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Hearing: The Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

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Co-chairman McGovern and co-chairman Smith, thank you for inviting me to testify before this panel to discuss the current state of the Syrian conflict. I am the co-founder of Syria Relief & Development, a Syrian American humanitarian organization that has delivered over \$75 million worth of aid in Syria and the region and assisted over 7 million beneficiaries and employ over 1000 employees inside of Syria. I want to touch on a few key issues and offer several legislative recommendations that Congress can take to address them before taking your questions.

Idlib

The violence in Idlib Province and northern Hama is a humanitarian disaster unfolding as we speak. Since the Assad regime and Russia in April violated a cease-fire reached with Tukey one year ago, the impact it has taken against civilians cannot be understated. The latest numbers, according to the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights speak for themselves: since April, more than 1,000 civilians have been killed, including over 300 children; hundreds more were injured. Airstrikes have targeted over 40 hospitals, 29 water stations and dozens of schools. This has resulted in the displacement of over 1 million Syrians: to put this number into perspective, Ghouta, Syria's largest displacement, displaced 80,000 civilians and Aleppo displaced 39,000. The displaced today are seeking shelter under trees in the hot summer sun because rent has quadrupled in price since April: when available, a small apartment is more than \$400/month. Only 50% of students displaced in Northwest Syria will have a chance to continue their high school education because more than a quarter of all schools in the area are damaged, destroyed, or occupied. In fact, in most instances students cannot attend school because these very schools are being used as shelters for thousands of homeless, displaced people.

The situation for the over 3 million Syrians in Idlib is becoming more fragile by the day and may soon result in a new refugee crisis. Greece has already begun seeing an increase in the number of refugees arriving from Syria at levels not seen since 2016. Despite the dangers on the ground, SRD has been dedicated to providing humanitarian aid to address what is nothing short of an emergency.

The deadly escalation on the ground has directly impacted the Syria Relief & Development's capacity to provide services in the north western Syria. In May, our Pulse of Life an SRD medical hospital in the town Hass was among those bombed and completely destroyed. UN OCHA was provided with the hospital's coordinates as part of its formal deconfliction mechanism with the

expectation it would not be subject to attack. We were wrong. Russia was provided that information and used it to deliberately target the facility. This hospital alone performed over 500 surgeries a month where over 5,000 patients were seen in the same span. Our hospital to this day remains completely out of service, leaving the local population of over 200,000 without medical services.

Despite this setback SRD, in conjunction with the Syrian-American community, continues to provide services and assistance in northwest Syria. Since 2011, member organizations of the American Relief Coalition for Syria, a coalition of Syrian-American humanitarian organizations including SRD of which I serve on the Executive Committee have provided more than 48 million beneficiary services and almost 670 million dollars in relief and support to Syrians in need.

However, more assistance is needed from the U.S. and the international community. In that vein steps must be taken to ensure that such aid reaches civilians who need it most. As I will discuss shortly, access to food and medical supplies should never be used as a weapon of war - either by the Syrian government through its monopoly and influence over Damascus-based organizations, or by terrorist groups, namely Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Civilians in Idleb have been protesting against HTS since the group's push to take over Idleb in January of this year, but civil society and stabilization support is needed to keep this terrorist group from growing in size and influence. Most importantly, civilian protection is paramount! The United States must take demonstrative action to bring an end to the fighting, as President Trump called for in Sept. 2018.

Rukban

The situation unfolding in the internally displaced camp of Rukban in southern Syria is an appalling one. Residents of the camp have been under siege by the Assad regime and Russia, where despite a limited delivery of aid last week, have denied UN convoys from providing badly needed aid since February. In turn, Jordan has refused to unseal its border to allow aid be provided to Rukban. The Syrian regime is currently winning its starvation siege of the camp, which has forced returns to regime-controlled areas which gives Assad absolutely no incentive to allow aid in. The reports of human rights abuse for residents who return to regime-held areas, need to be properly investigated. This should start by engaging with bodies like the Syrian Association for Citizen's dignity who are involved in monitoring the situation. Apart from the obvious moral imperatives in this, the fact that these reports are not being mentioned or investigated, gives the impression to the world at large that all is well with people leaving Rukban and for countries who might help residents negotiate safe passage, Rukban gets pushed to the end of their Syria to-do list and those civilians are given no option but to see their families starve or return to danger with the regime.

What Congress Can Do to Help

There are bipartisan steps lawmakers can take to address some of these issues. First, the United States can push for a genuine return to the peace process under the auspices of Geneva, a track which has all but disappeared. Second, Congress should pass HR 31, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, a crucial measure that penalizes Assad for crimes against humanity and imposes sanctions against individuals and entities complicit in support of the Syrian regime's war crimes. Second, Congress should approve the No Assistance for Assad Act (HR 1706) which similarly bars reconstruction funding to regime-held areas, knowing that this aid will only be used to develop loyalist areas and enrich businessmen closest to the Assad regime. Third, it should adopt

(HRES 395) introduced by the co-chairs of Friends of a Free, Stable and Democratic Syria Caucus, that condemns the bombing of hospitals in non-regime held areas. Fourth, that FY 2020 funding levels for humanitarian and disaster accounts remain robust.

Members of Congress need to urge the U.S. to bypass the siege of Rukban by bringing in aid cross border, as mandated under UN Resolution 2449, from Jordan or Iraq or from the U.S. base in the al-Tanf pocket by air drops. Realistically these are the only things that will stop the people still in Rukban from starving.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify on a global issue that constitutes the greatest humanitarian crisis of this century. I look forward to answering your questions.