

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 23, 2020

The Honorable Dr. Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense
Pentagon
Washington, D.C., 20301

The Honorable General Mark A. Milley
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
U.S. Department of Defense
9999 Joint Staff
Pentagon
Washington, D.C., 20318

Dear Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley,

We would appreciate further clarity about the mission of U.S. troops currently deployed to Syria.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019 required the president to submit to Congress the U.S. strategy in Syria. This strategy was meant to provide clarity into how the administration intended to address continuing threats posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda, and Iranian activities in Syria, in addition to the humanitarian crisis. Since then, the administration has articulated strategic goals for Syria via prepared testimony from Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, which stated, “U.S. strategic objectives and national security interests in Syria remain:

- 1) the enduring defeat of ISIS;
- 2) the reduction and expulsion of Iranian malign influence; and
- 3) the resolution of the Syrian conflict on terms favorable to the United States.”¹

However, ISIS remains a threat to U.S. national security, and to that of our partners and allies, with as many as 14,000 to 18,000 ISIS fighters remaining in Iraq and Syria, according to the Department of Defense as of June 2019.² Iran also remains a serious national security concern; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Milley told the House Armed Services Committee on December 11, 2019, “Iran is very, very active with their various special forces and other capabilities not only in Syria but also in Iraq.”³ On January 2, 2020, the U.S. military killed Qassim Suleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s Quds Force, with a drone strike at Baghdad International Airport. Suleimani was responsible for the death of hundreds of U.S. service members, and due to concerns over the potential for Iranian retaliation, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) “paused” counter-ISIS activities in order to protect Iraqi bases with American troops.⁴ And, finally, the Syrian political talks seem to offer little cause for optimism.⁵

¹ <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5752132?3&search=7Jh2mMhW>

² https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/09/2002169448/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF

³ <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5790637?1>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/us/politics/iran-missiles-iraq.html>

⁴ <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Releases/News-Releases/Article/2050464/cjtf-oir-statement-on-the-ongoing-defeat-daesh-mission/>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/world/middleeast/syria-peace-talks.html>

A coherent administration strategy is necessary to achieve these objectives, and it is critical that U.S. troops have a clearly articulated mission that connects to that strategy. Until now, the administration has not articulated a coherent and consistent strategy to Congress. This is particularly true given the events of October 6, 2019, when the White House announced U.S. troops would be removed from the immediate area in northern Syria ahead of an imminent Turkish military incursion.⁶

Initially, both President Trump and Secretary Esper indicated that the only troops to be removed would be the less than 50 special operations soldiers in the direct path of the Turkish military incursion and only for the purpose of force protection. Then, on October 12, 2019, President Trump directed the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from northern Syria, leaving only the small garrison of an estimated 100 to 200 troops at Al Tanf in southern Syria.

Further directives were given on October 21, 2019, when the president said he intended to keep limited troops in eastern Syria to secure oil fields. This was later explained by Secretary Esper on December 11, 2019, to mean that U.S. troops are in Syria “to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS” and that a “sub task of that” is to “deny ISIS access to that oil, because whoever controls that oil controls a resource that allows them to buy weapons, equipment, fighters.”⁷

Given the confusion over the mission of U.S. troops in Syria, particularly amid heightened regional tensions and strain on counter-ISIS operations, as well as the lack of clarity over how the mission connects to the administration’s articulated strategic aims, we respectfully request unclassified responses to the questions below for the record at your earliest opportunity and no later than February 13, 2020. If a classified addendum is necessary, please segregate all unclassified material within the classified documents, provide all unclassified information directly to our offices, and provide a classified addendum to the Office of Senate Security.

1. What is the primary mission of U.S. troops in eastern and northeastern Syria?
2. What is the mission of U.S. forces based at Al Tanf, and do those forces serve a counter-Iran function?
3. Do U.S. troops in Syria have any secondary missions, and, if so, what are they?
4. How does the mission of U.S. troops help achieve the strategic objectives of defeating ISIS, reducing Iranian influence, and resolving the Syrian conflict on favorable terms?
5. Are U.S. troops in Syria better positioned to carry out the administration’s strategic objectives now than they were prior to October 6, 2019, and if so, how?
6. How have threats to U.S. troops in Syria, both at the oil fields and at Al Tanf, changed since the killing of Qassim Suleimani?
 - a. What steps are being taken to protect U.S. troops in Syria from Iranian retaliation?
 - b. The counter-ISIS mission in Iraq was paused due to threats of Iranian retaliation. Did the counter-ISIS mission in Syria also pause, and, if so, when is it expected to resume?

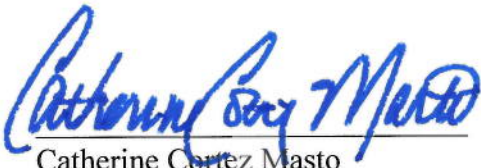
⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/>;
<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1988194/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-esper-and-general-milley-in-t/>

⁷ <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5790637?1;>

7. How would the removal of U.S. troops in Iraq affect the viability of the mission of U.S. troops in Syria and their continued presence?
8. What role, if any, does the U.S. military play in addressing the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps that hold families of ISIS fighters, and/or in addressing the Syrian prisons that hold ISIS fighters?
9. How many troops are expected to remain in Syria to carry out the above-mentioned missions in pursuit of the administration's strategic objectives, and for how long?
10. Do we have sufficient forces on the ground in Syria to protect the oil fields from ISIS as well as conduct offensive operations against ISIS?
11. What is the role of the United States military (if any) in transporting equipment related to oil and gas exploitation into or out of Syria and in facilitating the sale of Syrian oil, or in repairing any Syrian oil infrastructure?
12. What are the rules of engagement for U.S. troops securing the Syrian oil fields for interactions with any forces associated with the Syrian government, Russia, or Iran?

We appreciate your attention on this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Mitt Romney
United States Senator