

Hearing Transcript

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on the Human Toll of Six Years of War in Syria

March 15,, 2017

RISCH:

The meeting will come to order. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for attending. Today marks the sixth anniversary, I use that word guardedly, of the start of the civil war in Syria. We all know that it has caused the largest humanitarian crisis on the planet since World War II. There are many, many issues regarding the conflict and today we're going to explore some of those, and a few of them that we will talk about is the food shortage in Syria and the substantial starvation and deprivation that's occurred there. A recent development where Turkey has revoked the permits for certain humanitarian NGOs to distribute food there.

Education is a big issue, of course, for everyone in the world. And with six years, this war, there's an entire generation that is going to be deprived on the educational front. There's a number of issues regarding that and we're going to delve into all of those. And so with that, I would like to recognize our distinguished Ranking Member Senator Cardin for his comments

CARDIN:

Well, Chairman Risch, first of all, thank you very much for stepping in to chair this hearing. We should point out that Senator Corker has commitments with President Trump today in Tennessee and that's the reason why he is not able to chair the hearing. I have talked to Senator Corker and I know his personal interest in regards to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and I can assure everyone that this Committee will work together to do everything we can to help in regards the humanitarian crisis that exists in Syria today.

As Chairman Risch pointed out, the war has been going on for six years. Six long years. The country and many of its cities have been reduced to rubble. Loved ones have been killed and wounded. Syrians are now destitute, two-thirds extreme or abject poverty. I heard that it could cost as much as 25 percent of Syrians' family income to pay for water. Think about that for a moment, spending one-fourth of your income so that you have water for your family.

The essential infrastructures have been destroyed in the country. Schools have been destroyed, hospitals, sanitation systems, electrical grids. Five million Syrians have fled their homeland. And it's tragic for all Syrians, but particularly for the innocent children, many of whom have been killed. The mental health of the Syrian children, we just received a report last week from Save the Children, and it's tragic. As that report points out, these children have lost their childhood. They've been absent from school, because school does not exist in many parts of Syria today. Their speech has been affected. And they have many issues concern -- including partial (inaudible).

So this is a tragic situation for all in Syria. The act of war has challenged the humanitarian effort in order to get help to the people who have been victimized. We know that. I have grave concern about the Trump policies as to how it is assisting in dealing with the crisis in Syria. And Mr. Chairman, let me just mention three points that concern me.

First, we've heard that President Trump will be submitting a budget that has a 37 percent cut in the State Department's budget. If America is going to be active in dealing with the humanitarian needs, how do we do that with a budget that is already inadequate, cutting it by over one-third?

We've also heard reports that the humanitarian budget may be zeroed out in some cases. That's not what America stands for. We, our country, has been the leader globally in pursuing humanitarian needs, recognizing that its part of what we stand for as a nation, but it's also in our national security interest to make sure there's stability in countries. Can we really do that with a budget that cuts development assistance by that size of amount of money? Budgets talk about priorities, is that what our priority is going to be.

Secondly, I have grave concern about Mr. Trump's policies as it relates to Russia in dealing with Syria. Russia has supported and facilitated the atrocities that have taken place in Syria. They've targeted civilians, they have attacked humanitarian convoys. We know about the U.N. convoy that was attacked killing 14 civilians and wounding and severely injuring another 15 more. Russia has participated in war crimes, they need to be held accountable. I will be reintroducing shortly the Syrian War Crime Accountability Act. I urge my colleagues to help us get that done, so we make it clear to all who are participating in atrocities in Syria that they will be held accountable for their activities.

And third, let me mention the refugee policy of the Trump administration, the most recent executive order. There's been now over 100 Republican and Democratic national security experts that have sent a letter saying that the President's executive order is harmful to U.S. national security interests and beneath the dignity of our great nation. I couldn't agree more, it's counterproductive.

Let me just share with the members of this Committee the conversations we had with King Abdullah of Jordan. Jordan has accepted 650,000 -- 650,000 Syrian refugees. King Abdullah has made it clear that that has not presented a security challenge for the country of Jordan. United States has accepted a few thousand Syria refugees. There has been no example of any security threat. These individuals are vetted as extreme as we have for anyone coming to America, taking anywhere from 18 to 24 months. I think the members of this Committee know that.

We talk about that frequently, and Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I would like to introduce three families that are with us today because I think it's important to put a face. These are not numbers, these are people who are escaping terror and persecution that are now making America their home to help build this great country, as many of our parents and grandparents came to this country to build a better life for their children.

If I might, let me first introduce Mohammed (ph) and his family who arrived in the United States on November 16th of this -- of last year. Mohammed (ph) was a pastry chef in Damascus prior to

fleeing to Jordan. Mohammed (ph) and his family remained displaced in Jordan for more than four years before resettling by the International Rescue Committee in Maryland. Thank you.

Next, let me introduce, if I might, Awad (ph) who arrived in the United States last June. Awad (ph) was in the farming and wholesale business in Dara'a, Syria, before fleeing to Jordan. Awad (ph) was displaced for three years before he was referred to the United States for resettlement. The International Rescue Committee also helped resettle Awad (ph) in Maryland. Thank you for being here. I appreciate it.

And finally, let me introduce Sameer (ph) and his wife who arrived in the U.S. in December. Sameer (ph) owned a market in Homs, Syria. Sameer (ph) and his wife fled to Egypt to escape the war, where they remained for five years before being resettled in International Rescue Committee in Maryland. Welcome.

I am proud that you're here in the United States. I'm particularly proud that you're in my State of Maryland. Our state has embraced diversity. Our state, I believe, is stronger because of the diversity that we have.

It's very interesting, Mr. Chairman, and I'll conclude on this remarks. Thank you all very much. When we look at Maryland counties that surround D.C., we have Prince George's County and Montgomery County considered to be two of the strongest counties in the United States. Both are -- have embraced diversity for decades and is a place in which we welcome immigrants.

Mr. Chairman, we need to know Mr. Trump's policies as it relates to Syria and ending the conflict in Syria in the national interest of the United States. We don't have that information today. What we do have is a panel of experts who can help us deal with the humanitarian crisis that exists today and how we can be helpful in dealing with those needs. I welcome our panel.

RISCH:

Thank you, Senator Cardin. And I think all of us are anxious to see a specific policy regarding America's moving forward regarding the Syrian situation. And that I'm sure will be forthcoming. We all have our ideas about it. I think everyone is getting some input into that. Today, though, we're going to be talking about the humanitarian crisis. I suppose there'll be some overlap, but today is a focus on the humanitarian crisis. And certainly over the last eight years and particularly the last six years, our policy in Syria has been drifting to say the least and it really needs focus where if we don't focus it, we're going to have the same result that we've had over the last six years and it's unacceptable in the world and it's unacceptable to America.

Our -- we have five witnesses to testify today. First of all, we have three witnesses who are Syrian doctors who've come here to testify and Dr. Farida, Dr. Abdulkhalek, and Dr. Rajab. Our fourth witness is Mr. Neal Keny-Guyer. Senator Merkley is asked to say a few words about Mr. Guyer and I'll yield to Senator Merkley.

MERKLEY:

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased to introduce my friend, Neal Keny-Guyer, the CEO of Mercy Corps, a Portland based humanitarian and development non-profit. Mercy Corps is a unique organization. It works in over 40 countries, almost all of which are either in conflict like Syria or recovering from conflict or natural disaster. Mercy Corps is committed to innovation. Even in complex and fragile states, Mercy Corps works to make markets function better so that poor families can earn a living and lift themselves out of poverty.

In places like Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda, Mercy Corps' commitment to innovation is allowing them to help the poorest of the poor. Their commitment to innovation is impressive, but also their courage, working in some of the most difficult locations to be found on the globe.

In considerable danger to their own team, Mercy Corps has assisted millions of Syrians over the course of the war. They are one of the largest U.S. Government partners, providing assistance to Syrians affected by the war. And Neal's team continues to do all they can to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable individuals, vulnerable citizens. We look forward to hearing your testimony, Neal, thank you so much for the work of your organization.

RISCH:

Thank you, Senator Merkley. Our fifth and final witness is The Right Honorable David Miliband who is President and Chief Executive Officer of International Rescue Committee. So with that, I'm going to recognize all five of you to make statements. We're on a short string here, obviously, as we always are in the U.S. Senate. We'd ask you to keep your remarks to no more than five minutes. However, your full remarks submitted in writing will actually be included in the record of this hearing.

So with that, I'm going to recognize the -- our three doctors from Syria and I -- I'll guess I'll let you decide on who's going to go first to present their statement. OK, doctor?

FARIDA:

Good morning. Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished member of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Dr. Farida and I'm an OB/GYN from Aleppo. I'm here today not only as a doctor, but as a wife, a mother, and a Syrian.

Throughout the past six years, I have witnessed unspeakable horrors. I worked in M2 hospital in Aleppo, which was in the opposition-held area of the city. There, together with my fellow health workers, we risked our lives every day to save the lives of the others. We refused to leave until the last -- the very last minute. I was one of the many victims of chemical attacks, siege, cluster munitions, bunker buster bombs, and, finally, forced displacement.

I left Aleppo on December 12, 2016, along with my husband, Dr. Abdulkhalek, and our eight years old daughter. In the months leading up to our displacement, I can only describe the events as hell. In my hospital, M2, my team and I treated many women with severe injuries. One woman came with shrapnel which penetrated her womb, cutting the five-month-old fetus into two pieces. It took

three doctors at once to stabilize the patient. We saved her life, but her unborn baby lay dead on nearby table, split into two from the waist down.

Many other women died because they couldn't make it to the hospital due to the lack of ambulances and fuel, or because of the dangerous conditions on the road. Instead, they bled to death in their homes, along with their newborn children. Our hospital was the most dangerous place in Aleppo. My unit in M2 hospital was on the third floor. We were subjected to a daily barrage of rockets, barrel bombs, and cluster munition.

One day I was performing a cesarean section when a missile struck the fourth floor, causing the ceiling partially collapse. The surgical staff had to flee the room, but the doctors couldn't because we were forced to clean the debris out of the patient's abdominal cavity. Thankfully, we were able to save her life.

After my hospital, M2, was partially destroyed by airstrikes, we tried to build a new hospital underground, but the siege prevented the materials from entering the city. I then moved to M3 hospital. I worked until it was targeted by both airstrikes and chemical weapon. Throughout this, I had my daughter at my side. As a mother, how am I supposed to explain all of this to an eight years old who has known nothing about violence, killing, and destruction? How am I supposed to protect her?

I remember one day back in July when there was a chlorine attack near to the hospital. She came running into the operating room, crying and unable to breath. I left the patient, gave my daughter oxygen, and held her close. What else could I have done? This broke my heart. That feeling of powerless to protect my child has broken me till this day.

I wish I could say that these atrocities and the plight of the so many Syrian families was unique to Aleppo. Sadly, this is not the case. They are happening right now in other parts of Syria. Presently, more than 600,000 Syrians live under siege. This must end. Humanitarian access must be granted to these areas, and the international community must work together to end this practice once and for all. In Idlib, East Ghouta, Dara'a, Hama, and Homs, airstrikes have intensified -- airstrikes -- and the humanitarian aid has -- nearly non-existent.

There three hospitals have been targeted by airstrikes in the past two weeks, and one of SAMS' nurses was killed by an airstrike last week. It's our duty as human beings to advocate all of the involved parties on the ground to allow humanitarian access, and to finally hold these who violate international humanitarian law accountable.

Later this month, my family and I will return to Syria to continue our work at a hospital in northern Syria. The reason is simple, it's our duty. As doctors, we have taken an oath to treat any and all patients, regardless to their affiliation. We have a moral obligation to try and to save as many lives as possible, even if that means sacrificing our own. The Quran teaches us that to save one life is to save all of humanity. Work with us to save lives, if you want to do anything, do it now. There is no time to wait, as Syrians continue to die day after day. Thank you.

RISCH:

Thank you for your testimony. Doctor, you're next.

ABDULKHALEK:

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Cardin, members of community (sic), my name is Dr. Abdulkhalek. I'm an ophthalmologist from Aleppo, and was a director of M3 hospital, one of three hospitals in the Syrian American Medical Society supported in besieged eastern Aleppo. This hospital was built in 2014, and constructed underground to protect the patients and the staffs from airstrikes.

M3 was a small hospital, so we were often overwhelmed by the large number of patients and wounded arriving at our facility. We did our best to save as many lives as we could, but we were forced to make very difficult decisions. With the overwhelming number of wounded civilians and the limited resources that were available to us, we had to face the unimaginable task of deciding who to save, and who to leave to die.

Can you imagine having to make this decision? Yet, my colleagues all over the city and I faced this every single day. We asked for help from the international community many times. We communicated with U.N. agencies; we risked our safety and that of our families by appearing on international media. We did everything we could, yet help never arrived.

The U.N. system is clearly broken, as it has no means to enforce its mandates and hold perpetrators accountable for these crimes. I was one of three doctors from Aleppo assigned to negotiate a plan for medical evacuation with the U.N. and World Health Organization. At first, these negotiations were moving well, with the cooperation of many parties, including Russia. However, as the regime and its allies began to take more territory, the cooperation disappeared and the evacuation never occurred. Instead, the attacks on medical facilities, schools, and markets escalated.

Last year, on December 11, as we were trying to save lives and care for victims of barrel bombing attack, the hospital was attacked by a chlorine bomb. We immediately ran into the inner room, closed the door, and covered our faces. We then heard a knock on the main door, and encountered three men who were suffocating from the gas. We brought them whatever medicine we still had available. Thankfully, we were able to save their lives, but many others who were outside died from the gas.

After this attack, many hospital staff had to leave, fearing for their lives. Everyone has -- afraid that the second bomb would strike again. The previous day, another chlorine attack had hit the hospital. Most of the victims were children, and we only had one unit of oxygen. The medical staff worked tirelessly to try and pass the mask from one child to another, so that they wouldn't suffocate.

These chlorine attacks occurred after repeated attempts by the regime and its allies to destroy the hospital using barrel bombs and cluster munitions had failed. Instead, they resorted to chemical attack to drive us out. I'm asking you today to hold the perpetrators of these attacks accountable.

It must be made clear that attacks on healthcare and the use of chemical weapons on civilians and healthcare workers are accountable -- are unacceptable, and that international humanitarian law must be strictly enforced. This can't be the new norm in Syria.

In Homs, the three-year siege has blocked the delivery of medical supplies, such as blood bags, serum bags, and antibiotics. In the past six months, the siege has extended to create a complete lack of movement for all materials and medications. Yet, the world does nothing.

In East Ghouta, which is also under siege by the regime, there were more than 30 patients in desperate need of kidney dialysis medication earlier this month, after their medication had run out due to lack of aid deliveries. We pleaded with the U.N. and other international actors to deliver the life-saving medication, but it wasn't until after three patients died that the medications were delivered. And even then, it was a SARC convoy, not a U.N. convoy, that entered the area. In three weeks those medication will run out and the patient lives will once again be at risk. We need sustained humanitarian access.

Constant violation of international humanitarian law, regular use of chemical weapon against civilians, besiegement of civilian areas, manipulation of humanitarian aid, and forced displacement are facts, not claims. I myself witnessed or was a victim of every one of these heinous acts. I'm here today to ask the American Government for help. Do not let these acts continue. Do not let more innocent civilians suffer. Do not forget the human toll of this war- the refugees, the education gap, the destruction of the health care system.

An entire generation has been lost. The world failed Aleppo. Now is your chance to help protect and save the millions of Syrians still caught in the middle of this conflict. Enforce international law; hold perpetrators of war crimes accountable; reform the U.N. aid system; make the protection of civilian and hospital a priority. I ask you to be a voice of us. Do not fail us again. Thank you.

RISCH:

Thank you, doctor. Dr. Rajab.

RAJAB:

Good morning. My name is Mohamed Abu Rajab. I was the director of M10 hospital in Aleppo, the largest trauma hospital in the eastern part of the city. The hospital was established by the Syrian American Medical Society, SAMS, in February of 2013. Because of the many attacks on the hospital, SAMS moved underground to protect its patients and medical workers.

From the opening of the hospital in 2013 until it was bombed out of the service on October 14, 2016, M10 was hit by airstrikes 22 times. In October 2016, the hospital was targeted five times in one week, removing from service. I myself was injured by shrapnel in one of the attacks. Some of the shrapnel remains in my body to this day.

Do you remember the young boy, Omran, whose photo became a symbol of children of Aleppo? We treated him at M10. Thankfully, he survived his injuries. Sadly, his brother, Ali who was 11, died from his injuries.

Most of our patients at M10 were children. So much death and suffering and for what? The people of Syria simply want to be free. The use of bunker buster bombs changed everything. It wasn't until the entrance of Russia into the conflict that we start to see these advanced weapons: bunker buster bombs, parachute bombs, and more.

We moved from one hospital to another as each was targeted and taken off the service. We were convinced that we were going to die. When the final evacuations began, we were scared of what would happen to us. The Iranian militias were looting houses and killing anyone who resisted. We went to a checkpoint and boarded the infamous green buses. We ultimately made our way north to Idlib. We would have been arrested if we had entered a government-controlled area.

This kind of forced displacement cannot be allowed to continue. I love Aleppo. I love Syria. It is my home. It is a part of me. I dream of one day return to my home with my family and living in peace. I call on you to protect hospitals and health workers. This is a simple request. In addition, we must allow civilians to remain in their house -- homes, and not be forced to evacuate. When you live in freedom, you must help others to be free. The United States Government must be a voice for the innocent people of Syria, and must be a moral compass for the parties involved. Thank you, sir.

RISCH:

Thank you very much, doctor. We'll now move to Mr. Keny- Guyer.

GUYER:

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Cardin, senators, I almost feel like I should just stop right now after this human face and the courage of our Syrian friends. And I just want to thank doctors, Farida, Abdulkhalek and Dr. Rajab for their courageous work in upholding humanity. You touched us all. Thank you.

I also want to say what a privilege it is to be with my friend, David Miliband, and his great organization IRC. We work closely together and proudly around the world. And also I have to thank my friend Jeff Merkley for his -- first of all, his incredible friendship and for his incredible support to Mercy Corps, to our state and to our country. And finally to Tim Kaine for all he has done on behalf of Mercy Corps and, of course, for his friendship as well.

While the politics on the ground in Syria have changed, the one thing that remains constant is the suffering of the Syrian people. And at this point, I really want to thank the U.S. Government, USAID, the State Department, for years of leadership in supporting the Syrian people. I think we need to recognize this that U.S. has been the largest donor, largest supporter, a leader in upholding whatever aid there can be for Syria over these years.

Now, if I may, and Chairman Risch referred to it, Senator Cardin referred to it, I want to begin with Mercy Corps' situation in Turkey where recent events have diminished our ability to alleviate the suffering inside Syria. We've conducted one of the largest humanitarian operations from Turkey to Syria with the permission and full cooperation of the Turkish Government over the past five years.

As you all may know, just a few weeks ago, the Turkish Government revoked Mercy Corps' registration to operate in Turkey or to deliver cross-border assistance. That has disrupted live-saving assistance for 360,000 Syrians that we reach every month inside and has effectively ended support to 100,000 people in Turkey, Syrian and Turkish citizens. To-date, our situation remains unresolved. We continue to seek a dialog with Turkish officials so that we may resume our operations as soon as possible. We stand ready to correct any technical mistakes we might have made.

Meanwhile, we've had no choice but to shut down our presence in Turkey while working closely with our partners and donors, including USAID and the State Department, to quickly fill any gaps in our assistance. Now, we all know, Turkey has been a generous global leader in humanitarian action. It welcomed more than 3 million Syrian refugees and boost one of the world's most important policies on refugees, allowing them to earn a living for their families and offering them a path to citizenship. Like the United States, Turkey is a signatory to international humanitarian laws requiring protection of innocent civilians caught in the conflict.

As an independent and impartial humanitarian organization, Mercy Corps' mandate is to deliver essential aid to civilians in need on all sides of the conflict and I can tell you that we are very proud of our principled humanitarian efforts in Syria and around the world today. Of course, we all know the only solution to the suffering of Syrians is a political resolution. Humanitarian aid saves lives and it sustains hope. Only peace saves societies and nations. Strong, smart U.S. engagement remains a critical component.

Distinguished senators, I know this issue is tough, but please remain resolute in your push for a durable peace in Syria. Meanwhile, the scale of suffering is staggering. The dark statistics defy description. Imagine, the combined populations of Oregon and Tennessee in need of humanitarian assistance and that is Syria today.

At a recent Helsinki conference on supporting Syrians, Humam, a young Syrian who works for Mercy Corps told the assembly, he said, "I'm waiting for the war to stop so I can go back and rebuild Syria. I believe that we can rebuild Syria better than before. I feel I have a lot of power and I can bring my skills. I can now speak out and lead. I want the same for other youth as well." And friends, let's remember Humam, let's remember the human face of the people involved, and let's never lose hope regardless of how complex or how dark sometimes the day seem. Thank you very much.

RISCH:

Thank you. And finally, The Right Honorable David Miliband.

MILIBAND:

Chairman Risch and senators, it's a real honor to be back in -- Chairman Risch and senators, it's a real honor to be back in front of this Committee sitting alongside some extraordinary humanitarian leaders. I want to echo what Neal has said about the really humbling work that's done by the Syrian doctors. We're proud to work alongside them inside Syria. I also echo his -- the mutual admiration society that we're creating for each other that Mercy Corps as an organization that we're proud to stand alongside and to admire.

I won't take long for this opening statement. You've got the 10- page version I think in your papers, and I know that there'll be many questions. I also need to apologize that given the slightly later start time, I'm going to have to leave at about 1 o'clock and I do apologize for that.

The International Rescue Committee is a refugee resettlement agency in 29 U.S. cities and we're an international humanitarian aid agency. We have over 1,000 staff operating inside Syria today and 2,000 staff in the four neighboring states. In the south of Syria, we are proud to be the largest supplier of healthcare, but our efforts are currently impeded by a recent uptick in fighting between Syrian forces and opposition groups, by airstrikes on medical facilities. We lost eight of our hospitals in 2016 to airstrikes and by a local ISIS affiliate capitalizing on the chaos in the south.

In the northeast, I was in Iraq seeing some of the cross-border work last week. In the northeast of Syria, we support Iraqis fleeing violence from Mosul, entering Syria as refugees and Syrians displaced by counter-ISIS operations. The U.N. estimates that 400,000 more people could be affected as Raqqa operations intensify in the next few months.

In Idlib Province in the northwest of the country of Syria, IRC provides emergency assistance and safe classrooms to locals and those forced from eastern Aleppo. I have to report to you that increased infighting among opposition groups and air attacks from the regime and their Russian supporters are threatening civilians and our ability to serve them.

I won't repeat all of the statistics that you've heard or that you know. I do want to point to one statistic that still shocks me in the evidence I supplied. Subsequent to three U.N. Security Council resolutions, the head of U.N. operations has reported that less than 1 percent of those Syrian civilians under siege inside Syria have been reached by humanitarian operation, not because of inefficiency in the U.N., but because of deliberate blockage by the regime and in some cases by opposition forces.

You'll also know that 5 million Syrian refugees have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. From my visit to Lebanon last week, the priorities are clear. There are work, protection for women and kids, and education. Chairman and senators, we point out in our statement that there are three fundamental choices that now face the United States Government and the Senate.

The first is about politics and diplomacy because the truth is the U.S. has been absent from the recent public diplomatic efforts. Russia, Turkey and Iran have put themselves center stage. There is not just a war without end in Syria, there's also a war without law and a principled American

voice is needed to articulate support for international humanitarian law and accountability for those who violate it. The truth is, if the U.S. does not provide this voice, no one else will.

The second is about foreign assistance, we understand that major cuts or proposals for major cuts to foreign assistance will be announced tomorrow. This will be a tragedy for the people of Syria and for the region. They would translate into excruciating choices, not just for NGOs, but for the people that we serve. It would also set back U.S. strategic leadership. I hope you'll allow me to say that from my own time in U.K. Government, and now running an NGO, I know that U.S. humanitarian leadership is second to none bilaterally and through the United Nations. The U.S. provides 40 percent of support for U.N. -- for the United Nations High Commission (sic) on Refugees.

The U.S. genuinely drives the global system. The State Department and USAID have led the global community in the humanitarian response for decades. They project American ideals and protect America interests, all for less than 1 percent of the federal budget or for 0.2 percent of national income. The OFDA, the Office of Federal (sic) Disaster Assistance estimated that some 6.9 million Syrians in fiscal year 2015 were helped by the United States. That should be a benchmark for the future. It would be a genuine tragedy for the U.S. administration to lose faith in the value of humanitarian aid just at it's proving its worth.

Finally, the third choice is about refugee resettlement. Last week's executive order suspending the resettlement program and reducing resettlement numbers is a stark message to Syrians and to allies in the region, including, I'm sorry to say, Iraqis who've worked with and risked their life with and for the United States. The pause in the program, the uncertainty about its future is a gift for those who would argue that the United States will not help refugees in need if they happen to be Muslim. That is not true, but it's a calumny that's put around day by day around the region.

In Lebanon and Iraq, I spoke with people affected by the executive order. These are the most vulnerable people in the world -- some of the most vulnerable people in the world and the most vetted entrants into the United States. There already is extreme vetting for refugees who want to get here. The review that's being done is perfectly within the rights of any new administration. What is wrong is the suspension of a whole program that will lead to people going to the back of the queue because of the pause that's underway.

I would urge this Committee that if there is to be a review, it doesn't need to take four months. A 20 or 30-day review could get to the bottom of this refugee resettlement issue and the vetting arrangements quickly and allow the program to continue. Just remember this, after 9/11, the pause in the program was only two months. For no reason at all, there's now a four-month pause in the program despite the 120 leaders of the American national security system who said the program stands.

Mr. Chairman, senators, there can be no effective foreign policy without effective humanitarian policy. I hope that is a message that this Committee can take up with pride and with gusto. Thank you very much, indeed.

RISCH:

Thank you. And we're now going to proceed to a round of five-minute questions and answers. And I'm going to reserve my time to interject and I will recognize Senator Cardin.

CARDIN:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank all five of you for your testimony, but I want to join my two friends in paying special tribute to the three doctors that are here today. You really are inspirational to all of us. I grew up in a generation watching M*A*S*H on television as I saw American doctors perform during the Korean War and marveled how they performed in combat situations. They were soldiers. You're not soldiers, and you are performing with great personal sacrifice to your own safety in order to save lives in your community under conditions you should not have to put up with.

So, I just really wanted to express our deep appreciation for your international humanitarian efforts, which really inspire us and I think the global community to do more. What we do is not a personal sacrifice to our lives, which you do. So I just really wanted to thank you for being here. It's extremely valuable to the effort.

And I want to assure you that I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure those who have committed these atrocities, bombed hospitals, targeting hospitals, for their bombs, attacking humanitarian convoys in order to stop you from getting the medicines you need to keep children alive, that every one of those individuals who've committed these war crimes from the Assad regime to the Russian involvement are held accountable for their activities. And, of course, the number one thing we need to do is to end this war.

That's not today's hearing and I agree with the Chairman, that's not what we're here for today. But the way to stop these atrocities, the way to stop this humanitarian crisis is to resolve the civil war to deal with the terrorists that are in the country and to return stability to the people of Syria by a government that represents all of the communities in Syria.

So, Mr. Miliband, first of all, thank you for your extraordinary leadership. We've had a chance to talk about these issues. I couldn't agree with you more about the impact of President Trump's executive order.

I just quote from your testimony that those who are affected, they are family members of those who served American troops. They are unaccompanied children survivors of rape and violence, widows struggling to make a new life, and those in need of urgent medical care. They are those under persecution for their political or religious beliefs.

A two-month delay is too long for these people. And as you said, this was -- no need for this four-month period and we hope that it is much shorter than that. I just really want to talk a little bit and ask your impact on the -- the potential impact of the executive order in the region. We have Turkey, we have Jordan, we have Lebanon that have literally millions of Syrian refugees that border Syria. If they decide, well, the president -- U.S. policy is that they're not talking refugees, maybe we

should send these refugees back to Syria, what impact could that have on already unsustainable humanitarian need that exists in Syria?

MILIBAND:

Well, thank you, Senator. Well, the truth is that the numbers in small countries in the region are staggering. Lebanon has a population of 4.5 million and has 1.5 million refugees; Jordan has a population of 7.5 million, it's got 650,000 refugees and the government says 600,000 unregistered refugees; Turkey, obviously a much bigger country, 2.7 million refugees.

I think there are three things to have very clearly in your mind. First of all, the conditions for refugees on the ground are getting tougher by the week. They're running out of savings, they're having to re-register, which sometimes has fees associated with it. Their kids are not in school and are becoming more desperate.

Second situation is the political backlash against U.S. allies in the region like Jordan is very real. The unemployment rate amongst Jordanians is 26 percent, never mind the fact that poverty rate amongst Syrians is 78 percent. So there is a political management difficulty and the short-termism of the humanitarian aid system compounds the difficulties for the Government of Jordan. We're working with them on an employment program to try to and help their companies take advantage of free trade access, special free trade access to European markets, but that requires 15 percent of the employees to be refugees. We're trying to work with them to help square that circle.

The third aspect or the third consequence that I think relates to the first two is that many refugees giving up the hope of legal resettlement in the U.S. are frankly going to take their lives into their own hands and try and get to Europe. The European refugee crisis is not over. And the push factors that are driving people from Syria and from the neighboring states to get to Europe remain very strong indeed. And obviously the great danger is that there is a domino effect from a U.S. decision, historically the U.S. has been the largest refugee resettlement country, the domino effect goes through the European states who then rein (ph) back and also leads to a series of actions by hosting states like Jordan and Lebanon, but also, frankly, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia. That means that the global ramifications become very real and the instability is the result.

CARDIN:

Thank you. In regards to Mercy Corps, I want you to know I hope today we're going to hear ways that we can help deliver humanitarian aid effectively to those who are involved. Clearly, what was done in Turkey needs to be reversed and I'm sure that we will try to assist you. I'll certainly be working with Senator Merkley and Senator Kaine and others on our Committee to see how we can engage the Turkish Government to resolve your issues so that you can get that aid back to the people of Syria. I want you to know that. We'll begin communication with the Turkish Government.

RUBIO:

Senator Johnson.

JOHNSON:

Thanks Senator Rubio, I also want to thank the doctors for their testimony, for your courage for spending some time with me in my office yesterday. Mr. Keny-Guyer, you said the politics have changed. I want to talk to you -- I want to ask you Dr. Abdulkhalek, with the involvement of Russia, you've obviously been witness to chemical attacks, you've been present, can you tell us talk about the change in tactics, the change in weapons the minute that Russia got involved?

ABDULKHALEK:

After the Russian involved in the conflict, we noticed a new development weapons like bunker buster. A bunker buster can destroy the underground structures and parachute bomb. We noticed they use the -- progressive use of that bomb in the last three months of the siege. And also cluster bombs. And we had photos of -- by our own phones to that cluster bombs and bunker buster -- not bunker buster, to parachute bombs, I mean.

JOHNSON:

Was there more frequent targeting of your hospitals when Russia became involved?

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes, yes.

JOHNSON:

So they weren't...

ABDULKHALEK:

They...

JOHNSON:

... attacking ISIS, they were attacking Aleppo?

ABDULKHALEK:

They are -- they are locating the hospital, location -- they are locating the hospital position and they start targeting it many times until we had to leave that hospital fearing of our safety and the injured men.

JOHNSON:

So, doctor, you also said -- you talked about two attacks...

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes.

JOHNSON:

... with use of chlorine, but you also said regular use.

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes.

JOHNSON:

Any other chemicals that you're aware of that have been documented that have been used in those...

ABDULKHALEK:

No.

JOHNSON:

... attacks or is it primarily chlorine?

ABDULKHALEK:

Just chlorine attack. Just chlorine attack.

JOHNSON:

Do you know how -- you said regular use, do you have any idea how many chlorine attacks there were?

ABDULKHALEK:

On M3, there is just two chlorine attack, because M3 was not known to the government. So the last month they discovered its place -- their -- its place, so they start targeting it by many weapons until they used the chemical weapon chlorine gas. But they targeted earlier of that M2 hospital with chlorine attack before six or seven months.

JOHNSON:

So, doctor, you said the world has failed Syria...

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes.

JOHNSON:

I couldn't agree more.

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes.

JOHNSON:

It's shameful. Mr. Keny-Guyer, you'd said the politics changed. Describe that? Because -- describe the reality? It's great that we're going to say we're going to hold people accountable, but, you know, describe the reality in the ground right now, what has changed?

GUYER:

Well, I don't often find myself commenting on the politics of the situation, but what I will say that has changed, we all know, as an organization that had a significant commitment to the City of Aleppo, we had team members who were in Aleppo and actually were on the last evacuation bus out. And we're very proud of them. They were given the opportunity to leave like many of these doctor earlier on and chose to stay out of solidarity. But obviously the situation in Aleppo has changed, and in the north, you have now Idlib is very vulnerable. Many of the citizens of Aleppo are now there.

You clearly have the Government of Turkey has come down into its Euphrates Shield area, those areas, and then obviously the concern over Raqqa. What has also happened in the southern part of the country I think we should, you know, all be aware of and I -- it's very difficult and that is there has been efforts that have pacified some areas, but, of course along the Jordanian border, we've seen an increase in conflict.

What has remained the same and I think is critically important is the staggering need of innocent, innocent Syrians. And just if I may, in particular comment on, you know, all lives are really important, but at the same time we are particularly concerned about young Syrians. You know, nearly 4.8 (sic) Syrian refugees in the region are children. And there are more than 8.5 million children and young people in Syria that are in need of immediate support, never mind education, but just immediate support

JOHNSON:

OK, so -- and listen, I appreciate that, I've got 35 seconds.

GUYER:

Yes.

JOHNSON:

The point being is the world has failed, we've stood by the world for six years and watched the slaughter of a half a million at least Syrians. And I'm all for a diplomatic solution, but diplomacy follows facts on the ground. The facts on the ground are such that Russia, Iran, and Assad have conquered Aleppo. They are winning the war, is that not correct? Isn't that -- isn't that the politics of change and how -- what kind of diplomatic solution can there be when the facts have changed so dramatically on the ground?

GUYER:

Well, I -- I'm not sure I would go as far as you did, senator, in that situation. You know, I've spent more than 30 years working in and out of the Middle East and I'm always conscious to draw any firm and fast conclusions that relates to the Middle East. But what I will say is that it -- we are no closer to a political solution, I think you are right in that. And in fact in many ways, the situation is more complicated than ever and the one thing I am sure of is that those who suffer the most are innocent civilians and Syrians and especially the children.

JOHNSON:

I agree.

RISCH:

Thank you very much. Senator Coons.

COONS:

Thank you, Senator Risch and Senator Cardin. Thank you, doctors. Thank you for your incredible testimony, thank you for your bravery. Thank you for what you continue to do to risk your lives in the service of humanity.

It is hard to hear your testimony. It is hard to endure the images and the sounds and the stories of unspeakable suffering and unthinkable human rights violations in Syria that continue week in and week out, month in and month out, over years. And the hundreds of thousands of innocents who've been killed.

In a way that just cries out for the world to respond, should shock the conscience of every senator here and everyone who listens. Thank you. Delaware just welcomed its first Syrian refugee family. In a small but important act, I think a Christian church, a Muslim mosque and Jewish family services in partnership welcomed a refugee family that had fled an area close to where you're from because of a chemical attack years ago.

The United States has done a great deal, but nowhere near enough. My first visit to confront some of the reality of this was with Senator McCain and a number of other colleagues to a well-known refugee camp in Jordan where we had memorable meetings with Syrians who said we don't want sympathy, we don't want tears, we don't want blankets, we want action, we want accountability and we want engagement.

It is encouraging to be reminded that American humanitarian assistance did help 7 million Syrians last year, but it is heart-breaking to realize that a likely dramatic cut in our humanitarian assistance that may be announced tomorrow may significantly affect hundreds of thousands if not millions of Syrians and the whole region. And I'm gravely concerned that a pause and a travel ban sends exactly the wrong signal about our values and our willingness to welcome and embrace and support exactly the sort of work you have done.

So, to Mr. Keny-Guyer, thank you for the bravery and dedication of Mercy Corps along with Senator Cardin who's statement I think speaks for itself and was powerful about the importance of welcoming refugees to this country and about the importance of supporting Mercy Corps. I will only say amen, and I look forward to trying to work with you to right this situation in Turkey. If I might, Mr. Milibrand -- Mr. Miliband, I'll just be interested in hearing what you think would be the actual human consequences on the ground of having the United States nearly abandon its humanitarian assistance obligation.

MILIBAND:

Thank you, Senator. I think that U.S. assistance should be seen in three or four key areas. One is obviously the Food for Peace program that is a significant contributor to food security for Syrians. We're working with the U.S. Government cross border on that program. Secondly, the U.S. has distinguished itself by the flexibility and speed with which the Foreign Disaster Assistance bureau works with NGOs like ours to reach those in grave need. One obvious example is inside Syria.

But I just draw your attention to what's happening in Mosul at the moment. I was about 15 kilometers from Mosul at the end of last week. It's thanks to U.S. support that when ISIS is driven out of an area of Mosul, humanitarians are the first to go in after including from the organizations represented here; we're supported by the U.S. in doing that. And that work is beginning to put together the elements of a functioning city. So in the east of Mosul, there is some reconstruction work that's allowing people to have basic services that they can go back to.

Thirdly, U.S. foreign assistance is distinguished by its ability to target the most vulnerable and often that is women and girls and it's often labeled as protection work, "protection work." We're certainly proud to be partnering across the region with the U.S. in protecting women and girls from the unspeakable levels of abuse that are often associated with emergency humanitarian situations and I think it's very important to flag that.

The final thing I'd mention is that it's a scandal to me that less than 2 percent of the global humanitarian budget is spent on education. That speaks to the short-termism of the humanitarian system. There's a fiction that's convenient for donors that these emergencies are short term and tragically it's a fiction that is embraced often by the host countries for their own political reason.

The short-termism leads to a neglect of something like education, but the U.S. is willing to support education. In the Beqaa Valley last week, I was able to see some kids who had been traumatized - - traumatized refugees who I had met three or four years ago in the same informal settlements so called, they're being helped by a program that is an education program that is giving them the chance of rebuilding their lives.

COONS:

Thank you, Mr. Miliband. If I might just in conclusion, doctors, 15 of the last remaining doctors in Aleppo, including you, have sent a letter to President Obama detailing atrocities of the sort that we've heard testified to here today, and asked for us to take action around accountability. I just want to commend Senator Cardin and Senator Rubio for reintroducing the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act and all of us who are joining as co-sponsors to insist on accountability for the unspeakable war crimes that are being committed in Syria against the Syrian people. Thank you for your testimony today.

RISCH:

Thank you. Senator Young.

YOUNG:

Thank you, Chairman. Thank you to our doctors. Thank you for your constancy of purpose, for your courage and for bringing light to an otherwise very dark situation in Syria. I agree with Mr. Miliband, we do indeed have a fundamental choice to make on this authorizing committee about our level of assistance we'll continue to provide you and others who are on the receiving end of international human rights violations.

And I would like to elicit from your testimony here a few things that I just thought were incredibly powerful. I'll start with something Mr. Miliband said. He indicated that the introduction of Russian air power ushered in a new phase of this conflict, devastating and deliberate effects on civilians, civilian infrastructure. The air strikes destroyed or otherwise rendered all hospitals in eastern Aleppo out of service. That despite the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2286 condemning attacks on medical facilities, hospitals and humanitarian operations.

And then the doctors, you each spoke in a very personal way to the tragedies you've seen on the ground. Dr. Farida, you note that "a hospital, a hospital was the most dangerous place in Aleppo." Dr. Abdulkhalek, you highlight the repeated attempts by the regime and its allies to destroy the hospital where you worked using barrel bombs, using cluster munitions. Dr. Rajab, you noted that in the hospital where you served as director in Aleppo, the hospital was bombed out of service on account of 22 air strikes. You're hit five times in one week.

I -- I can't imagine operating under these conditions. I can't imagine being in one of these hospitals. I can't imagine living in an area of the world where you're constantly under this sort of attack. And who do we blame for this? Well, I mean, blame there's plenty of blame to go around, but certainly the Russian intervention complicated matters significantly.

Mr. Miliband, you note that the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2286 in May of 2016. Given Russia's permanent seat on the Security Council and habit of vetoing resolutions aimed at the murderous Assad regime, no matter how egregious and deplorable Assad's actions have been, I was curious, so I went back and I looked at the comments of the Russian representative in May of last year during the passage of this Security Council Resolution.

You know what the Russian deputy permanent representative emphasized in his comments? It's really duplicitous, breath-taking what he says. He says that it was unacceptable that medical personnel continue to suffer attacks since people's lives depended on their work. He says, "Protecting humanitarian personnel, including medical personnel is one of the most important aspects of the whole issue of protecting civilians." He further said members of the U.N. must do more work to protect medical personnel. This, again, coming from the Russian deputy permanent representative.

The Russian representative also tried to cast doubt regarding Russia's conduct in Aleppo by emphasizing the need for the Security Council to be guided by reliable information. He said, "It's unacceptable that unverified reports of attacks against hospitals, taken from unreliable sources are fed to the media, and then used for political pressure."

I just like -- doctors, do you have any thoughts about the Russian representative's comments at the U.N., his assertion that reports of attacks against hospitals are unreliable?

ABDULKHALEK:

We noticed that attacks being more aggressive in the last months after they make the siege in (inaudible) on the eastern of Aleppo. At that stage, Russia was very involved in the process of attacking the more civilian areas. So Russia start to make good -- a big effort to damage the hospital and to let us fled from that area to another area until we had to evacuate all the City of Aleppo, I think so.

MENENDEZ:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's truly a tragedy that we are holding a hearing today to mark the beginning of what was a peaceful uprising in Syria that has turned into the worst humanitarian crisis in recent memory and we have all seen the heartbreaking images of children and families suffering under the barbaric attacks of Bashar al-Assad, his brutal oppression, ISIS, the network of actors including Vladimir Putin in Russia, Iranian terrorist networks, who continue to support his ongoing war crimes and human rights violations.

And it's unconscionable (ph) and reprehensible that the leader of any country could orchestrate bombing campaigns against innocent civilians and institutions, hospitals, schools, aid convoys, whose sole purpose is to provide aid and support the communities. So I have the utmost respect for all of you and all the work you're doing particularly the doctors, you truly honor your profession globally. And in the darkest moments of man's inhumanity to man, as we have seen in Syria, you have shown us what humanity truly is all about. And so we honor you and we -- and the mere fact

that you have to wear masks to protect your identity just speaks volumes of the challenge that you face.

But I have to be honest with you, I am concerned that in the midst of listening to all of the comments of comfort and solidarity and succor that the reality is that that means nothing if we're going to have a 37 percent cut in our budget, nothing if we are going to deny refugees to come into the United States, nothing if we are not going to continue U.S. leadership in the world in this regard. So all these statements of solidarity will only mean something to me and certainly more importantly to those who are fleeing Syria when we act in ways that actually embrace the cause and that actually shows our solidarity in meaningful ways. In meaningful ways.

So this is why I have a real concern, our humanitarian programs operate out of the State Department, mostly the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and a host of program to USAID. I am deeply alarmed by the administration's proposed budget plan to slash these agencies which accounts for just for 1 percent of the overall budget. And I think it's not only morally reprehensible, these kinds of drastic cuts are squarely against the national security interests of the United States. It abdicates our global leadership, it puts our allies at greater risk. We want to say to other countries in the world, in the Europe and elsewhere when the King of Jordan comes here, thank you for housing the refugees from Syria. And yet we're going to cut the very assistance that ultimately gives that a possibility.

So I hope my colleagues when it comes time to follow up the words of solidarity will do so with their votes. Now, I want to go particularly to Mr. Miliband. I appreciate what the -- your organization does, the IRC. I thought the title of senator was pretty significant, but The Right Honorable is a real heck of a title, so -- but on a serious -- on a serious note...

MILIBAND:

I promise you it's not a hereditary thing in the U.K.

MENENDEZ:

New Jersey has welcomed 275 Syrian refugees in the past 12 months and the IRC has an active network in New Jersey that in my view has enriched the state. But what happens when we take a different course? I know that you head an organization and of course you had your own distinguished career in Great Britain, but as one of the greatest allies the United States has had, what would you say to us is the consequences of us cutting in half the number of refugees to come to the United States? What's the consequence of decimating the budget that ultimately helps? Why would it not be in the national interest of the United States and its security to do so?

MILIBAND:

Thank you, Senator. I think the simple answer to that is that America helps create a more stable world and American retreat leads to more instability that is not just an affront to America's moral values but also to her interests. And both in respect to foreign aid and in respect resettlement, this

country has good claim to be a world leader. Maybe it takes a foreigner to recognize the good things about a country.

And one of the areas where America undoubtedly has claim to global leadership is in its refugee resettlement program. It's one of the -- it's definitely the most success refugee resettlement program in the world. We're working in Germany and elsewhere where they want to learn the lessons of your refugee resettlement program.

So I think that there is an affront to America's moral values, but also the strategic leadership that you offer. This global system that we have, this global order that we have for all of its faults, is upheld by American leadership and when that leadership is in retreat, then both international humanitarian law, but also global stability are threatened.

RISCH:

Thank you. Senator Rubio.

RUBIO:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here for all the work you're doing in particular for the doctors who have risked so much to be a part of this. I want to touch on the narrative that some have put out. Since you're on the ground and you've been there and you've seen this reality up close, you can hope to enlighten us about this reality and all of you I think can comment on it.

The narrative that you see in some of these outlets around the world, which, I don't know, where they're getting their news from is the following, and that is that Aleppo was a city divided between areas controlled by rebels and areas controlled by the government. And that these benevolent Russian forces combined with the regime went in and liberated this part of the city held by rebels, who by the way, I don't think anyone here is a fan of many of those elements, many of which were radicals and who themselves committed all sorts of atrocities against humanity.

And that these very benevolent forces came in and liberated this part of the city and rescued all of these civilians and are doing these phenomenal things. And you saw this in late December, images of churches opening, and people know where I stand on Russia, people know how I feel about Assad, and I used to get a lot of these emails telling me what you're talking about, look at these phenomenal things that are occurring in Aleppo with these "liberated areas".

In the context of all this, what is lost is that apart from the rebel forces, many of whom are criminals themselves, is the reality of the suffering of the people that had nothing to do with either side, they just happen to live in this area. They happen to be families and children that were going about their lives, not involved in the internal politics of any nation including their own and somehow were targeted, which is what you've now described.

Tell us the reality, if you are someone that happened to have lived in one of these areas, and I think you've touched upon it, but the reality of this sort of notion of liberation, this notion that somehow these benevolent forces have come in and now liberated and are helping to reconstruct a part of

the city, how would you characterize the way this was conducted by Assad, by Russia and even by some of the rebel elements as they left?

ABDULKHALEK:

I can tell that, in the Eastern part of Aleppo, now the U.N. maps decide that about fourth of the buildings are destroyed completely and the other buildings are damaged. There is no life now in the Eastern of Aleppo after the rebels run away and after the civilians had fled to other part to near live; no electricity, no clean water until now. All -- not all, most of the rebels, soldiers are not rebels in the beginning of the revolution, they were civilians like us and they had to raise their weapons against the government because the government start killing everyone go uprising against the government.

So they were not soldiers from the beginning of the revolution and they deal with the civilians like their brothers, most of cases of course. They are afraid of our lives, they left us evacuate before -- before them and they don't (inaudible) -- OK, they don't involve by targeting us or killing us.

RUBIO:

And you may have alluded to this earlier, I didn't see in the written testimony and I see that two of you are concerned about being identified for your own safety.

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes.

RUBIO:

Who are you fearful of?

ABDULKHALEK:

We are fearing?

RUBIO:

Yes.

ABDULKHALEK:

From the government. From the government because if they discovered our identity or they may send someone to get rid of us or they can capture our relatives in their area.

RUBIO:

Is medical facilities that you worked in, were these medical facilities being used by anyone to conduct war against the government or is this place...

ABDULKHALEK:

No, it's just a place for operations and for helping civilians. Sometimes injured soldiers came to us, but we don't know which kind of rebels he has -- he belongs to, which one he belongs to, that group or that group, we don't know.

RUBIO:

But the bottom line is, these were facilities that were treating people of medical conditions and you have no doubt in your mind that these buildings particularly after the Russian engagement were specifically targeted?

ABDULKHALEK:

Yes, yes because, many of these hospitals are well known to the government, and they start targeting it one by one -- one at a time, and then repeated it until they destroyed it, then they stopped targeting it after they destroyed. They know -- they knew that it has been out of service, so they stopped targeting it.

RISCH:

Thank you. Senator Markey?

MARKEY:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, let's just get right to the heart of this. President Trump wants to cut the State Department budget by 37 percent and then move the money over to the Defense Department in order to build more bombs. So, that's going to create a dynamic that is very dangerous inside of the country. Right now, Russia, Turkey and Iran are gathered in Astana to shore up the ceasefire and the Geneva talks are scheduled to resume this week, but the United States doesn't appear prepared to have a significant role in any of the upcoming discussions, even though the United States has been a part of this war almost from the very beginning.

So Secretary Miliband, how long can America remain absent from these discussions if we are going to be able to reinforce the ceasefire, protect civilians, allow medical and other relief to go to victims?

MILIBAND:

Well, thank you Senator. First of all, I think it's important to recognize what the doctor said earlier, that the notion that the current ceasefire is an abuse of the term ceasefire.

MARKEY:

I agree with you.

MILIBAND:

That there is significant activity still taking place. Secondly, without a U.S. voice speaking up for the protection of civilians, there will be no voice doing that.

Thirdly...

MARKEY:

We need U.S. diplomats at the table, is that what you are saying?

MILIBAND:

I would argue very strongly for that, and I think there's something that Senator Rubio and Senator Cardin have started this accountability bill that they have introduced, it could very powerfully be linked to a recent resolution in the U.N. General Assembly for bringing together trial ready materials to hold accountable those who commit war crimes. And while it's true that the U.N. Security Council is deadlocked, the U.N. General Assembly is not deadlocked. There is a massive majority of countries ready to support that kind of initiative.

MARKEY:

Mr. Keny-Guyer, child soldiers, it's not just ISIS, it is also the Free Syrian Army that are engaged in conscripting children into their armies. What would you recommend that the position of the United States should be in terms of what we use our influence to try to ensure is the policy in Syria?

KENY-GUYER:

Thank you, Senator. Well obviously, with respect to child soldiers anywhere, anywhere whether that's in Africa, whether that's in the Middle East or other parts of the world, we have to have a firm policy that is unacceptable and those who engage should be held accountable. And I think Senator Rubio described it very well in his description is Syria has devolved into a situation now, where any fair-minded person looking at it is going to go, it's hard to sort out who are the good guys and who are the bad guys.

It is not crystal clear who the good guys are, but what is crystal clear is that stability in Syria, stability in the Middle East is critically important for every interest that this country has in that part of world and is critically important to our national security. And as the doctors reminded us, the only solution going -- there's not a humanitarian solution, frankly there's not a military solution, we know.

The only solution is one that is diplomatic going forward and I certainly would urge and believe that will end up with a lot better solution, one that's more in U.S. interest to the degree that we're engaged and at the table.

MARKEY:

So you're just, once again, reinforcing this point that whether it be the ceasefire or it be the conscription of child soldiers, all the way down the line, the longer the war goes on is the more each side begins to engage in activities that are atrocities by any definition. And so that's why the United States can't abandon the diplomatic pathway, it's the only solution ultimately to this problem.

Can you talk a little bit about the programs that we can put in place in the country for -- to protect women and girls, if you got any suggestions to us that the United States government should be trying to advance?

KENY-GUYER:

Well, the biggest protector of women and girls are the community norms and structures that already exist inside Syria. And to the degree that we can support, and all of us work with this, IRC, Mercy Corps, there are credible civilian local councils inside Syria that aren't involved in the politics, aren't involved in the fighting, and believe one day they're going to have the opportunity to build a better Syria. It's in that context where you support organizations like ourselves who work through local Syrian groups. That's the best way to ensure the protection of girls and women.

MARKEY:

Do we need to be talking to the Russians to get this resolved, in your opinion?

KENY-GUYER:

I think one needs to talk to anyone who is...

MARKEY:

Including the Russians?

KENY-GUYER:

Yes, sir.

MARKEY:

Mr. Miliband, do we have to be talking to the Russians to get this resolved in your opinion?

MILIBAND:

Definitely, but progress depends on what you say to them.

MARKEY:

I appreciate that. But you have to have the discussions with them. If you don't have the discussions, it is just repetition syndrome, we are just going to see this go on year-after-year, you agree with that?

MILIBAND:

I do. I think that the other thing to say is that Russia and Iran are not natural allies and we should not take it as a matter of definite course that they are cleaved together in an alliance that is unbreakable. And there are some signs that Russia and Iran are sending different messages into the system, and I think it's in your interest and American interest that they do not cleave together.

MARKEY:

Thank you, I agree with you.

RISCH:

Senator Flake.

FLAKE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You know, it seems that absent diplomatic political solution, we're not going to see any end. I think that is agreed here, but we've been pursuing that for six years now without success. Humanitarian situation has been well documented, but I'd like some indication of where that goes from here, how much worse it can get or what we're likely to see if no political solution is reached in the coming months. Mr. Miliband?

MILIBAND:

Thank you, Senator. I would say two things about that. First of all, I think you're going to see more and more people leaving Syria. I mean, you've got 7 million internally displaced already, in addition to the 5 million refugees. We haven't seen the end of the refugee flow. And frankly the bombardments that are still taking place would drive further people out.

Second point is to pick up something that Senator Markey was saying. I remarked to him that Iran and Russia are not natural allies, neither are Turkey and Russia natural allies. Remember, Turkey is a member of NATO and a significant part of the future of the conflict depends on the relations between Turkey, Russia, the Syrians and the U.S. in respect to the Raqqa situation. And so, if it's correct as the U.N. says that 400,000 people could be displaced by the attempt to retake Raqqa, then the way in which the U.S. engages is absolutely critical to that.

FLAKE:

Any other thoughts on that, ways -- won't it be manifested in just the increased refugees outside of the country then, is that the agreement?

KENY-GUYER:

No, as I said earlier, Senator, I worry greatly about a whole generation, now going on two generations of young people who have not been educated, who have not had a chance to contribute positively to their societies. And particularly in that part of the world where there are competing ideologies, some of them as sinister as they come and should not be allowed to continue to exist in a civilized world.

Yet those become pathways increasingly for young people out of that mix.

And so the longer this goes on, the more the instability continues, I think the more we need to worry about those kinds of issues. And that's why it's so important to bring this to a close as soon as we can.

FLAKE:

The U.S., the EU and other organizations and countries have been certainly helpful with the humanitarian effort. Can anybody give any idea of what Russia has done with regard to humanitarian efforts?

MILIBAND:

That's not their - that's not their focus.

FLAKE:

I know that's not their -- but is there even an attempt to make it look like they are concerned about the humanitarian situation?

MILIBAND:

I did actually raise this with the now famous Russian Ambassador and -- some time ago, and the Russians talk about their support for the U.N. system, and that's the way in which they would see their humanitarian aid going forward.

FLAKE:

But nothing independently, unilaterally. OK, all right. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

RISCH:

Senator Merkley?

MERKLEY:

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Today, here we are six years from March 15, 2011, the day of rage where mass popular demonstrations occurred against the Syrian President triggered by the Syrian secret police torturing young boys who had spray-painted anti- Assad graffiti, six years in which we now see half a million people who are dead and a quarter of the 21 million people in the country have fled, destabilizing neighboring countries, certainly having a big impact on Europe.

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres, when he was High Commissioner of refugees characterized the war in Syria as, "The great tragedy of this century, a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history." Our witnesses today, the doctors and IRC and Mercy Corps, have been there in these horrific circumstances trying to assist with medical care and nutrition and support, and I commend them all for this tremendous effort individually and with their organizations.

I am disappointed that Turkey has revoked the registration of Mercy Corps to provide assistance through Turkey to over 300,000 Syrians. I do appreciate that the Government of Turkey has been a leader in the refugee response and a close partner to Mercy Corps over many years before. And so Mr. Keny-Guyer, I would like to ask, what are the immediate steps that would be helpful that you might like to see taken by the Government of Turkey?

KENY-GUYER:

Thank you, Senator, and thank you for your efforts as well in this matter. You know, when the revocation came, we were frankly stunned and deeply saddened. And I say saddened because of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians that we help each month inside the country and have been such a critical lifeline of support and hope.

And then secondly particularly for our Syrian team members who have put their lives on the line through all of these years in the toughest times and darkest days to make a difference, and we've always enjoyed a close working relationship with Turkey.

So, our approach right now is we presume and we've not been given an official reason, but we presume that there's some technicality and that our sole aim is to enter into discussions and negotiations that will allow us to restore our ability to operate.

The Governors in Turkey have been extremely supportive of our work, the local authorities have been supportive, the Turkish Red Crescent have been supported. And so, we thank the Senators here for all your support, and at this stage we are working night and day to ensure that we can get back to work there as soon as possible.

MERKLEY:

And has our State Department been helpful in facilitating a conversation?

KENY-GUYER:

Our State Department, our Ambassador have been extremely, extremely helpful. I want to commend them for their efforts, particularly in these difficult times.

MERKLEY:

So at this moment, with the supply chain of significant assistance to over 300,000 inside Syria, with that disrupted, can you paint for us a picture of the challenges being faced by those who would otherwise have been assisted by the flour and water and support that you all provide.

KENY-GUYER:

Well, a large substantial portion of our aid going cross-border was wheat flour that went to bakeries. And so was we were trying to use markets to keep the price of bread affordable for ordinary normal citizens there and those -- and through those bakeries really vulnerable people got vouchers, so they could pay a very little amount for their bread so, that was a critical lifeline.

In addition to that, we've been providing -- there a number of internally displaced camps for Syrians along the Turkey-Syrian border. We had been providing clean and fresh water for those camps to more than 100,000 people on a weekly -- a weekly basis, so immediately those abilities have been cut off.

In addition, because again we see the resilience of Syrians, we see their desire to help themselves even at this time. We had been supporting inside Syria the recovery of agricultural land, so that Syrians could get back to growing their own food and not be as dependent on the outside. Again, wherever you can restore markets, it's so important for people, it's so important for any chance of recovery. All of those programs are at risk.

MERKLEY:

Thank you very much. Thank you.

RISCH:

Senator Kaine.

KAINE:

Thank you Mr. Chair. I want to thank some colleagues on the Senate, Senators Murphy, Rubio and McCain joined with me today introducing a resolution commemorating the challenges of the last six years and encouraging all of us the global community to do more.

I want to thank you organizations here, IRC, Mercy Corps and SAMS. SAMS does wonderful work, you been praised as individuals, but I also know this organization and I met with SAMS physicians in United States, and also in Gaziantep, really, really a strong organization; thank you for what you're doing.

A comment and then maybe a question or two. In November 2015, right before Thanksgiving, the House of Representatives here passed a bill called the Securing America Against Foreign Enemies Act. That was the bill that blocked Syrian refugees from coming into United States. This is a body that won't have a vote to declare ISIS an enemy, but it would label Syrian refugees an enemy.

I was very proud of my Senate colleagues, when that bill came over here, we wouldn't have anything to do with it. Because refugees are not the enemies of the United States and I'm extremely discouraged that after the Senate had the good sense not to do that, this administration came in and perpetrated the same thing. It issued these, the immigration orders in January with the title an Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorism, that was the title.

The revised immigration orders aren't much better because they hit refugees in three ways; one by a temporary suspension of the refugee program, two by a temporary suspension of Syrians being able to come into the United States, and three by a dramatic reduction of the number of refugees that the United States would take.

Refugees are not terrorists, refugees are not enemies. When the administration issued the initial executive orders, I was in Roanoke, Virginia and Blacksburg, far from an international airport, far from worrying about this issue, doing events about the Affordable Care Act there. And I had somebody come up to me at a reception and said, hey, my family helped a Syrian refugee family resettle in Roanoke working with Catholic charities a year ago. Let me tell you how great they're doing. The husband is working on a construction crew and everybody loves him. And all the construction workers of different, you know, political persuasions banded together to buy soccer shoes for all the kids at Christmas, and you can never say anything bad about this guy in front of any those construction workers. This family's been a credit to our community.

But what they were asking me was this, here's what they said, but we have a second Syrian family arriving at the Roanoke airport in four days. They've been in a refugee camp in Jordan for four years getting vetted and finally approved to come to United States, what's going to happen to them, and they haven't been able to come to the United States.

The notion that this administration is perpetrating that refugees are enemies is just absolutely contrary to the values of this country. I second comments made that the slashing of the foreign aid budget would be a horrible thing, but even if the foreign aid budget does get slashed by a penny, perpetrating a stereotype about refugees or Syrians that they are our enemies is deeply troubling to me.

A question, the U.N. Security Council in February of 2014 passed a resolution 2139 calling for cross-border delivery of aid, safety for people receiving aid, and safety of medical facilities.

I think the enforcement and implementation of that's been a disaster based on the testimony that has been given. What does it say about the U.N., what does it say about the Security Council, what does it say about the nations that are members of the Security Council that a resolution that called so clearly for there to be delivery of aid and protection of medical facilities has been so poorly enforced in the three years since it passed?

MILIBAND:

If I might, Mr. Chairman, I think that there are two very important things to say about that. First of all, you made a distinction between the U.N. and the U.N. Security Council, and there is often a confusion between the agencies of the U.N., the officials of the U.N. and the countries that stand it up. I know from my own experience, a divided Security Council means a weak U.N., and the truth about these resolutions is that a divided Security Council is weakened the hand of all those trying to implement the resolutions.

Second point, I don't know which is worst, the fact that the 2014 resolution hasn't been abided by or the resolution condemning the use of chemical weapons on the 28th of February this year was vetoed by the Russians, and I think it's important to see the two of them together. But it points to the fundamental challenge that now exists, because we've never been in a situation before where a permanent member of the Security Council was unwilling to uphold fundamental aspects of international humanitarian law.

KAINE:

Yes.

KENY-GUYER:

Senator, and if I may, just to add quickly, I think you point out, the U.N. even the best of the operational agencies often reflects the politics of the Security Council, and discourages them sometimes from taking the kind of bold, clear action that they should be taking.

We have encouraged them along with IRC and others, we encourage them from the day of that resolution to now test it and push, push, push for cross-border humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately that did not happen.

I think that just reinforces why and how important it is that the importance of organizations like Mercy Corps, IRC and SAMS, in order to reach people in need in some of the toughest places in the world, but particularly those environments that are plagued by these kind of politics, were often the only last mile and the only lifeline.

KAINE:

Mr. Chair, I have one more question, but I -- if you would like to each ask questions before I do, I can...

RISCH:

No, I -- do you have any further questions? OK.

KAINE:

If I might, the U.S. is currently engaged in a major military action with other nations against Raqqa and there has been a prediction that that might lead to another 400,000 refugees out of the area. I don't want to ask you about the military side of it, but what would be your prediction about, if this military operation is successful, walk down the road with us a bit and tell us what we; A, might see in terms of the humanitarian challenge; and B, what that might mean in terms of opening up space for either greater or lesser likelihood of a political resolution in Geneva and in some of the talks about finding a cease-fire and then hopefully a next chapter in Syria?

KENY-GUYER:

Well, very quickly, I don't know any of us who don't hope deeply that groups like Daesh ISIS have no place to operate anywhere. They're not in the interest of anyone. They're certainly not in the interest of innocent Syrians. And so I think one would welcome through that kind of action that Raqqa could become back as a normal city.

In terms of the humanitarian impact, it really is going to depend on obviously how the military action on folks. There were great predictions that Mosul would produce a million person humanitarian disaster; it still might, but it has not up to now.

I think we've all appreciated some of the great care that's been taken, the real concern for civilians, again their suffering, but some of the harshest predictions didn't come true. I think we all hope that for Raqqa as well. And so, if there is effective coordination on the ground, if there is upholding humanitarian principles and rights, if there is respect for the actors like ourselves, I think actually we could move in very quickly, restore essential services, and meet critical humanitarian needs, if there's also the funding available to do that.

MILIBAND:

First of all, I think it's very important to emphasize the degree of trauma that it means to live under ISIS Daesh for two or three years. The people I met last week coming out of Mosul have lost sons, brothers to execution. They've got relatives who are in hiding, literally not coming out their own house for two years because they had previously worked for the Iraqi government. There will be a massive degree of trauma.

Secondly, I don't see Raqqa being a quick win at all, this is going to be -- you're going to be debating this in a year's time, I would guess, and I think it's very important to recognize that. Thirdly, we've learned from -- we know from history and we can see in Iraq today, the position of civilians and the definition of military operations is absolutely key to the way in which the peace has then built after the war has been won.

And the way in which you win the war defines whether or not you can build the peace. And civilian casualty rates in Mosul are currently running at 47 percent, and that is obviously a dangerous down payment on any attempt to rebuild the city afterwards. That's one reason that the humanitarian, the political and the military all come together.

So the final point on the political options, the great danger is that the options get worse rather than better. And the options become increasingly extreme opposition groups that Chairman Rubio has referred to versus an Assad regime that in its pomp and in its "claimed victory" asserts itself in an even more bloody way and that is a recipe for continued instability inside Syria.

RISCH:

Senator Cardin.

CARDIN:

Mr. Chairman, I just really wanted to thank the panel. Mr. Miliband, I think we will make the 1 o'clock deadline. I would point out that in Mosul, we have a government that we can at least work with and communicate with, whereas in Raqqa, we do not. So, there is I think a much greater risk in Raqqa. I would also point out that, clearly we need to deal with the responsibility and accountability to the Assad regime to Russia's involvement in Syria, to the terrorist groups that are operating in Syria.

All that are continuing to add to the humanitarian crisis. So, we need to engage the international community more effectively in dealing with this. But it starts with taking care of business at home, what we do here in the United States and many of my colleagues have talked about this.

But our refugee program is not only directly important for refugees, but it is a signal to the international community as to America's leadership. And it very much will affect policies in other countries, and you mentioned what Europe decides to do with the neighboring countries, or Syria decide to do.

We also in Congress have our responsibility, we are the ones who pass the budget. President Trump can submit a budget, but we are the ones who pass the budgets, and we have a responsibility. And Republicans and Democrats have been speaking out about the importance of our foreign assistance budget, and I hope we will do the right thing there.

We also need to deal with atrocity preventions. We did mention many bills today, we also have an atrocity prevention bill that's bipartisan that we'll work on to try to get done. Senator Rubio has been one of the key leaders on that. War crimes accountability, we have that also, Senator Rubio has been instrumental.

But it's also U.S. global leadership, where is America, and we do that by our policies but also by our priorities that we set globally. So, we know that displaced families are at risk, we know that it's difficult to get humanitarian aid to those who are at risk, and we all need to do a better job. I thought today's hearing -- I want to thank again the doctors particularly for being here, but I want

to thank all of our witnesses for providing I think a very helpful back information as to what we need to do to help not only Syrian humanitarian needs, but the whole region which is involved.

RUBIO:

Well, I thank the Ranking Member and all the members that came today and everyone who's on this panel, including the -- and especially the doctors here who have taken great personal risk, not just on their conduct on the ground, but even being here today. There was a statement made earlier, and I know exactly understand what you meant to say, I believe it was you, Mr. Guyer, you said we don't know who the good guys are. And I understand exactly what you mean., but I know who three of them are, and that they are happened -- I know who five of them are, but three in particular who are with us here today and the two doctors in particular, the three doctors who are here and we thank them for the work that they've done.

The other part that comes striking today, and I say this to my colleagues who remain is, and there's a lesson to be learned, we didn't have to be here today, this didn't have to happen. This began as it had been pointed out repeatedly by Syrians themselves standing up against the government. And when we talk about some of these horrifying actors on the ground, it's amazing how many of them aren't Syrians, how this vacuum in Syria became a magnet for foreign fighters from all over the region to come in and use it as a playground for their broader aims and goals, how the Assad regime has invited non Syrians to come in and slaughter their fellow countrymen.

And it was stunning in this committee about two months ago we had a hearing and I asked a very direct question of the then nominee for Secretary of State about whether the Russians have been involved in the commission of war crimes, and he said he was not aware. It's been two months, so I think hopefully by now he has been made aware of the reality that targeting medical facilities no matter what is happening in that area is a war crime.

And that targeting would have not been possible had it not been for the assistance and potentially the direct attacks conducted by the Putin regime. Moving forward I think that this is an ongoing crisis for the world. And to those who have argued in the past that America's got a lot of problems and we should be focused on our problems and let other countries take care of their own problems, it didn't work that way. That's not how the world works, especially now as interconnected as it is. We're having debate in this country about refugee programs and the like because we have refugees. We didn't have refugees and we didn't have people that needed to leave, there wouldn't be a refugee issue for us to be debating in this country.

And the other is, this is what the absence of American leadership looks like, and sadly I believe it's a bipartisan absence in many cases that has led to this situation. So sometimes in foreign policy, it's not enough to do the right thing. You have to do the right thing at the right time, because if you don't, those options are forestalled and you've reached the situation that we are facing.

So, the obligation is to take this message back to our colleagues and ensure that these ideas are reflected, not just in what we do now when it comes to Syria, but the role that America decides to play in the world in the years to come. And having the Syrians here today and hearing the testimony of all of you, but in particular those who risked their lives before they came and risked their lives

now upon their return, I hope will serve as an inspiration to every member of this Committee, every member of the Senate, and those of us who care deeply about the affairs of the world, about the way forward in the years to come.

So, I thank you for hosting this hearing and I want to thank all of you for being here. The record for this hearing is going to remain open until the close of business on Friday and then includes for members, it's time for members to submit additional questions for the record. And we ask the witnesses if possible obviously given the circumstances to respond as properly because they are going to be made part of the record, which we can refer back to as we debate some interesting topics in the weeks and months to come.

So with that, I want to thank again the every member of the Committee who came and this hearing is adjourned.