize, in terms of the importance of finding a modus vivendi between the Turks and the Israelis, how important the Druze question is in the south. The Israelis want some kind of guarantee for the well-being of the Druze, who suffered a horrible slaughter at the hands of Sharaa's extremist security forces just a few months ago. Their fears about the Druze are legitimate. They are very well—they are very well-established. They also—they also intersect with Israel's concerns about threats on their own border to Israel. From the Turkish point of view, the Turks look at this, and they see a desire on the part of Israel to fragment Syria. I think that is another area where the United States really has to put in sustained—sustained diplomacy to find a formula that will assuage the Israelis and also convince the Turks that this is not an effort to fragment the whole country.

Thank you.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Dr. Doran. Now, Colonel Outzen.

Mr. OUTZEN: Sir, the Russians are opportunistic. They will look for any hole in any polity, in any State in the region. They will

worm their way in. They will try to break it apart, and hollow it out, and maximize their own influence. They have done this in Georgia. They have done it in parts of Ukraine. They have done it in Belarus, and they did it in Syria. We made a huge mistake, in my view—the United States did—in overestimating their staying power and their strength. For—you know, I remember, going back to 2013, 2014, 2015, when there was bipartisan support to do something stronger—more strongly to support the Syrian opposition. We bought this idea that, oh, the Russians will never let it happen, and their air defense is too strong. The Iranians will never let it happen. Well, the Syrian people suffered for 10 years because of that overestimate. I think we should avoid making that same mistake in the case of Ukraine.

Now, we also cannot count on the Russians giving up anytime soon. What they have shown is that even with an economy smaller than that of Texas, they are willing to squeeze every little bit out of their people to keep fighting these wars. It is a very strong combination of deterrence, strengthening our allies—and that means, in my view, Ukraine, which we have done a pretty good job, I think, after a bad start, of helping Ukraine. My view is we should do more. We also have to see Syria as an analogous position to that. If Syria is left on its own, if we do not—and I am not saying write blank checks to Al-Sharaa or anybody else. I have my own doubts about the man. Through engagement and through strengthening the Syrian State, and nesting it in with our regional allies, we will leave no room for the Russians to do what they have previously done in Syria, and what they continue to try to do in Ukraine. Then we will have sewn together a very strong regional network of alliances that restores American credibility. That is the direction I think we need to take it.

Co-Chairman WILSON: Well, thank each of our witnesses for being here today. I am grateful for our colleagues, and again, I hope people notice. I am so grateful for the staff here too. The Commission for the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, it is very bipartisan and very bicameral, because we want the best for the American people and we want the best, in this hearing, for the people of Syria and for the Middle East. With that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:40 p.m., the hearing ended.]

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