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WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE WAR(S) IN SYRIA?

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy Program and I'm delighted to be here with my colleagues, Amanda Sloat, Pavel Baev, in from Norway, and Suzanne Maloney, the deputy director of our program, to discuss Syria with you today. And we're also happy to talk more broadly about the region.

Obviously, there's been some news in the last 24 hours that may implicate other issues or involve other kinds of questions. When we get to our discussion on Syria and the broader region, feel free to bring up what you wish, but we want to begin with about 45 minutes of discussion up here about the various key dynamics that we see in Syria today and try to work our way towards a policy discussion about what the United States should do next.

We're obviously in a period of transition in the U.S. Government, internally within President Trump's Administration. He, himself, has wanted to celebrate the battlefield defeat or large elements of the defeat of ISIS in Syria with a hope to minimizing the U.S. role thereafter. But I think everyone in this room is well aware that ISIS is only one part of the problem of what we face in Syria today and so this begs the question really of what we can and should do next.

We've got a lot of expertise on the panel and what I want to do in just a minute is begin with Amanda, then Suzanne, and then Pavel. And each one of them, in addition to thinking strategically about the problem writ large and Syria writ large has a key element of regional expertise that I've asked them to try

to highlight, talk about, bring us up to date about. Amanda, who had been a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department working on Southern Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean issues, spent a lot of time on this issue, especially the Turkish and Kurdish dimensions when she was in government.

She's also -- I like to think of her as one of my most cosmopolitan colleagues. She's probably one of our top yoga experts, but beyond that she's from Western Michigan, so most of the last two weeks she's been mocking us for our intolerance for the snow, but she also has deep roots in Scotland, Ireland, I think, other parts of Europe, and did her Ph.D. at Edinburgh, as well as having, as I say, grown up in the heart of the American Midwest. And so you can talk about Scotland and Ireland with her, if you wish, in Q and A, but we're going to begin with Turkey and the Kurds.

And then, Suzanne Maloney is one of the country's top experts on Iran. Wrote the definitive work on the history of U.S. relations with Iran since the revolution and especially the political economy dimensions to Iran's evolution in that 30-some years and our various efforts to sanction Iran, to put economic pressure on Iran, to deal with Iran in a number of strategic dimensions of its behavior in the region. And obviously, Iran is a huge actor inside of Syria today. And then Pavel, who's kindly flown over from Oslo for this event, is a student of all things Russia. In fact, he was born and educated in Russia, still has family and goes back to Russia quite often, and studies different dimensions of Russian foreign policy, including military reform, including Russian foreign policy in places like the Caucasus and certainly in the broader Middle East, as well. And he's

also a specialist on Russian energy issues.

So what we're going to hope to do, the goal of the conversation is, again, to bring in these different pieces and then work our way towards a broader discussion of what U.S. policy should be. This is a week of milestones. It's the 15th anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war, or at least the 2003 version of the Iraq war. For those of you who really go back far in Washington lore and who have a, you know, hankering for nuclear issues, you'll recall that today is the 35th anniversary of President Reagan's Star Wars speech, but it's also roughly the seven-year mark of the Syrian Civil War. And, of course, this just underscores the tragedy that we've all been witnessing and trying to address roughly a half-a-million dead, about half the population displaced, roughly 12 million out of an initial population of 23 million or so. Of the 12 million displaced, probably five million are refugees in different parts of the broader Middle East and Europe. This has obviously become implicated with many of the ISIS concerns in recent years and terror attacks inside of Western Europe, in particular. Huge numbers have internally displaced, huge parts of the country completely devastated by conflict with an estimated price tag for reconstruction of maybe something in the vicinity of a hundred billion dollars.

Just a couple more words of introduction from me and then we'll go to Amanda. The Institute for the Study of War, as many of you know, does excellent work on tracking what's going on in the battlefield in Syria. I've printed out their latest map. It's not quite big enough for you to see -- I'll wait for my microphone to just better hear and -- sorry.

SPEAKER: Wait for it to connect.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. So I'm just going to talk through, in very broad terms, the map of Syria today. But if you look at a color coding of who holds what, what you see is that the Assad regime controls maybe one third of the territory, but probably 75 percent of the populated areas of Syria. The Kurdish North is another big chunk, probably 20 percent of the territory, but only a couple million people at most in those areas. And then, of course, we have pockets that are still being contested near Damascus, with the tragedy underway in the suburb of Eastern Ghouta, up in the north, where Turkey has been involved in trying to push aside our Kurdish friends around Efrînê, but also in the area around Idlib in the northwest, where we see the remnants of former Al-Qaida or al-Nusra affiliates constantly renaming themselves, but still involved along with other opposition groups. And then finally, in the southwest, near the Israeli border, where the Israelis have had concerns about Iran's role. But we also have a number of moderate opposition groups that we've worked with in the past that continue to have pockets of control in certain areas.

What this adds up to, in a nutshell -- and I'll finish here -- is that we assess -- President Trump's national security team seems to assess that Assad is bent on retaking the whole country. Yet at the same time, we've heard General Votel of Central Command and others make this assessment: they also underscore, Assad doesn't really have the forces to hold the whole country and he certainly doesn't have the forces to take everything back at once. So, the question then becomes how much of the country can we help our local allies hold

onto and create maybe some local autonomous areas of self-governance in the meantime, along the way, as we still envision a long-term goal of seeing Assad replaced?

I'll just signal that I have very serious doubts as to whether the replacement of Assad can be a realistic U.S. policy goal. And most people don't really think it is in the near-term, but we still cling to that hope through the Geneva negotiation process and through various kinds of public statements, for example, by Secretary of State Tillerson in his speech at Stanford on Syria in January.

So those are just a few pieces of what we want to try to bring together with your help in the course of the next hour and a half. Without further ado, I'm now going to turn the floor over to Amanda, then Suzanne, and then Pavel.

MS. SLOAT: Hi, thanks, Mike, and thanks for pulling this together and thanks to all of you for coming out this morning. I wanted to talk for a few minutes about the Turkey piece. Turkey's been in the headlines a lot in the last couple of weeks with the military operation Operation Olive Branch that it's been prosecuting in Efrînê. And I think to understand what Turkey is doing there now, it helps to take a look back over the last couple of years and understand some of the history that led Turkey to where it is now.

When the war started or, well, at least when the demonstration started, Turkish President Erdoğan initially engaged with Assad to see if there was a way that he could encourage him to make some democratic reforms that

would bring the conflict to a quick and a peaceful resolution without becoming more of a military conflict. Assad did not listen to him, the civil war began within Syria and it was at that point that Erdoğan really turned on Assad and his primary objective in Syria became the quick overthrow of Assad. Erdoğan, I think, like many in the United States and others, thought that the war would be over quickly and that Assad would be gone quickly, which certainly was the experience of other dictators in the Middle East as part of the Arab Spring.

As part of that, I think the Turkish government was willing to turn a blind eye to some of the fighters that were crossing at its border and going into Syria in the name of trying to get rid of Assad more quickly. Obviously, Assad did not fall. We saw the rise of ISIS and at that point, the flow of foreign fighters across the Turkish border became much more problematic. Eventually, Turkey began to take steps to crack down on its border.

So, Turkey went from being very focused on getting rid of Assad. At that point, the United States started working with the YPG, with a faction of Syrian Kurds that were operating in Syria. At that point, Erdoğan's goal shifted from getting rid of Assad to trying to block the Syrian Kurds from controlling a significant region within Syria. Why was that the case?

The United States, if you'll recall, was not interested under President Obama in getting involved in the Syrian Civil War. President Obama had come to office based on opposition to the war in Iraq, was not looking to get the United States involved in other conflicts, was trying to draw down in Afghanistan, and so was not willing to put U.S. forces in the middle of a Syrian

Civil War. The United States only got involved once there was the rise of ISIS, which Obama saw as a national security threat to the United States, to our partners in Europe, and our partners in the region. So, the United States began to look for ground forces with whom it could partner in Syria.

A long history going into who they ended up looking for. Lots of conversations with the Turks. Some of the conversations with the Turks ended up faltering because President Erdoğan had been quite insistent on the U.S. developing a no-fly zone along its border, which was more military action than what the United States was looking to get involved in. There was also some disagreements about the number and availability of Syrian opposition forces on the ground.

The U.S. had a train and equip program, which you will recall ultimately was unsuccessful partly because, again, the United States was only interested in supporting forces that were willing to fight ISIS. Many of the moderate opposition forces that were operating in the area at the time wanted to fight against the regime. It's what they had been doing for a number of years; it's what their fellow brothers have died for, it's what they wanted to do.

This did not leave the United States with a large number of good options. U.S. Special Forces who were deployed in Syria to look for ground forces with whom to support in partnership with American Airpower found a faction of Syrian Kurds on the ground that they wanted to work with. It's important to remember that these are not all Syrian Kurds; it is a faction of Syrian Kurds. They ended up working with the YPG.

The problem for the Turks with the YPG is that they are closely linked with the PKK. The PKK is a designated terrorist organization by the United States and Europe that has been operating a domestic insurgency in Turkey for the last 40 years and has resulted in the death of thousands of Turks. So the Turkish government saw -- essentially saw the U.S. as partnering with a terrorist organization in Syria in the name of fighting against another terrorist organization.

The U.S. government was able to make a legal distinction between the PKK, which it has designated as a terrorist organization, and the YPG, which it has not designated as a terrorist organization. The Turks didn't see it that way and that created a large amount of tension between the United States and the Turkish government.

This is essentially what we are seeing playing out now with the conflict in Efrînê. The Turkish government's understanding had been that the United States was going to work in a very limited and tactical way with the Syrian Kurds in this fight against ISIS. Erdoğan was willing to a certain extent and after a large amount of diplomacy to tolerate this cooperation on two grounds: one is that there was not arms given directly to the YPG. And U.S. Special Forces worked with the YPG and a number of Arab forces to create this umbrella body, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and was able to give some supplies to the Syrian Democratic Forces more broadly rather than just the YPG specifically.

President Trump ended up putting in place a plan that Obama had initially outlined to arm the YPG specifically for the fight in Raqqa. So this was

the first thing that changed that Erdoğan wasn't happy about. Erdoğan's second redline was that he didn't want the Kurds to control a contiguous region across all of Northern Syria. The United States has been working with YPG forces in Eastern Syria from Manbij East to the east of the Euphrates River. Interestingly, Russia has been working with a faction of YPG forces on the west in Efrînê. The Turkish government did not want these two areas of territory to be connected, which would create a contiguous Kurdish region. It would block any sort of Turkish access into Syria and it would be seen as a security threat all along Turkey's border.

So I've been talking too long, so just to move this forward, Turkey's military action in the last year or two has largely been to prevent the connection of these two territories. Operation Euphrates Shield, which it launched in summer of 2016, was a way of wiping remaining ISIS forces off its border and preserving a corridor between these two areas of YPG control. What it's doing now with Efrînê, interestingly, is attacking the area in Efrînê where the YPG Kurds are again as a means of pushing them out to clear space off the border there. The history of Turkey's interaction with Russia has been interesting, as it went from very tense relations after Turkey shot down a Russian plane that had been violating its airspace, now needing to cooperate with Russia, which controls the airspace in Northern Syria where Turkey is operating.

The last thing that I will say is, is the challenge that Turkey is now facing, and we'll come back to this in the discussion is that there tend to be very conflicting messages coming out of the U.S. Government not only about what its

overarching serious strategy is, but what its policy is towards the YPG. And part of what precipitated the Kurd, or the Turk's most recent military action in Efrînê was concern coming out of Tillerson's speech that the U.S. was not, in fact, looking for a short-term transactional relationship with the YPG, but rather was planning to stay with them in a long-term to help provide security to the liberated areas, which the Turkish government saw as a means of security guarantees for this broader Kurdish region. And as I said, Turkey's overarching objective right now is to prevent this formation of an overarching region. So it's really creating tension between the United States and Turkey in terms of going forward in Syria and also creating interesting dynamics between Turkey and Russia.

MR. O'HANLON: Amanda, that's great. I'm just going to have one follow-up before we go to Suzanne. And obviously none of us can predict the future, but from what you just said and what you wrote in your excellent paper that everybody here should know about, a very good paper on the U.S. Turkish relationship that just came out this year, I do sense at least the potential for hopefulness that if one were to -- I mean, if our long-term goal in dealing with the Syrian Kurds is to make sure that they can begin to live in peace, that they don't have to be ruled by Assad again, and that they can still keep pressure on ISIS and prevent Iran from gaining more foothold in the east, are those -- it sounds like some of those goals may be compatible with Turkey's goals. It may require, you know, sort of imaging two or three separate Kurdish autonomous areas. Maybe Turkey keeps some military presence between them. Maybe we keep some presence and make some promises about preventing their consolidation.

But is that kind of a vision, at least hypothetically, something we can work towards?

MS. SLOAT: Yeah. I think we need to work towards some sort of solution and I think some sort of solution on the ground is possible. Now that the military operation in Efrînê is completed, Erdoğan has been threatening to march about 60 miles east to Manbij. Now, Manbij is where U.S. forces are deployed and it's also where there are YPG forces that the U.S. has been working with. The United States consistently told Turkey that YPG forces that had gone into Manbij to clear the city as part of the military operation were then going to leave Manbij and move back east after the operation was done.

This has not happened and it's something that Erdoğan is continuing to drive towards. And so I think Erdoğan had been willing to tolerate a certain Kurdish presence with the YPG on the east of the Euphrates, outside of Manbij, but wanted to keep this space clear in the middle area. So there are U.S. promises that he is looking to fulfill.

So the question is whether you can do multiple things: whether you can get the YPG to move out on Manbij; whether you can try to get the YPG to relinquish their affiliation with the PKK, which they have never done. Ultimately, you need to have some sort of solution to the Kurdish issue within Turkey, ideally in the name of getting the PKK to resume its ceasefire and to resuming peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK, which Erdoğan had done successfully at one stage, but then that ended up falling apart in the face of some Syria-related violence. And I think there really needs to be

ways of addressing some of Turkey's legitimate security concerns about what's happening there.

But I think we need to find some sort of diplomatic solution and it may contain a military. Because otherwise, if President Erdoğan is to believe, his forces and partnership with the Free Syrian Army on the ground are going to start moving east and I think everybody wants to avoid a situation where you have American and Turkish forces in direct military combat with each other.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, just one last clarifying question from me, for my benefit. This entire region east of the Euphrates that the Kurds control, there's few than a million people in the entire region, right, or in that ballpark? There's only about two million Kurds in all of Syria, I think, two-and-a-half million. Is -- are these the right order of magnitude numbers?

MS. SLOAT: You've got me. I'm not --

MR. O'HANLON: Well --

MS. SLOAT: -- sure on the numbers.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, I think it's fair to say that the Kurdish population in Syria is, by estimates that I've seen, about 10 percent of the total, something like that and large fractions of it were in the cities. So, I mean, the only broad point I'm trying to make is not a math test, but to get a picture of this terrain. This terrain is arid and sparsely populated with just a few urban concentrations; is that a fair overall picture to draw?

MS. SLOAT: Especially in Efrînê. I think that tends to be a much more mountainous area. But the one point you raise would -- that I would again

reinforce is, one, I -- the YPG do not represent all Syrian Kurds. There are other factions of Syrian Kurds, including those that have been represented in the opposition that has engaged in Geneva and other negations that the YPG has not participated in. And in addition to the makeup of this area, you also have large numbers of Arabs. And there have been reports and some concerns about large numbers of Arabs being displaced from these regions as part of the Kurdish military operation there.

So I think we tend to look at the Kurds exclusively in terms of fighting for us against ISIS, which I think has been part of their strategy, but they also have a political agenda in terms of wanting to create this region. And so in addition to looking at the broader stability questions and the counter-ISIS questions, we also need to be looking at the demographic makeup of this area and ensure that we don't have large numbers of Arabs that are being displaced from what have traditionally been Arab cities in that region, which is the case for Raqqa, for example.

MR. O'HANLON: Right. Great. Thank you. Suzanne, over to you to paint the picture of what Iran's activities and interests are at this point and how we should think about them going forward.

MS. MALONEY: Sure, and thanks so much to Mike for organizing this event and to both Mike and Amanda for kicking us off with such a really rich discussion and thank all of you for coming out on an unseasonably cold April or March morning -- almost April. I'll point your attention to the title of our event today and the reference to wars with the S in parenthesis; that wasn't a typo. It

was, in fact, I think, an indication of what -- the conversation you'll hear over the course of this morning, which is that there has been a conflict in Syria that has been primarily a civil war with proxy forces involved that may now be morphing into one or more regional conflicts, involving the regional players as the main actors in this conflict.

And I think that shift from the first horrific phase of the Syrian Civil War to what could be a conflict involving both the United States, Russia, as well as the regional superpowers is going to be one which could even become more horrific. And that is why I think we wanted to come together today, not simply to talk about the track record and what we've seen over the course of the past seven years, but to sound a warning for the future and for the need for a coherent American policy to address the conflict in Syria, not simply because of the refugees, which has been a subject of a lot of work of our colleagues around Brookings; not simply because of the humanitarian implications or the strategic implications in the conflict as it's gone to date, but what may come is really dangerous. We're entering this new phase; it was entirely predictable. We don't know where it's going from here.

But let me talk a little bit about how we got here from the perspective of the Iranians and where we might be going. I'll make three quick points about the past; three quick points about the future; and, look forward to hopefully delving into greater detail as we go through the conversation. Just as a sort of obvious starting point for the Iranians, Syria invokes all of their core regional interests. The issues, the parameters that govern Iran's approach to the

region, threat opportunity and ideology, they're all sort of front and center when it comes to the conflict in Syria.

The involvement of the Iranians in Syria is long-standing and multifaceted. Obviously, Syria is a key conduit for Iran's access to and its support for Hezbollah, its most durable and powerful proxy force, and it's a crucial element of Iran's deterrence strategy. But the Iranian leadership also has a deep emotional connection to Syria as the sole Arab state which came to its defense and a durable ally since the earliest phases of the war with Iraq, a time they forged the worldview of the Iranian leadership in a way that is very paranoid, a sense of deep isolation, and that relationship with the Assad regime dating to Hafez Assad and now, of course, Bashar is one that the Iranians take very seriously and value tremendously.

It's interesting to recall, we've all now surely forgotten given what has followed, that the Iranians that were actually initially somewhat divided. There was in 2011, 2012 at least some debate that we could see within the Iranian leadership about exactly how to respond to what was happening in Syria and what it meant, the former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, several others within the form policy establishment, in fact, arguing for Iran to sort of avoid implicating itself directly in what became the military conflict. They were clearly and decisively outmaneuvered by the security establishment, which understood and has made the case and I think whose involvement in Syria has deepened the perception of Iran as having an existential interest in the survival of Bashar Assad.

And so those early divisions have been very much forgotten within the Iranian political establishment and I think there's really no distinction between reformists and hardliners, as we often describe the Iranian political spectrum here, in terms of their willingness and readiness to continue the engagement in Syria. This has -- was transformed to some extent by the evolution of the Syrian opposition in more extreme directions and, of course, by the emergence of the so-called Islamic State. And so as a result of the changing nature of the Syrian conflict over the course of the past seven years, the Iranians have found themselves more and more invested in Bashar's survival and more and more determined to ensure his continued rule in Syria and is -- and Iran's continued hold on Syria as a kind of bulwark against the forces of Salafi jihadism, which the Iranians perceive to be part of a broader plot orchestrated by the international community generally, by the United States and its Sunni Arab allies in the region specifically as a means of isolating and eventually defeating the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

For the Iranians, the -- this was driven home by the arrival of IS on their own territory. And to some extent, this has created at least some popular buy-in. There are polls of the Iranian population which suggests the conflict in Syria has some degree of popularity among the general public. This is possibly controverted by what we saw over the course of protests in December, in January in which Iranians specifically pointed to the costs of the conflicts, calling out, “We are not for Syria, we are not for Gaza, we die for Iran.” In other words, “It's our own national interest that you ought to be pursuing not these foreign

conflicts."

But what the Iranians have done is not simply defend an ally, but they've created a really powerful expeditionary force driven by and reliant on recruitment of Shia Partisans from across South Asia. And this has, I think, been -- become a very powerful tool in their arsenal and is one of the factors that I would argue is going to sustain Iran's involvement in Syria, not simply the commitment to maintaining supply lines and ease of access to Hezbollah, not simply the appreciation of the expansive reach that it now -- that Iran now has across the region, but the fact that Iran for the first time in the post-revolutionary history has engaged to some extent successfully in a conflict outside of its borders by relying on the recruitment of a transnational army: an army that can't be sent home, can't be repatriated to Iran for a variety of domestic reasons. And that is quite useful in trying to shift the demographic balance of future Syrian state.

And I think it's -- that is a very powerful reason why we're going to see the Syrians sustain their involvement in Syria. They're looking consolidate their gains; to test the redlines. We've seen already the first use of force by the Israelis against Iranian targets on the ground in Syria ramping up what has been a long-standing campaign on the part of the Israelis to try to push back against at least Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies. This latest development, the attack on Iranian forces, I think, is just a taste of things to come. I have colleagues here from the Center for Middle East Studies here at Brookings who can speak to this in greater depth, but I think we're going to see a continuing process between the

Iranians and the Israelis to try to test the boundaries of what might be tolerable. And this is where the position of the United States becomes so interesting.

Finally, the Iranians want a kind of payback. They've invested a lot in Syria, not just hundreds of their own Revolutionary Guard Commanders, thousands of those that they recruited to fight in Syria from South Asia, from the Shia militias in Iraq and Hezbollah, but also in terms of their own Treasury. And these strains, as I said, have been showing up in terms of the domestic politics of Iran. And what we're hearing from the Iranian leadership is that they are determined to stay, that they, in fact, see the fight in Syria as the kind of frontlines, as Ayatollah Khomeini said recently of the fight against the world imperialism and the conspiracy against Iran.

There is a heightened risk. The Iranians appreciate that as this new phase of the war begins with a more assertive Saudi Arabia, with an American President who is more unpredictable than his predecessors, that the possibility of a wider conflict is on that they have to be prepared for, but every indication from Tehran suggest that they are, in fact, prepared for that fight.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. So one follow-up for you, please. Suzanne, thank you for that excellent primer of where Iran's activities had been, where its interests are. Is it fair to conclude from what you said at least in Tehran's own potentially delusional way, they think of what they're doing in Syria as partly defensive? And it's not all about destroying Israel or any other kind of offensive great ambition like that; they see this as in same way protecting fellow Shia and protecting the revolution even in their own country, which may or may

not make them easier to deal with. But you're saying that's actually a sincere view in their own minds about what they're up to in Syria?

MS. MALONEY: Well, for the Iranians, the best defense is a good offense. And so in a sense, they would prefer to take the fight in Syria than see the fight at home and this is precisely the argument that they're making to their own population and it's why for some period of time there was at least some suspicion that this was not an unpopular conflict in the eyes of most Iranians. But yes, absolutely. This is, you know, for the Iranians, this is an attempt to ward off what they see to be very much directed as a conflict against them and one that has been orchestrated deliberately to try to take out the Islamic Republic. And they see Bashar Assad, who wasn't a very popular figure in Iran at the outset of his leadership in Syria, they see his kind of staying power and his willingness to kind of thumb his nose at the international community as more evidence of the utility of that alliance.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Pavel, I'm curious, you know, to have your take on what Russia's been up to and also ultimately that same question of, you know, what does Putin really want in Syria and what would he be willing to settle for in a war that's allowed him to really flex his muscles, but also obviously bog Russia down and cost Russia a lot. So, I'd love to get your take and thank you again for being here all the way from Norway.

MR. BAEV: Oh, it's certainly my great pleasure to be part of this conversation and I appreciate the opportunity very much.

I will not give you a broad picture of kind of Russian intervention in

Syria. I think we have discussed that over the last two-and-a-half years back and forth many times. It was certainly a very high risk and also a low capacity enterprise and the risks were managed and the investments, I will say that intervention generally paid off above expectation. It was on -- all-in-all a remarkably successful exercise in project -- projecting power, successful to such a degree that last autumn, after the meeting with these two partners in Sochi, Putin proclaimed victory. And that was exactly the point where everything went wrong.

Well, and it -- typically, that's how it happened. And costs and casualties mounted as the ability to control the situation diminished far greater than Russia -- and reduced its scale of its intervention and what appeared to be a victory or very near victory as it turned into a rather serious confusion. And it is probably impossible to answer your question, what Putin really is up to. I don't even specifically think that the standard answer “up to no good” would suffice because he is probably at loss at the moment. He was certainly busy with other things; in the recent weeks, the election still matter even in Russia. But what was Russia mostly doing over the last three months probably starting with that initial shock, the new year, when the drone attack hit Russian Hmeymim airbase and going to throw other shocks. Essentially, it was mostly washing its hands.

It washed its hands over the Kurds in Efrînê and gave green light to Turkish offensive there very directly through the kind of military channels. Generally assuming, but on balance, the strategic partnership with Turkey's far more important than whatever ties with the Kurds Russia had. It washed its

hands over several mercenaries which were hit severely on the wrong -- when caught on the wrong bank of (inaudible) and Moscow was quite shocked with that U.S. strike on them because certainly it was colossal overkill. You're looking at what assets were gathered for that very short strike, from drones to B-52s, from the kind of Flying Fortresses, C-132 helicopters and the artillery. That concentration of firepower Russia was never able to gather for (inaudible) or for any purposes, so Moscow was quite shocked and pretended that nothing happened.

Moscow also kind of washed it hands over the problem in East -- in Eastern Ghouta saying, “Nothing can be done.” Yes, another sad story, but the UN discussion and Security Council was very clear and deliberately blocked. Moscow also had no objections against the Israel air strike against Iran; quite a strong strike air strike again, unprecedented probably again, a sign of things to come. Again, no response from Moscow and probably this sort of position makes certain sense. You allow all the other parties through that protracted conflict to make their blunders and mistakes. You are not going to partaking in that; you are kind of licking your own words and generally staying there. But this strategy involves the risks of losing relevance, not on losing control probably, I think, Moscow has stepped away from that desire, but of losing relevance.

And where to come from this particular stage further, how to avoid losing relevance is not something Putin likes. For him, staying in the focus of events, particularly like in Syria, is of an important point in itself, being a part of game. There are not that many key games in the world he's able to play a crucial

role on and for that matter, the North Korean problem shows that somehow Russia has lost relevance; he's not very happy about that. Syria make -- is one place where Russia feels it still can make a difference, still wants to return to that possibility, but doesn't want to carry the burden to pay the costs.

Unlike Iran, Russia has not invested that much in that intervention in kind of the whole enterprise. It was always tried to save the dictator in distress on the cheek and the trick with that is that you have to keep doing that again and again and again. You cannot rescue that man from his own country, unlike in Private Ryan, he is stuck there. It's something you need to invest more and more. So how to proceed with that? I don't want to answer this question for Putin. It's probably -- it is probably a hard one.

One positive thing I would probably point to is that the confliction -- the conflicting channel with United States works. During the last 10 days, we held two conversations and generally were able to sort out many things, minimize the risks. Russia is very worried about new U.S. strike probably of the same capacity somewhere in Syria, which would undermine Russian's position further. It cannot stop it, but it can try to dissuade United States against it. But again, it's much like saving a dictator in distress; you need to dissuade again and again and again until the strike finally comes.

Two kind of fundamental differences in the position of Russia comparing with Turkey and Iran, which might play out in the future. One is that when it comes to post-conflict this building, reconstruction and everything related to the sort, resettlement refugees, all this colossal work, you've mentioned the

cost of that. That's not Russia's forte. Russia immediately feels out. Its influence goes down, its capacity to contribute is nearly non-existent. Russia is able to be in the game only as long as there is conflict and war. That's kind of -- that's -- its element there is that's kind of the base of its influence, which, again, is not a very constructive proposition.

The second difference which is going to -- is there, is it unlike these two parties to the conflict and unlike Israel and some other stakeholders, Russia is one party to that war which in principle can pack its bags and go. There are no vital interests for Russia in that war. There is kind of -- Russia is not really committed 100 percent to that. Syria is still a faraway place. It's -- Russia has no intention of quitting. Russia has no plans for withdrawal. But all the stakeholders in the conflict know that for Russia, this option is present. If things would become too burdensome, too problematic, too risky, Moscow can move a single away and that's both a plus and a minus. Whether there is really staying power in Russian intervention is still an open question. Two-and-a-half years isn't long enough to answer that. But the very availability of this option makes Russia's position rather special.

And I will stop here just, you know, to save more time for our discussion.

MR. O'HANLON: That's fantastic. Thank you. And also, thank you for the humor. It's pretty hard to find any humor in this subject, but I appreciate your noble efforts. I just want to really ask one more question of each person on the panel. It's going to be the same question for all three of you and

it's a policy question. As I said at the beginning, our hope here is that as the conversation continues with your help until 11:30, we'll wind up, maybe some of us, at least, thinking we have a clear sense of what U.S. strategy should be, even if we may not all agree exactly on all the details and walk out with a consensus.

But I don't want to start with that question quite yet. I want to start with a smaller policy question, which is, is there a particular part of existing Trump Administration Policy that you would suggest that we rethink? And you can be as small-bore or as big picture as you wish and I'm just going to remind people to buy time for you to think about how to answer that, remind you essentially what stated U.S. policy is right now. I personally see it as primarily two major statements by government officials in the last few weeks. One was the speech by Secretary of State Tillerson, outgoing Secretary of State Tillerson, at Stanford in January which was on Syria. And the other was the Syria portion of General Votel's testimony before Congress in recent weeks, General Votel, of course, being the Combatant Commander at Central Command.

And if we go to Tillerson's speech, he said that he had five or the United States had five major goals and they were to continue to fight and defeat ISIS and Al-Qaida, to work towards a negotiated settlement in which Assad would have to step down from power, to limit Iran's influence, to help refugees and internally displaced to come home, and then to deal with the weapons of mass destruction issue. By the way, Charles Lister, our former colleague, now at the Middle East Institute, I think, just pointed out in his testimony that there have been up to 300 uses of chemical weapons certified now on the battlefield in Syria

over seven years, which is astounding. So, that problem has not been resolved.

And then Tillerson talked about how to advance those five goals and he talked about how the U.S. presence would be enduring within Syria, although the President may have partly contradicted that, it sounds like, in recent days. He talked about how we would try to work regionally with certain local and regional actors to help with the recovery process, bypassing Damascus and bypassing Assad along the way. And Votel went to Raqqa with AID Administrator Mark Green in recent weeks, essentially as a way to underscore that commitment to help rebuild in all the zones where we can safely operate. And Tillerson also promised the Turks that we would work hard to satisfy their concerns about the future political role of the Kurds within Syria, although how much he persuaded the Turks is another matter.

So that's one piece of existing policy. The other things I would add from Votel's testimony are briefer, but he said a few other additional things. He underscored how we have to really work with these local council, so he reiterated the message about local governance and reconstruction, which is a little bit noteworthy, coming from a Combatant Commander who might have been forgiven for simply celebrating the partial defeat of ISIS and then hoping the problem could go away. But Votel didn't give himself that easy out. He also underscored we're not interested in fighting Assad militarily, which at one level is obvious, but he made the statement explicit yet again, and, of course, that we didn't want to fight Russia. And then finally, he talked about how we needed to work toward some kind of a resolution with Turkey, but also in a way that was fair

to the interests of our Kurdish partners.

So these are the different pieces of U.S. policy that are on the table and I just wondered if people wanted to comment. This is not totally different, Amanda, from Obama Policy, as I interpret it, anyway. It may be slightly different rhetorically. And I'm not going to give you full responsibility for Obama Policy, but I'm curious as you having been an official in that government how much you would see continuity with Obama to Trump and then which pieces of Trump Policy you might want to quibble with or at least suggest that we begin to rethink. And then I'll have the same questions for Pavel and Suzanne.

MS. SLOAT: That's a good multipart question. I -- my overarching comment is, I am not clear what current U.S. administration policy is on Syria.

MR. BAEV: Yeah.

MS. SLOAT: And even if you unpack some of the statements that you referred to, there's internal contradictions within them. Tillerson, I think, set out a policy that on paper makes sense as a policy, but it is very unclear how that gets implemented, given the competing interests of Russia in Iran, in particular on the ground, whether the United States is prepared to make the military investment long-term in achieving some of the other goals that he laid out. And very strikingly, he shifted the policy focus from what during the Obama Administration was a very clear counter-Isis only policy to introducing elements of countering Iran on the ground. And so then the question becomes which forces Tillerson envisions doing that and how they are going to do that.

The U.S. has been relying on these Syrian Kurdish forces and what you have been seeing in Efrînê is a number of Syrian Kurds, YPG members, who have been leaving efforts to conclude the fight against ISIS in Manbij and east of the Euphrates to join their YPG brothers in countering the Turks in Efrînê. So it's not surprising that these YPG forces' primary loyalty is going to be to fellow YPG forces, but it does raise some question about the extent to which we continue to have leverage over them in the east and also the extent to which they are willing to continue being our ground forces for our own military purposes there.

On the Votel speech that you referenced, it was also interesting to see in his testimony that he said they were only focused on countering ISIS. And so I didn't hear a lot in his speech about now pivoting to a counter-Iranian mission on the ground there. Votel also said that their mission was not to try and resolve the broader conflict in Syria, the broader civil war in Syria. The military has been very focused on this counter-ISIS operation. As a result of that, I think Special Forces, in including Votel and others, are very invested in their partnership with the YPG. And so they are articulating the strongest American support for the YPG in a way that the State Department is trying to preserve this relationship with Turkey. Then you have the President who told President Erdoğan last fall that the U.S. was going to stop arming the YPG in Raqqa, with the Pentagon quickly backtracking and saying they were reviewing this to see whether or not that was going to happen. And then you had President Trump saying in his press conference with the Saudi leader this week that the U.S. was

likely to be able to leave parts of Syria, now that the counter-ISIS operation was done.

So you seem to have a President saying that the U.S. is going to declare mission accomplished against the Islamic State and leave. You have a State Department that has described cooperation with the YPG as temporary and transactional and very focused on preserving ties with the Turks, coupled with Tillerson's speech that was never clear to me if that was actually a fully interagency vetted statement of what U.S. policy was. And then finally, you have different factions within the Pentagon, most notably Special Forces, that are very committed to continuing their alliance with Kurdish fighters on the ground. So I think there is a lot of confusion within the Administration about what ultimate objectives are.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Pavel, same question to you. And you can go as big or as small as you like, be as specific or as broad.

MR. BAEV: Yes. It's not really quite my professional expertise to give clear advice to the U.S. government of how to conduct its business and I --

MR. O'HANLON: Better from you than from Putin, so, well, so, you know if we have to listen to some Russian, we'll --

MR. BAEV: And it's -- looking from outside, it's certainly a fascinating show about how different policies clash and how different personalities interact. And I don't think there is much chance that there will be more coordination in that effort and not less. I don't really put much trust in the possible summit between President Trump and President Putin, if that

materializes idea which is very welcomed in Moscow, but still too hard to pull out.

Got one proposition which these days is probably strengthening -- is turning more against Iran. Sorry for stepping on that ground. And Syria is one place where Iran is vulnerable, where it is possible to inflict pain and squeeze the assets for the United States without going all out against Iran. So this is kind of a low risk area where it is possible to go with that policy and I think as far as Russia is concerned, it is possible to secure Russia's consent for that. Russia's partnership with Iran in Syria is not really rock solid. It -- there is a bit of a brotherhood in arms in the sense that Russia understands that without Iran, the regime -- Assad -- al-Assad regime cannot be really rescued. Russia's support is not strong enough; Russia's intervention cannot possibly be increased to such a degree that it would become the main pillar of securing that regime, so Iran is important. But at the same time, Russia is never happy with the kind of Iranian influence in the al-Assad's forces with attempts to turn some elements of these forces into proto corps of kind of Revolutionary Guards, Iranian, and so on.

So I don't think Russia would kind of object violently against U.S. hardline against Iran in Syria. Other than that, Russia really wants to be taken onboard, to be taken seriously, to be engaged in some form or shape, and this -- through that engagement, it's -- it is probably possible to make Russia agree to just about anything United States would want to accomplish short of removal of al-Assad regime, which is still somewhat of an important proposition. But even there, I think Putin's support for that regime was much more a part of his general struggle against the evil of revolution; against his -- this ideological stance, which

posits that kind of every revolution brings only chaos and violence. It's this kind of revolution should be stopped. Syria is a place where we will take a stance against that, kind of part of the global vision.

If the al-Assad regime was removed, not through revolution, but through some sort of political maneuvering over -- involving other stakeholders, I think Russia can agree with that. There is no particular closeness between Putin and al-Assad; there is no particular chemistry; there is no particular personal relations.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And, Suzanne, the same question to you and then we'll go to the audience for your thoughts and questions.

MS. MALONEY: Sure. Well, I want to pick up exactly where Pavel left off, but I also hope that we'll come back to you, Mike, because I'm sure you have specific ideas, as well. I think with respect to the Trump Administration's Policy in Syria, there has been an incredible opportunity sacrificed. They may still pull it out of the bag, but the Administration came in talking very tough on Iran, based on the perception -- legitimate perception that the nuclear deal had not produced the kind of wholesale transformation of Iran's regional policies and approach to the world that at least some elements of the strategy to sell that deal here in Washington had promised that it might.

And so as a result, the Administration was reasonably well-position and began to build up, I think, a kind of leverage through the rhetoric, through the determination to take on Iran, to try to extract some concessions from some of our allies, as well as conceivably from countries like Russia with

interests in Syria to take on the Iranians more directly. And when I say take on, I think I'm very -- being very realistic here. I have no expectation that the Europeans were -- had any intention of committing troops or, you know, sort of engaging the Iranians directly in Syria. But what we know from the nuclear diplomacy is that there was a strategy that worked.

It was built on a very tightly focused consensus among the P5 plus the Germans, all actors that had a considerable degree of political and economic influence with respect to the Iranians, had that kind of coalition been sustained and driven to attention and focused around the Syria question, I think there might have been some potential to put real pressure on what the Iranians are doing in terms of their direct support on the ground, in terms of the way that they're going to dig in and essentially control major aspects of Syria's domestic politics and its economics in the post-reconstruction phase.

And frankly, the debate over the deal became very much at odds with what you were hearing from different parts of the Administration about the need to confront Iran across the region. They could have been brought together in a way that, in fact, created at least some kind of a viable strategy. I think the Europeans and particularly the French were still talking in a very tough way about the potential for applying economic pressure to Iran as a result of its activities in Syria. But in effect, the kind of fixation on the nuclear deal and what, I think, now is an almost inevitability that the United States will abrogate its participation in that deal and get absolutely nothing in return from the rest of the world or from the Iranians, has sacrificed an incredible opportunity.

And let me just make one other point because Mike referenced the sort of persistent use by the Syrian regime of chemical weapons. This is an issue that, frankly, the Iranians are incredibly exposed on, both in terms of their own domestic politics and in terms of their regional exposure. For Iran, the issue of the kind of international indifference to the use of weapons of mass destruction during the Iran-Iraq War is something that they harp on incessantly and it is something that Iranians have internalized as one of the core grievances against the United States and international community.

Khamenei, the supreme leader came up just a couple of weeks ago and essentially gave Assad a free pass, said yes, they say he uses -- they say people use chemical weapons. But, you know, essentially completely uncaring. If we had made this issue a much more high-priority issue, the Iranian complicity in the use of chemical weapons in Syria would have had domestic reverberations within Iran in a way that could have been very powerful. And so, again, I think a real opportunity lost. Perhaps there's some possibility in the weeks to come before the May 12th deadline for renewal of waivers to sustain our participation in the joint comprehensive plan of action. There will be some rethinking on the part of the Administration.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Now, let's go to all of you. I'll save my fire for later, weave it all into the discussion and the Q and A. So please wait for a microphone and we'll take a couple of questions at a time, perhaps. Start here in the third row, please. And please identify yourself, as well.

MR. BUONOMO: Thomas Buonomo, American Humanist

Association. I wanted to ask Suzanne what combination of coercive measures in diplomatic or economic incentives, et cetera, would potentially persuade Iran to come seriously to the negotiating table on regional issues, including Syria and, you know, the Israeli Palestinian issue, which I view is inextricably interconnected. And the chemical weapons issue, I think that would, you know, U.S. credibility would depend on us, frankly, acknowledging our own involvements in the 1980s-'88 Iran-Iraq War and that aspect of it. Thanks.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And there's a question -- we'll go to that about the eighth row back there. I see three hands. Why don't we take all three of those, so we'll have four questions and then we'll come back to the panel?

MR. WURMAN: Hi, Alex Wurman with the Atlantic Council. So in the medium term if there is a de-escalation in the conflict, would it be in the U.S. interest to kind of promote and push international financial institutions to take part in any sort of reconstruction, understanding that while there would be humanitarian benefits, it would also possibly lead to an entrenchment of the Assad regime? Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Thanks.

MR. PAULEY: Hi, thank you all. Logan Pauley with Stimson Center. We see that the resolution 2401 is ending in a couple days and it's failed pretty miserably.

MR. O'HANLON: The humanitarian ceasefire arrangement, is --

MR. PAULEY: That's correct, yes. The 30-day ceasefire. At a

meeting on Mach 12th, Nikki Haley said that the U.S. plans to put forward a new UN resolution for an immediate ceasefire because the Russian Ambassador said that the 2401 didn't include an immediate ceasefire. But we saw there humanitarian corridors fail. I wanted to ask if you guys see any opportunity for multilateral responses to violence in Syria as being beneficial or if multilateral responses are actually exacerbating the problem.

MR. O'HANLON: And then finally, please.

MR. EVENSON: Michael Evenson of the Middle East Forum. Do you think that the Arab League will be more receptive to a forthcoming Trump Israel-Palestinian peace plan that completely excludes the goal on heights?

MR. O'HANLON: So here is what I would like to do in responding to the questions. I'll take the third one, one question, the one on reconstruction; then we'll go to Suzanne, because you got one directly; and then Pavel and Amanda, you can just speak about whichever you wish, if you don't mind.

I wanted to address the reconstruction question because I think it also raises the broader question, as you pointed out, of how to think about the future of Bashar al-Assad. To my mind, this is the fundamental contradiction in American policy right now. Amanda pointed out a number of tensions or contradictions. To me, this is far and away the central one. We have General Votel acknowledging we're not going to fight Assad. In the wake of the Russian intervention, there's no realistic chance of Assad being displaced. We're not even really trying to arm and train insurgents to achieve that goal. And we don't really seem to want that goal because even if it somehow could be achieved,

we're not really sure how to control the mayhem that would inevitably result as those half-million deaths were avenged, most of them having been caused by the regime and its chemical weapons use, its barrel bombing, its artillery against apartment buildings and so forth.

So realistically, we don't have a way to think about Assad or his future. I think the Geneva process is counterproductive, not just a long shot, but counterproductive because it deludes us into thinking we have a political strategy when we don't. And I would rather see it simply terminated or fundamentally redefined along the following lines: let's acknowledge there is not going to be a negotiated transition of power in Syria in the short-term, period. There isn't because for Assad, that is snatching defeat from the jaws of battlefield victory. It's just that simple for him. He watched what happened in Iraq. This is the mirror image.

If a minority group that had power for many years loses power, their group will suffer retaliation. That is the number one lesson of the Iraqi Civil War and Assad, I think, has at least interpreted the lesson in those terms. Others may want to disagree with me in a second; they'll certainly have that chance, if they wish. But my bottom line is that the only thing we can hope for with Assad is that he allow autonomous governance in some of these more remote areas and we should work hard on a full-bore reconstruction effort there and even try to persuade the World Bank and other foreign donors to work with these subnational entities as they emerge.

But we should also recognize Assad's going to stay in Damascus

for some foreseeable amount of time. And our best hope is to try to persuade him to choose his own successor and hold up on the major reconstruction aid until he does, for those parts of the country that he controls. And then as he does hand off power, we can at least try to get more Sunni Arab and Kurdish representation at the cabinet level and the advisory level in the future government, but recognizing that it's not going to be dominated by those groups, even though together they are the majority of the population inside of Syria. It's not going to be a democratic majoritarian political transition because Assad will not allow it.

And even if he himself could be incentivized by Russia to go find A Dacha on some nice Russian lake and live in exile, he's not going to do that to his fellow Alawites. He's not going to desert them and leave them at the mercy of these sectarian groups who, even though the war is not simply a sectarian war, nonetheless, it has a dimension, an aspect along those lines. And the Alawites will suffer enormously, in my judgment, if there is any kind of a future majoritarian government, unless we get extremely lucky. And Assad's not going to count on luck, especially when he's basically won the war on the battlefield.

So it's got to be a managed transition to a successor that Assad himself likely and largely chooses. Our main leverage is with reconstruction aid to withhold the spigot being fully opened for areas like Damascus until Assad has chosen an acceptable successor that the Sunni Muslims and Kurds can at least tolerate and don't feel have been, you know, killing them in large numbers the way that Assad and his inner circle have been. So that's how I think we have to

rethink the political strategy and link it to the reconstruction strategy. You can give some humanitarian aid to the areas that Assad controls in the short-term, but you got to withhold the massive reconstructive aid for the central cities until Assad is gone, but recognize it's not going to be Geneva that chooses the successor; it's going to be a more indirect and Assad-driven process. That's my take.

Thanks for listening. Suzanne, over to you.

MS. MALONEY: Very quickly and I'll just start there because I really do agree with Mike's reality-based assessment of the prospects for a Geneva process having any relevance to events on the ground, but I also want to inject just a note of caution about the extent to which reconstruction aid provides us with leverage. Because fundamentally, this is something that the Iranians have tremendous capacity and expertise in. They helped maneuver us after the Lebanon War, they will control those cities, the major cities of Syria, in the aftermath of this conflict or in the next phase of this conflict and, you know, isn't it handy that the Revolutionary Guard has had a construction business for about 30 years that now dominates much of the Iranian economy? Those companies are very well positioned, they're already talking publicly about what they -- the industries and sectors that they expect to benefit from in Syria. And so I think that the danger that we have is by withholding our own engagement with the Assad portions of Assad-controlled portions of Syria is we're essentially only enabling the Iranians to consolidate their hold on those.

Let me just speak briefly and generally to the question about what

combination of pressure and incentives might have lent the Iranian evolvement in Syria. I think that what we know from the nuclear diplomacy is that sanctions can work, but they will not be applied multilaterally. We will not have buy-in from our allies and partners and certainly not from the Russians and the Chinese, unless we're working together in a very tightly held coalition. You know, the -- Europe has never sort of jumped to the front of the line when it comes to putting economic pressure on Iran. It was only the kind of combination of factors during the latter phase of the nuclear crisis that persuaded the EU and individual European states to apply really severe economic pressure to Iran. And it had an impact in terms of the Iranians willing to negotiate. It was entirely obvious that in the aftermath of the JCPOA, no one in Europe was going to start pressuring the Iranians over Syria. But the Trump Administration through this kind of, you know, attack on the deal through the determination to go after Iran had an opportunity, I think, to create at least some platform for a conversation on that basis.

And just to the point about our complicity in the 1980s use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein, in fact, in 18 years ago, an American Secretary of State expressed regret for our support for Saddam during that war. It had had -- it has had no impact on Iran's worldview or on Iran's capacity to put trust in the United States. And so I, you know, I don't think that that's the major issue here. I think what we have is a complete lack of shame on the part of the Iranian regime and that should be exposed.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Pavel. Pavel.

MR. BAEV: Oh, right. Yes. There was a question about the

usefulness of United Nations and multilateral institutions in general for preventing the next disaster essentially. The UN fail to prevent the disaster in -- Aleppo; it failed to prevent a disaster in Eastern Ghouta and probably will fail again, because probably the next disaster will be the Idlib province where now the -- everything is in place for the next offensive there. Nevertheless, there is always, always a chance that something might be negotiated there. At least Russia, in principle, is very interested in meeting the security council into something meaningful in this conflict resolution because that's the one place -- one international (inaudible) where Russia feels very comfortable, where Russia feels it has exactly the profile and the veto right and everything where it can make a difference. So that's the only hope in this regard.

But the hope is pretty slim and I do think the next disaster is in the making, as far as the Idlib province is concerned. And again, we will -- everybody will be washing its hands and saying it's -- after all, it's mostly Al-Qaida, which -- whatever name it takes. So what can you do or what can be done? And for the al-Assad regime, the only problem with Idlib is, again, to how to handle that with Turkey on which probably there are better experts than myself. But I don't see any role for Russia in that regard.

MR. O'HANLON: And Amanda.

MS. SLOAT: Well, it's the benefit of speaking last is everything smart has already been said. I mean, I agree with what Pavel said. I mean, the UN has shown itself to be pretty ineffective in terms of ending any of the conflict, not least because you've got a Russian veto on the security council. And I think

the things that Russia has been prepared to veto have been pretty extraordinary, especially when you look at some of the humanitarian and the CW statements that have been coming out.

I also generally agree with Mike's pessimistic read on the Geneva process. If you want to be very cynical about it, Geneva essentially bought time for Russia to bolster the regime to win back the military control on the battlefield. And I think the U.S., because of its much more limited involvement on the ground, does not have a lot of -- or a lot of military leverage to have great leverage over some of the diplomatic conversations.

I found Pavel's comments interesting, although perhaps not surprising, about Moscow's willingness to wash its hands of this. I think the initial thinking in the United States, which maybe was somewhat wishful thinking, but was that Russia was going to end up getting mired down and bogged down in the conflict and then was going to end up suffering a lot of negative consequences as a result of that, which, going back to Pavel's opening statements, you can argue, is starting to happen to a certain extent that you have Putin declaring victory against ISIS in December, but now facing the same challenge that everybody else is in terms of how you win and secure the peace. I think he's right that Russia's -- is not directly affected by this in terms of proximate geography, which makes it a little bit easier to walk away, but then it does raise this question of who actually is going to win the peace and then who is going to fund the reconstruction of everything that's happening in Syria.

Final point is, is my concern. Whatever configuration you end up

having is that you have a situation where you have the Kurds controlling territory on the north. You have Assad and the Alawites continuing to control a lot of the wealthier coastal land on the western side of the country. And then you have a big area of desert with lots of disenfranchised, angry Sunni populations, which is a good recipe for ISIS 2.0. And so then there's a real risk that in a couple years we end up replaying this game all over again.

MR. O'HANLON: One point, too, that you both made me think of. Russia's lost more than a hundred people in Syria this year, right, between the incident that you described, Pavel, and the plane crash in --

MR. BAEV: Yes.

MR. O'HANLON: -- Waitaki, I believe. So in that sense, there are these -- plus the financial costs, substantial investments that are ongoing by Russia.

Okay. Well, let's take one more round and then we'll go through the panel again. So let's begin with the gentleman in the red tie here in like, the sixth row, closer to me, please. And then proceed from there.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I'm Adilah (inaudible) writer. We all know that ISIS has been defeated militarily, but the question that the organization is still there. Some reports confirm that 3,000 fighters -- ISIS fighters are still there. So my question is, how to eradicate this organization or in other words how to extinguish ISIS from the face of the earth, as Trump assets many times? My second question is, is there a possibility that ISIS will reemerge in Syria?

MR. O'HANLON: Well, why don't you give the microphone to the

gentleman right next to you and then we'll stay up here.

SPEAKER: Hello, Markus (inaudible) of Montgomery College. You've already talked a bit about this issue, but I wanted to comment on maybe not my own opinion, but one that is shared by many people, especially in my generation of kids who grew up post-9/11. We've seen what has happened in, like, let's say Iraq and Libya and Afghanistan. And I think you've mentioned that this kind of a repetition of regime change might not be so -- as effective this round. So what I wanted to comment on with the current Trump attitudes with Russia and sort of less resistant -- more resistant to those regime changes, what is in it for maybe the general public who's become more apathetic or fatigued of this constant conflict in the Middle East and what is the benefit we get from continuing to be involved, whether it's political, militarily, or reconstruction?

MR. O'HANLON: Great, thank you. And let's take one more and then I think we'll go to the panel and then we'll have a final round of questions after that. And the last one will be here in the fifth row, I guess.

MR. HOOVER: Hi. Patrick Hoover, Navanti Group. My question is specifically for Amanda, but anyone else can chime in. I was wondering, how do you assess the impact of Operation Olive Branch, as well as continue Turkish threats of attack east of the Euphrates on broader inter-Kurdish relations in the region, specifically the Karaji, based in Northern Iraq? I know that they've public -- publicly condemned the operation, but they haven't really mobilized fighters in support of the Syrian Kurds. When faced with a common threat, we have seen Iraqi Syrian Kurdish cooperation specifically in Kobanî a couple years ago. So I

was just wondering if you could comment on that and what role the Karaji could possibly play in reconcile -- reconciling between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds.

MR. O'HANLON: Great. So why don't we start with you this time, Amanda, and you can address that any of the others, if you wish. And then we'll just work through the panel.

MS. SLOAT: Sure. I -- quick comments on all three. I -- the first and second were related. I mean, yes, I think ISIS is still there. And as I had said in my response to the last question, my concern is especially having a large disenfranchised Sunni population is a recipe for the reemergence of this. We're also seeing Al-Qaida back in Syria. So even though we have defeated some of the major military centers, it doesn't defeat the ideology and it doesn't defeat the appeal of the ideology. If you look at the coalition strategy that the United States had set out several years ago to countering ISIS, the military component was only one part of that. There was also an economic component; there was a large diplomatic component; there was a messaging and communications component. And frankly, I think a lot of the Arab countries in the region are going to have to be much more actively involved, continue to be involved in addressing some of those other strains of that. They are better placed to do so than the United States is, but this is going to continue to be a long-term challenge.

That relates to the comment asked by the second person, which is, there is a U.S. national security interest in this if you end up having the growth of regional terrorism. You know, the reason the United States got involved in Afghanistan was because of 9/11 activities. I personally thought the Iraq War

was a mistake, but the Obama Administration had taken a very narrow interest in what was happening in Syria because of this ISIS threat. I think you could also argue that one of the other big results that has come out of the Syria conflict has been the massive refugee crisis. Turkey, for example, has 3.5 million refugees coming out of Syria with a population of 80 million, which is an extraordinary number.

You've also seen the refugee and migration crisis that affected Europe and I think, in addition to the humanitarian situation there, it has contributed in some ways to the rise of these populous movements in Europe and also the rise of some of these far-right parties in Europe. So again, even though some of these things in the Middle East are some ways away from the United States, there are spillover effects on our allies in the region that you could argue end up having later costs on our national security interests, not only in the humanitarian space, the terrorism space, but also in terms of the now political complexion of a lot of our partners in Europe.

To the question on Turkey and the Kurds, I think there's a tendency to look at the Kurds as a unitary bunch of actors and the majority of Kurds in the KRG are actually a different faction of Kurds than the Kurds that are comprising the YPG. And I think there are differences between them and there are also tensions between them in terms of some of these struggles for primacy within the broader Kurdish region.

As you mentioned, there was an effort during the initial U.S. support for the YPG forces to drive ISIS out of Kobane, to try and bring some

Peshmerga in from the KRG and elsewhere. You may recall that those Peshmerga did not stay there for a particularly long time. They weren't really interested in fighting with the YPG and the YPG were not particularly interested in having the Peshmerga there. So I think you've got two separate bodies of Kurds operating there.

The biggest -- or there's two, I think, main concerns for the United States coming out of Turkey's Olive Branch operation. One is that it's ended up drawing a lot of these YPG fighters that had been fighting over in the Manbij area and doing final targeted assassinations, missions against remaining pockets of ISIS. And the Kurds that were operating in that area had been drawn away from that conflict to join their YPG brothers in the Efrînê area in this fight against Turkey. The second is if you end up having an expansion of the mission that ends up bringing Turkish forces directly into conflict with the Kurds in Manbij, which are ones that the United States are supporting, as well as U.S. fighters there.

The whole Kurdish question ends up highlighting all of the intricacies of the conflict. In Efrînê, you've got YPG that are supported by Russia and yet Russia essentially acquiesced to Turkey's military action against them. Then you've got the U.S. that is supporting the YPG Kurds over in Manbij and those two things are going to create a lot more concern for the U.S. government if Erdoğan actually does expand his military campaign in that direction.

MR. O'HANLON: I want to save time for one last round of questions, but anything to quickly add to Amanda's thoughts here from either one

of you?

MR. BAEV: Just probably a word about the -- about situation with ISIS. You know, my reading of that problem is that ISIS as we knew it is defeated, is gone, that ISIS which conquered Raqqa (inaudible) which build all those ties with Europe, that has disappeared. What are the remnants of that will probably shift and change and morph to some -- into something very different with a different name. What cannot be eliminated is the capacity for producing new forms of radicalism in the situation where there is a minority supported by Iran in the country, which is so traumatized, so destroyed, which so huge -- has such a huge refugee population.

Something new is brewing and will come to surface and a different name with probably different passion with a different capacity to connect with Europe. I think that is something which really made ISIS into an international threat. And just today, we had another incident in France, which shows that problem is also not taken care of. But to what degree the connection between the problem in Europe and the situation in Syria is interrupted seriously, then that certainly remains to be seen. But it will not be sort of the same kind of ISIS under the same black banner.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Suzanne.

MS. MALONEY: Just one more word on this point. I think the college asked a very good question and speaks to what is a broader debate in this country, articulated during the 2016 presidential campaign most effectively by President Trump about, what are we doing there? Why are we investing so

much blood and treasure in this part of the world? And it connects back to the issue of ISIS. My co-panelists have been very eloquent on the prospects for terrorism to emanate from this conflict and spill over in ways that impact us directly.

But let me just point to the broader issue of why what happens in Syria doesn't stay in Syria. It goes to all the neighboring states, it results in a resurgence of terrorist activity that threatens all of us. It can very easily result in a regional war between the Iranians, the Israelis, and potentially other states that will quickly draw in the United States in a very direct way. And I think more importantly than even all of this is that what's happening in Syria is the inevitable function of a long-standing and still unresolved crisis in the Arab world in particular and one that affects the broader Muslim world more generally, a crisis of governance, a crisis of providing opportunities for young people that don't include jihad or exile. And that is something that the United States has a tremendous interest in resolving and contributing to a better future. So in that sense, you know, I understand the temptation to turn our backs on this very messy part of the world, but I think that inevitably we have an interest and a real stake in creating a better future.

MR. O'HANLON: I'm going to add one word, too -- I can't resist and then we'll have the final quick round. I think, to me, the question ultimately is, how do we find a way to address the stakes and the risks that's not so costly and so, you know, counterproductive as to be self-defeating? And certainly, the Iraq War remains extremely controversial. I was not a critic of it, at the time. I

was a critic of the idea that it would be easy. But I can't claim that I foresaw all the troubles, but I also can't claim that it's been vindicated at this juncture. I hope someday, Iraq will be looking good enough that we can have a good conversation. But right now, I think you have to assess that as a mistake.

Then we try to go in the other direction and do very little in Syria and just encourage on an insurgency, maybe arm them, maybe not, change our mind all the time. That didn't work. And then in Libya, we helped overthrow the dictator and then we pulled out and hoped that stability would somehow appear through a UN manage process and that didn't work. I think right now what we're doing in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the level of effort is roughly consistent with the interests. So we have to keep working at getting better with sort of medium level efforts. Because the interests are big enough that we can't ignore them, but they're not so great that we should spend a trillion dollars and lose several thousand lives on a mission that may not be successful in the end, anyway. So to me, that's the beginning of how to answer your question, from my own perspective. But you've raised a very tough one, of course.

So let's see if we have time for a couple more questions and then we'll wrap up. Think there were questions earlier in the back and I ignored you all and I apologize and if you're still interested in posing your query to us, please raise your hand again.

SPEAKER: Think one of them left.

MR. O'HANLON: One of them left in frustration. (Laughter) Okay, so we're going to come back up to the front here. I think I see two hands. We'll

take these and then conclude.

MR. ROPANSKI: Hi. My name is Jack Ropanski, unaffiliated. Question about Israel. What is -- are relations like between Israel and Russia and might Israel want to work with Russia to assure autonomous region in the southwest which is Iran-free, but not may be Assad?

MR. O'HANLON: And then we'll go to the gentleman in the sweater in the fourth row and then be done.

MR. SMITH: Hello, my name is Wright Smith. I am with the Inspector General's Office at the Defense Department. Could you -- it's probably for Amanda, but anyone who wants to comment, also. Could you speak to the effect that the purges and the crackdown on the Army that Erdoğan launched in the wake of the coup has impacted the Turkish military performance during Operation Olive Branch?

MR. O'HANLON: So do you want to start with that and then we'll see what you two have to say about the other question and --

MS. SLOAT: I think it's a good question. I don't have a deep understanding of where the Turkish military is. I mean, I think they have -- it was long and slow-going in some ways in getting into Efrînê, but then I think there has also been some surprise with the quickness with which the YPG has ultimately collapsed and decided to retreat. I think in some ways this highlights that the Kurds are the strongest when they are getting air force support from the United States and they are a little bit weaker when they don't have that capacity bolstering them. Certainly, it's caused a lot of reorganization within the Turkish

military. The U.S. military officers who are based there have had to reestablish relations with new officers following the reshuffle within there. So I think it has had some weakening effect. I think it is -- has caused some significant reorganization within there. But they have managed to successfully prosecute this most recent operation in Efrînê.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Pavel.

MR. BAEV: Yes. On the question about Israel, I think it is a part of the kind of greater trick of the Russian policy that Putin is able to speak with every party to this conflict. And he enjoys that position of being in the center of communication, left, right, and center. At the same time, the problem is that he was very keen on saying every party what the party wants to hear, but there is a limit to the usefulness of such a dialogue. Because still, the message needs more substance.

And as far as connection with Israel is concerned, I think unlike with us, Putin thinks he has some sort of personal connection with Netanyahu and he wants kind of to build on that. But at the same time, combining that particular connection with the commitments with the brotherhood (inaudible) with Iran is extremely difficult. And Iran is very suspicious about that tie and so that the balancing act is a trick of staying in the middle of that communication, is very hard to continue even more so to Putin and any substance to that.

And on a kind of larger plane, when I think what would determine Russia's capacity to keep playing a role in Syria, I would say a lot depends upon what is the (inaudible) Caucuses in Russia would remain stable. In that region,

which is kind of -- is full of powder boxes, we have had remarkably legal residence of the whole ISIS, of the whole kind of -- whole -- the conflict in Syria of this intervention, which is in many ways counterintuitive. That's still -- that is still the reality. Whether this reality will continue, that is really the key question. Because if things start unravelling there again and the possibility of that is extremely high, Russia's ability to play a role with Syria will be much diminished.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And finally, Suzanne.

MS. MALONEY: I can't add to that in any serious way. I think this dynamic which has placed Russia at the center of this conflict in a way that far outstrips the United States' ability to have influence on each of the players is really the core takeaway for me.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, thank you all for being here and please join me in thanking my colleagues. (Applause)

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