Maximum Pressure on the Assad Regime for its Chemical Weapons Use and Other Atrocities

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Thomas DiNanno, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense Policy, Emerging Threats, and Outreach in the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, Department of State
- Ambassador James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Department of State
- David Asher, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
- Michael Doran, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.

Please note: This transcript is based off of a recording and mistranscriptions may appear in the text. A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1811-video-event-maximum-pressure-on-the-assad-regime-for-its-chemical-weapons-use-and-other-atrocities52020
Michael Doran:
Hi, thanks for joining us. My name is Mike Doran, I'm a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. Today we're having a webinar on Syria, the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign and the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. In early April, the Assad regime was found responsible for using chemical weapons three times within a short period of time on the same village by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). That's the international group in the Hague that is responsible for overseeing the Chemical Weapons Convention, the international Chemical Weapons Convention. The OPCW set up a special organization of independent analysts to look into the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and for the first time it found the Assad regime guilty. In the past, the OPCW has verified the use of chemical weapons but it has avoided attribution to the Assad regime. Because of the Coronavirus crisis, this report hit the news and then kind of died, and hasn't received a lot of attention, but we here at Hudson thought it was important to dig into it to see what it means for Syria and for our Syria policy.

We have a very distinguished panel here to discuss this issue. Leading off the panel is Ambassador James Jeffrey, who is probably, I think certainly the most experienced man in the State Department today. Ambassador Jeffrey has a long and distinguished career as a Foreign Service Officer.

Before he started that, he was a military officer fighting in Vietnam and serving in Germany. After he joined the Foreign Service, he rose over the decades to the rank, the coveted rank, the highest rank in the State Department, that of career ambassador. Along the way, he was ambassador to Albania, to Iraq and to Turkey, and he was also the Deputy National Security Advisor in the George W. Bush administration. That's the hardest job in the government because you're not allowed to sleep and you're held responsible for everybody else's mistakes. Ambassador Jeffrey, Hello.

Amb. James Jeffrey:
Hi Michael, good to be here. All I'll say is I'm the oldest person in the State Department. I'm not so sure the rest apply to me. Okay.

Michael Doran:
Okay. Well you're very humble. It's one of the nice things about working with you. After Ambassador Jeffrey, we have DAS Thomas DiNannon. He runs the Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Bureau in the State Department. This makes him the official in charge of missile defense, space policy and of course chemical weapons. Before that he was in Homeland Security with responsibility for counter-terrorism programs and national preparedness initiatives. DAS DiNannon, hello?

Thomas DiNannon:
Thanks Mike. Great to be here.
Michael Doran:

Great to have you. Last but not least, we have David “follow the money” Asher. He is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute with me. He is one of the most experienced people in the United States on using money and the tracking of money to take down terrorist networks. He has advised people at the highest levels of the government, including presidents directly. I know this from my own experience, as well as the military and the Defense Intelligence Agency. David. Hi, how are you?

David Asher:

Good morning.

Michael Doran:

Good morning. Ambassador Jeffrey, let me turn to you first. Could you just set the scene for us? Could you tell us what's going on in Syria today? What's US policy and frankly, are we winning or are we losing?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

Thank you, Michael. First of all, the Syrian conflict has been going on for over eight years now since 2011. This is the most serious and dangerous conflict underway in the world today. Over half the population has been driven from their homes by President Assad and his henchmen. That's almost 12 million people either internally displaced in areas that Assad doesn't control or in the case of 6,000,000 refugees across the border. This is basically a war of Assad and his supporters, Russia and Iran against much of the population of Syria. The conflict has drawn in five outside armies, the Russian, the Iranian and for other reasons, the US, the Turkish and while they don't always admit it, the Israeli, to conduct various operations in very close proximity. This makes it, in another sense, the most dangerous conflict in the world today.

We've also seen the rise of terrorist movements, either deliberate or inadvertent because of the loss of control over the country. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and particularly Daesh or ISIS, as well as the use of chemical weapons, which we're going to talk about here today. The US position, which is supported by most of the international community, is to find a political solution to this conflict under UN Resolution 2254, which calls for elections and a UN-run new constitutional process. We support that fully and we also want to see the Iranian and all Iranian-commanded forces out as part of any peace settlement. And of course, we want to see the enduring defeat of Daesh. We approach this by, first of all, mobilizing the international community, working closely with the UN and continuing a policy of pressure, mainly economic and diplomatic to isolate this regime and to sanction the major oligarchs and others who are supporting Assad.

We believe that we are having considerable success. Another part of this whole diplomatic campaign, however, is what we call accountability, holding Assad responsible for his deliberate attacks on no-go sites that the UN has passed through the Russians to the Assad regime, hospitals and such that Assad deliberately attacks. Not allowing humanitarian deliveries across lines. Secretary-General Guteres just spoke out formally on this. Today, [Assad's] use of chemical weapons, he has done this repeatedly. As you know, the United States is taking a very tough position on this and this administration. We've had two strikes, the second joined by British and French military forces and we're prepared to act again, if we see Assad moving
towards the use of chemical weapons. We certainly think that he is keeping that option open. But I'll turn it over to Tom now. Thank you very much.

Michael Doran:

Thank you. DAS DiNanno, what can you tell us about this report that came out in early April? How significant is it and how can the United States use it to blunt the actions of the Syrians and the Russians?

Thomas DiNanno:

Yeah. Thanks Michael. Thank you and welcome to my friend and colleague, Ambassador Jeffrey. Your introduction doesn't quite do it justice, but he's great to have on our side. Let me just run through quickly what I think why the OPCW report is important. Some of the work that has been done at the OPCW by Director-General Arias and Ambassador Oñate who ran the IIT report. I would say just before I wanted to make a few remarks about the report, this is some of the worst acronyms you'll ever see, even for all my colleagues and friends that have worked in the Pentagon. So just bear with me. But most importantly about the IIT report is that its impartiality and its technical professionalism and the level of detail, which Ambassador Arias and Oñate took to run through it.

So some of his key conclusions, I think are worthy for our discussion here today. Most importantly, again, this was last month. The IIT is charged with identifying the perpetrators, not whether or not an attack took place. That is another mechanism called the fact-finding mission. The IIT's report actually identifies the perpetrators and in this case has identified the Assad regime as responsible for those attacks in March of 2017. They were based on a nine-month investigation, that included interviews with eyewitnesses. It conducted reviews of testimony, it reviewed potential symptoms, chemical analysis that were taken on site, it analyzed the fragments of the ammunition of the ordinance that was used in question. It reviewed the satellite imagery, it reviewed site plans. So the level of detail when you read the report and if folks are interested enough to join this discussion, it might be a worthwhile read. It's not 500 pages, it's maybe 50 pages and it's incredibly detailed.

Another point I'd like to make about the impartiality of the report that I think is critical is that the alternative scenarios that Ambassador Oñate went through, that they looked at every plausible alternative scenario as to whether or not the Assad regime was responsible for these attacks. Again, when you read the report, you'll see that the level of detail and the time that they took to go through these alternative scenarios that they were staged and everything that you see coming from the propaganda machine in Russia and Syria now, it tells you that this notion of impartiality was taken extremely seriously and I can tell you I think their results are well worth the wait. There's some frustration sometimes. It's the international machinery of multilateral organizations, to take time to work through this type of work. But the results speak for themselves, again, an incredible effort.

Just one last comment and then I'll turn it back to you is why the OPCW is important, is that it's not a report from the United States. It's not a report by the United States and its allies. The OPCW is an international organization. We contribute like everyone else, everyone has a voice, everyone has a vote. And so for the OPCW to produce such a thing again, speaks very loudly and again, I would encourage you to actually read the report. You can download it from the
OPCW website, to look again, determine, make your own conclusions as to the level of professionalism and the credibility of the report. So I'll turn it back to you, Mike. Again, thank you for having me here for this discussion.

Michael Doran:

No, thank you. Let's now move to David Asher. David is a veteran of the fight to use international law and terrorist finance against regimes like the Assad regime, what's the significance in your mind of this report?

David Asher:

Well, the significance is that, yet again, the Assad regime, like father, like son, is engaged in the pursuit to development and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. This has been going on for over 25 years. The history that I was most intimately involved in trying to stop during the Bush administration was with the North Korean government. From 2002 to 2007, the Assad regime pursued a nuclear weapons program in Syria, centered around a facility called Al-Kibar, a little mini Nyongbyon nuclear reactor like you see outside of Pyongyang North Korea, on the Euphrates river. And had the Israeli Air Force not taken out that facility on September 4th, 2007, Assad would have had a nuclear weapons program.

The fact that the Assad regime pursued a nuclear weapons program, as most likely the most senior official in charge of this, I will say in my mind, almost undoubtedly in partnership with the government of Iran, I don't think the Assad regime had the money otherwise to afford it. With the support of the North Koreans is a very bad harbinger of what could be happening right now as pointed out in the OPCW report. I think we just scratched the surface of a very evil axis relationship between North Korea, Iran and Syria and Hezbollah, which cannot be understated, especially if you're looking at the finances. A huge amount of money is moving through Lebanon right now and it has, so this is nothing new. It just gets worse and worse. And what's great is the OPCW did an objective fact-finding effort to unveil it.

Michael Doran:

So, it's nothing new, but Ambassador Jeffrey, it's nothing new in the sense that we knew this all along, but now we have an international organization and as DAS DiNanno says, one that is independent and impartial, that has identified the Assad regime as a perpetrator and also a report that points to the complicity of the Russians in all of this. Now, we've been hearing a lot of reports lately about tensions between the Russians and the Syrians, can we believe these reports and does the OPCW finding give us a tool to drive a wedge between Moscow and the Assad regime?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

One, we believe these reports are accurate. We have talked to the Russians at various levels over the past year. The Russians are not happy with Assad. The problem is they do not see an alternative. The Russians have key interests in Syria. One is maintaining their bases, one they've had for a long time, one they got as part of the deal with him. And as well as certain other economic activities and investments that the Russians have made. That's their basic goal. But in addition, they see Syria as an example of effective, not quite “little green men,” but “little
green men plus,” that is a limited military commitment that brings them significant strategic success. They've been fairly successful, at least militarily. The problem is they don't have a political way out because of the problems with Assad. Our job is to present them through the UN and our support for the UN with a way forward. But that requires them and distancing themselves to some degree from Assad and from the Iranians.

That's where issues like the use of chemical weapons, where, as you know, in 2013, the Obama administration and the Russians at the highest levels came to an agreement that was supposed to eliminate all chemical weapons. Well, not only are they not being eliminated, they're being used. They were used in 2017. We saw one case of them being used in the spring of last year, in 2019 as Secretary Pompeo laid out in New York in September. So, we do try to stress to the Russians that as long as they have an ally like Assad, they're not going to get the international community to stomach him to support a diplomatic reconciliation, to support reconstruction assistance so that they are allied and hooked up with a cadaver. And they realize that's not a good way forward and all the rest is simply hard negotiations with them to try to find a way forward, which is what we're doing now.

Michael Doran:

Now, we're in an election era and when I talk to conservative audiences, I often hear people saying, "What the hell are we doing there anyway? Why don't we just leave it? Leave it all behind?" Ambassador Jeffrey, why should Americans care about this issue with Syria?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

That's a very long and complicated question, Michael. It's a question of, what's America's role in the world? As somebody who's been involved in two of our bigger and I think less successful ventures, Vietnam and Iraq, I have a lot of sympathy with the American people. That's why I point to things like our presence in Syria or our presence in Iraq today where it's just a few hundred or a few thousand Americans with a very large international contingent of some 20 or 30 countries who have joined us in Iraq and a few who support us in Syria. Extremely low casualties, extremely low cost, and very significant strategic gain. Do the American people want to have this region, the Middle East, and tomorrow the United States attacked with chemical weapons? Do they want to see terrorism run unchecked through the region? We've already seen what that does to us. Do they want to see refugee flows from Syria and other places undermine our trading and strategic allies in Europe, which we saw in 2015?

I could go on and on. There's lots of reasons why this matters to us. Even oil. Right now, it's in surplus around the world. It'll probably always be in surplus in the United States, but our trading partners from Japan to Europe need oil that can only come in that quantity from one place. That's the Middle East. So for all of those reasons, we need to be there, we need to be there smart. My argument is what we're doing in Syria right now and in Iraq is smart.

Michael Doran:

Thank you. That's very clear. DAS DiNanno, when you look at this report, you made it clear that one of the values of the report is that it undercuts the Russian propaganda. I know exactly what you're talking about because I've been following this issue for years now. Again, when I talk to audiences, it always surprises me, how many people, I'm talking about Americans, are willing to
believe that these chemical weapons attacks in Syria are done by ISIS or by Turkey. I hear all kinds of things other than the Assad regime. As you mentioned, this report does a very good job of answering all of those false claims. How can we use it now to our advantage? How can we really put it to work other than simply pointing to it?

Thomas DiNanno:

Great question, Michael. Look, I guess what you learn in these multilateral organizations in the Hague or the UN or in Geneva is that countries hate being called out. I mean, there is a bit of a, “So what? So you have a report. So what? What does that mean?” The level of effort that the Russians or the Syrians and their cabal of friends will take to deny, to save face in these international organizations is really astonishing. So it tells you, it tells us, that what we're doing is effective.

Again, back to that report that you mentioned, all of these conspiracy theories, if you would, were exhaustively run through. Recreating scenarios to actually say, "Okay, we'll look at your clients." When you read that, to me it just shows that again, the level of effort that they took to be impartial. It tells me that we’re being effective, the louder they push back. Again, you don't see this all the time, necessarily, but on the ground in the Hague, delegations there, we've got a great ambassador at the OPCW, Ambassador Ken Ward. You really see diplomatic efforts paying off.

Michael Doran:

So you think, even the Russians can be embarrassed?

Thomas DiNanno:

Yeah. Look, again, Ambassador Jeffrey could probably tell you more than I could, but my interactions with them, they can't even look you in the eye across the table. Their instructions coming from very high levels and their diplomats, again can't even look me in the eye. They know full well that there's a red line that was crossed. The chemical weapons use. I mean, we get so used to these atrocities and it’s becoming seemingly normalized in our news cycles. When you actually read the report, they dropped the chlorine bomb on a hospital. Just the levels of atrocity is astonishing.

Amb. James Jeffrey:

Correct me if I'm wrong. The Russians passed intelligence to the Syrians about the exact location of the hospital and then the Syrians dropped the bomb on the hospital. Is that right?

Thomas DiNanno:

Yeah. And I would point out that the hospital was already underground. That was the only way that they could actually treat some of the casualties of the war. So an already struggling health infrastructure, barely functioning and they dropped a chlorine bomb on it. So again, the levels to which the Syrians and their backers, the Russians will go seem to know no bounds. But I think our efforts are being effective on calling them out.
Michael Doran:

Is it realistic for us to fear that the Syrians might pass these weapons to non-state actors like Hezbollah or sub-state actors?

Thomas DiNanno:

Maybe I'll just respond quickly. Absolutely. The maintaining of an infrastructure to procure, acquire logistics to deploy such weapons, it has to be troubling for everybody involved in chemical weapons. Again, these are now active and again as we see, they're usable. So a very troubling, yes, I would agree with that.

Amb. James Jeffrey:

This has got the Israelis particularly concerned, the mounting evidence of chemical weapons, reconstitution and willingness to use it and the Syrians pass all kinds of weapons on to Hezbollah. I don’t see them stopping at chemical weapons.

Michael Doran:

And so this has got to be a concern to the Israeli Ambassador Jeffrey, but that this is a proliferation concern, that the United States has to take very seriously.

Amb. James Jeffrey:

I would think so. And I think most Americans share our concern about chemical weapons, nuclear weapons, biological weapons.

Michael Doran:

In your travels abroad and your discussion with diplomats in Europe and elsewhere, do you sense a similar sense of gravity about this issue?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

The problem, Michael, is there are so many indictments against the Assad regime. Indictments that particularly resonate among our European partners. Violation of UN norms, human rights abuses, on and on, up to use of chemical weapons, weaponizing of refugees, which the Europeans have seen, that it’s hard to separate out concern about one of the awful things the Assad regime does from all of the other things. What we do is we measure what the Europeans are doing and what they’re doing is they’re holding the line against reconstruction assistance and diplomatic recognition. They are passing packages of sanctions after package of sanctions. They just did one about a month and a half ago before the Coronavirus hit. There are partners in this maximum pressure campaign and we believe that they’ll stay with us in large measure because they understand how terrible this guy is across the board. He stops at nothing.

A few years ago, I was involved in the National Security Council in his attempt to get a nuclear weapon through assistance from North Korea. At the very last moment, our friends, the Israelis took care of that threat to the region and to the world. But this guy just keeps on delivering threat after threat.
Michael Doran:

If I read you correctly, our strategy hinges on the fact that what the Russians want is for the Europeans to come in and to pay for reconstruction of Syria because the Syrian regime can't pay for it and Russia can't pay for it. The Chinese, I presume, are not going to come in and pay for it. So what they want to do is just kind of get us used to the fact that the Assad regime behaves like this and then slowly come in and start paying for reconstruction while they benefit, while they reap the strategic rewards. What we're doing, if I read you correctly, is that we're denying them that money that they covet. Is that the essence of it?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

To some degree. That's why we don't have quite as much traction with the Russians with all these terrible things. Otherwise, there's an old saying, if you owe a bank $1,000 the bank owns you. If you own a bank, a billion dollars, you own the bank. The Russians are basically saying, "This guy is so awful. This guy is so much of a threat to you. Look at the terrorist attacks in 2015 and '16. Look at the refugee waves the same year. This is the gift that just keeps on giving terrible things. Unless you get behind us Russia to save Assad by making him..." We don't know what, fat and happy, there is no real answer to what the Russians want other than reconstruction money to flow from international organizations, Europe, the Arab world and America and for everybody to recognize Assad as the leader of Syria. That's not going to happen.

Michael Doran:

Do you see any sign? There's so much concern these days about the Chinese. Do you see any sign that the Chinese are taking an interest in Syria? Are they possibly willing to fund anything in Syria? Is it a concern at all that we should have?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

The issue of China in the Middle East is a bigger and complex issue. Because normally we see for example in UN votes, the Chinese will line up loyally behind the Russians. But they have different interests in the Middle East than the Russians do. They obviously want low oil prices, which they have right now, but generally speaking, tension and conflict in the Middle East sends oil prices up. That's not a problem for Russia. In fact, it's a good thing. It's one of the difficulties we have with Russia in the Middle East. But for the Chinese, so it is a problem. They also are not willing to either trust the Russians to run the Middle East or enter themselves.

So therefore their position has been relatively benevolent towards the American security system in the Middle East over the past decade and a half, where they've challenged us in other areas. When that will change as it probably will, I don't know, but for the moment, their interests are strategic stability and in a way that aligns with us. Secondly, flow of oil, that's also fine with us. Thirdly, if they're going to do something in Syria, they're going to make a profit. And as there is no profit to make in Syria right now, they're just not there.
Michael Doran:

Right. David, back to you. When you're looking at these economic problems that the Assad regime and Hezbollah are having, do you see any way to use these problems in a more strategic fashion?

David Asher:

Yes. I actually think that we're on the verge, if we wish to pursue an opportunity that's presenting itself, to actually sort of obliterate the financial foundations of both the Assad regime, and in many respects, that of Lebanese Hezbollah as well. The Iranians are already suffering a huge economic blow through declining oil revenue and so they can't bail neither of them out, nor can Russia. So the macro economic factors are all weighing negatively against Assad and his henchmen and Hezbollah. But what makes them further vulnerable is that they have become increasingly reliant on illicit sources of income. They've been involved in criminal activity as long as time has existed, but it just gets more and more conspicuous. You see, particularly the activities to the man named Rami Makhlouf, who's the cousin of Assad, the Syrian leader who's been also the financial czar of the regime.

He's got himself in all sorts of rackets including Captagon and methamphetamine smuggling, and a long term partnership with the government of Venezuela actually. That came out in the recent indictments against the Nicholas Maduro regime — or former regime for cocaine trafficking, narco terrorism, and money laundering. Hezbollah played a major role and plays a major role in that on the ground in Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, there have actually been over 50 tons of cocaine seized by European authorities in the last 36 months tied to the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria network. These have been targeted and coordinated by US law enforcement.

I've seen no press on this. It's not secret. There's been articles about the seizures, but no one's actually put together the pieces. If we had a campaign of actions to unseat the finances of the Assad regime, much like the one we did against Slobodan Milošević back in '97, '98, that was complimented by a special operations campaign from the air and ground, when back in '97, '98, something called Operation Matrix, which involved a joint special operations command, notably in a leadership role, taking out the factories and the financial facilitators and the administrative hubs and leaders for the Milošević regime, really killing them or wiping those facilities out.

And then the Treasury Department went with the State Department's help into Cyprus and Lichtenstein and Luxembourg and other locations where the money of Milošević was hidden and told the governments, they either freeze it or we're going to cut you off in the US. A very similar strategy could be implemented against the regime of Assad. I think that we could target it Hezbollah concurrently, for their cocaine trafficking, money laundering, and narco terrorism using the RICO indictment. Something that has never been applied by the Department of Justice against terrorists, even though terrorism is a predicate offense for RICO.

So to me, it's time for us to not just look at this problem... And I'm not saying the ambassador's looking at it, he's going at it full bore. But I'm saying as Americans, this is a zone of conflict that ultimately could be the site of much more plausibly of a future 9/11. When I came back to State in 2014, 2015, to build the economic campaign against the Islamic State, Syria was disproportionately a central player in that. We can't ignore that Syria is much more interconnected and much more of a geographical threat to our national security interest. It's not
just some place in the Middle East that we forgotten about. It's actually existential to our security. Good news—we do have the means to bring this regime under tremendous pressure and what we need to do is get organized.

Michael Doran:

It's very odd because it's existential, as you say, it's interconnected with all of these larger national security issues. But the place itself, we have no interest in it. I mean, we have no major economic interests, right? The Assad regime does not pose a direct threat to the United States and so on, but it's at the crossroads of all these other issues. So it's hard to get the level of commitment right. Because to a lot of people, it just doesn't seem to make sense.

Amb. James Jeffrey:

Michael, if I may intervene there, that's why we are pursuing what we think is a smart policy, a very limited American military presence for a very specific goal, to go after ISIS. Supporting military operations of other countries, in various ways, Turkey, Israel, in focusing on economic and diplomatic pressure. Our military presence, while small is important to this whole overall calculation. So we urge the Congress, the American people, the president to keep these forces on. But again, this isn't Afghanistan. This isn't Vietnam. This isn't a quagmire. My job is to make it a quagmire for the Russians.

David Asher:

Michael. If I could just jump in real quick.

Economically, the ambassador has a tremendous tool that's about to come online called the Caesar Act. I can't tell you why it's called the Caesar Act, but it has something to do with the Central Bank of Syria, as a money laundering entity, which it certainly is. But it's going to allow secondary sanctions like we had with the so-called CISADA sanctions against the Iranians several years ago. Anybody who's touching the hand of a Syrian that's involved in anything bad from the standpoint of US law is going to be sanctionable. To carry out the sanctions the ambassador has got a good team, he's brought together with real expertise, including the fellow who drafted the Caesar law on the Hill. If we can bring together the forces of law enforcement, not just US law enforcement and European law enforcement, but actually international law, I would love to see Assad tried as a war criminal at the Hague. I've never been a big believer in international lawfare, personally, but if there's ever a guy who deserved it, is that.

Amb. James Jeffrey:

Yeah, I agree. Having dealt with Milošević in earlier days, Assad can make a better case for being a subject of the Hague than Milošević. Caesar is the code name of a Syrian government defector who smuggled out tens of thousands of pictures of Assad opponents being tortured and killed in Assad's prisons. That's where it got its name.

Michael Doran:

Ambassador Jeffrey, if I could go back to your point about the smart use of force by the United States in Syria, I strongly agree with you and I want to put to you a kind of a little pet theory of mine, and get your reaction to it. Feel free to shoot it down if you disagree with it. I think that
Turkey can be of great benefit to us in Syria. I think that the latest round of fighting in Idlib where the Turks killed a large number, I don't know the exact number, a large number of Iranian and Hezbollah operatives, shows that Turkey can be a part of, or at least be comfortable with a US counter Iran strategy and counter Russia strategy in the Middle East in general and particularly in Syria.

Now, Turkey is always going to have more interaction with Iran than a lot of other countries in the region. They're not going to be as hostile to Iran as say, Israel or Saudi Arabia, but they can sit comfortably with a US strategy provided we look after, we are attentive to Turkish strategic needs. There's nobody, I think in the government that understands US-Turkish relations better than you. Do you agree with my little theory or are you among those who think that, really, we can never come to an agreement with the Turks on this question?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

No, I'm a full-bore supporter of coordination and cooperation with the Turks on Syria as well as on certain other things. By and large, we do do that. We share with them an interest in ensuring that Idlib does not fall to Assad's forces. We work with them closely on the constitutional committee and on a political solution. Our end goal for Syria is very similar to this. Also on Iran, well, Turkey doesn't fear, and I won't say fear, Turkey does not see Iran targeting Turkey per se. Turkey has long, and this goes back to the Ottoman empire, seen Iran or Persia as a rival, as a threat on its border. I've heard this from President Erdoğan twice personally, and I know it's deeply ingrained in the Turkish foreign policy DNA that Iran is not a friendly power. All good.

There are four things you have to consider. One, the issue of our presence in the northeast working with local Kurdish and Arab partners. The Kurds have ties or had ties to the PKK. That's a real concern to Turkey. Secondly, Turkey has a very complicated relationship with Russia. They're not friends, but they have mutually dependent on each other. Turkey is very reluctant to sever those ties, thus tries to balance us and the Russians, that often doesn't work out. Thirdly, we have a specific problem with their purchase of the S-400 systems. Finally, Turkey for various reasons, be it human rights, be it various lobbies, is a hard sell in Washington.

Michael Doran:

Are you optimistic about the direction of US-Turkish relations? We have these outstanding issues that you mentioned. Are you seeing movement forward on them or is it still hard going?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

The S-400 is a huge issue and I first got involved in Turkish affairs in the aftermath of the Cyprus intervention in the embargo. So I know how bad relations can be. But the S-400 is an extremely complicated issue because it goes to the biggest defense investment, the United States and its allies have made since World War Two, which is the F-35 fighter and the Turkish action, which undercuts the capabilities of that fighter. So therefore, from our standpoint, we have no give. From the Turkish standpoint, it's a question of sovereignty. Why can't they buy weapons from whoever they want to buy weapons from? Particularly as the United States, there's a lot of history going back to the weapons embargo of suddenly from yesterday to tomorrow turning off sales of weapons and a replacement parts and everything else without a good deliver of weapon systems from the Turkish standpoint. So both sides are locked in on
that. That's the biggest problem. Beyond that, we basically get along fairly well with Turkey on most of the issues from Libya to NATO to the Caucasus, Black Sea area and including Syria and Iraq.

Michael Doran:

Thanks. DAS DiNanno, when you look at the current situation, the OPCW report and everything else that our colleagues have been talking about, what are the next steps that you want to see the United States take in to ratchet up the pressure on Assad and the Russians?

Thomas DiNanno:

Thanks, Mike for the question. I think David Asher began to hit on it. At least where I come from and the in the counter WMD world, not only do we need to publicly and diplomatically engage and expose, but we also need to dismantle, and this gets to complex finance arrangements as David points out, dismantle the supply chain and render the Syrian chemical weapons program a thing of the last century, to eliminate it entirely. So I think there's ways to do that. Again, David points out through other means and we're approaching it that way and where necessary, military pressure, as we've seen. So all options remain on the table and a diplomatic piece that I'm engaged with on a day-to-day, it's very much a part of that. But dismantling the chemical infrastructure is an absolute imperative.

Michael Doran:

Thanks. Ambassador Jeffrey, on this question of dismantling and use of military force. Of course, we do have an actor in the Syria conflict who is using military force, for that purpose. I mean, speak of the Israelis. Israelis want to see no Iranian strategic weaponry in Syria. We've heard reports lately that the Iranians may be withdrawing from Syria. I saw last week in a statement, you seem to pour a little bit of cold water on that theory. But nonetheless, it seems to me that they are in a weakened position in Syria as a result of Israeli actions and as a result of American policy. Is that the way you see it? What would you recommend as next steps to put greater pressure on the Iranians with regard to these weapon systems?

Amb. James Jeffrey:

First of all, with total US diplomatic support and other support that I won't go into, the Israelis have carried out a very effective, military and diplomatic and essentially all elements of government campaign against Iranian and Hezbollah strategic weapon systems in Syria. That's having a real impact on the Iranians. Secondly, the Iranians are all in on an Assad military victory. He suffered a huge reverse in the Idlib battle back two months ago. That's another blow to the Iranians. We have seen also the Iranians pulling in some of their outlying activities and such in Syria because of frankly, financial problems that David mentioned in terms of the huge success of the Trump administration sanctions policies against Iran. It's having a real effect in Syria.

We do see some withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces. Some of that is tactical because they are not fighting right now, but it also reflects a lack of money. Therefore, my recipe is more of the same, use the Caesar bill when it comes out, maintain our military pressure, which as I
said, is designed to defeat ISIS, but it also denies significant terrain and resources as the president want to say, the oil fields in the Northeast. Support the Israelis, support the Turks and work with the Arab world and Europe to ensure that nobody “goes wobbly” as Margaret Thatcher once famously said on sanctions, on economic pressure and on no diplomatic recognition. That's what we're doing. It seems to be slowly but surely having an effect.

Michael Doran:
Do you see Israeli and Turkish policies as compatible in Syria?

Amb. James Jeffrey:
They share many of the same goals. The problem is, this is probably the fifth reason why there are limits to how closely we can coordinate with Turkey. Turkey has very difficult relations and this is something quite new from my time in Turkey. Turkey has very difficult relations with all of the Arab countries except Qatar. All of the important ones except Qatar. Obviously not particularly good ones with Iran and importantly, no longer good relations with Israel. That limits the ability of countries to cooperate with Ankara. To the extent it is done, it is done indirectly through their cooperating with us. Turkey cooperates with us and we have the added burden of trying to keep everybody aligned.

Michael Doran:
I would go back to your original defense of why we need to be involved in a place like Syria. We have this indispensable coordinating role to play. Nobody in the region gets along with each other, but a lot of them can get along with us. And so we can be kind of a shock absorber, assigning roles and missions or at least running interference so that their hostilities with each other don't get into a way of the really big questions. Would you agree with that?

Amb. James Jeffrey:
Absolutely. And you'll read often particularly in this administration, in the media, attacks on how we've lost our ability to lead. Every president takes a different approach to the question of American leadership. This president has taken his approach and I'm not shy about making it clear. But day in, day out on security issues all over Europe and all over the Middle East, we remain the indispensable country, not only because of our power, but because of our contacts. It begins with the president who has good relations with most everybody, including Erdoğan, including Putin, including all of the Arab leaders and most of the Europeans. They just won't admit it, but they're on the phone with him all the time. That's the reality. It's the reality with any president. It's just the way it works.

Michael Doran:
Yeah, that's interesting. So, David, we're going to get the Caesar bill soon. This is going to give new tools. Let me put to you the question I asked DAS DiNanno, what are the steps that you would like to see, the immediate steps to turn this into an effective, strategic tool?
David Asher:

Well, I think that to me the most important thing is to scare, coerce, deter, dissuade those in the international financial system that provide a safe harbor, not just to the procurement architecture of support for the Assad regime's WMD programs, that's a matter of course we'd want to target that, but I want to go after Assad's personal piggy bank. I want to find his money. I've done this personally five or six times. I know it's possible. Whether I can help do it, I hope the State Department could do it and we'll support them at the Hudson Institute. But there's a certain art and a certain science to doing this that we've developed and I'm proud to have been part of the financial intelligence revolution against rogue regimes and terrorist and trafficking networks in the US government starting 25 years ago. We have a lot of knowledge. We have a lot of capabilities declared publicly over the years to track terrorism finances. Syria is a state sponsor, a terror partner of terrorist states and every tool that we can imagine out there is available.

Success is a question of task organization, and ability to campaign. That's one thing I learned when I came in, in a desperate hour with John Allen, as a civilian to help build the economic war campaign. Ultimately, with General McFarland as well, against the Islamic State. I mean, we had hundreds of people supporting us in the government and very few people could tell us what to do. They couldn't give us information for reasons of stovepiping but the information existed somewhere. So what I've been impressed by from afar looking at it what Ambassador Jeffrey's put together, he's put together a team of women and men who are first rate, who know their targets and have the flow of critical information. For example, they've effectively sanctioned almost every major aspect of the SSRC, which is the WMD program of Syria. There are ancillary elements, off in Asia and Africa and places like that they could hit.

The thing they haven't been able to target is the financial institutions that are processing these transactions. Just based on public information that we at Hudson are looking into, there's banks in London, there's banks in Switzerland, there's banks in Qatar, there's banks in other countries that had been mentioned as well. To the extent those financial institutions aren't put under pressure through things like USA Patriot Act, they're going to always have somebody willing to launder the money in front for the regime, indirectly. So you're going to have to scare them into submission. We used to call it in the case of China, kill the chicken to scare the monkeys. We're going to have to kill some chickens here to scare the monkeys and the monkeys in the financial system that are willing to work with Assad personally.

Michael Doran:

I want to share an anecdote that you relayed to me. But I don't know actually, if I can tell the whole story because it involves another individual, so I'll tell it just kind of in general terms and then you can fill in the details, if it's appropriate. I found it very interesting. You told me a story, when you were working in the counter ISIS campaign and you were targeting the money of ISIS, there was an unknown question in the intelligence community about money that was being held somewhere and you had the brilliant idea of calling them up and asking them if they had the money. Do you feel comfortable telling that story?

David Asher:

Oh, it's simple. I mean, for six months we had a request to the intelligence community and to State overseas, "Tell us how much money the Islamic State had sequestered inside the Mosul
location of the Iraqi Central Bank. FYI—the safest place to store the money for the Islamic State was in the central bank vault in the branch in Mosul. Not a surprise, perhaps but for six months, John Allen and I asked that almost every week and we got no response. So I said basically in my own parlance, "Screw it." I'm going to go out and I just called a leader of the Iraqi Central Bank on Skype and asked him, "How much money is in the bank?" He says, 'Oh, I will find out as soon —. Right away. And he called back on his cell phone with his guys in the bank, because his own bank officials had been taken hostage by the Islamic State in Mosul. They were running that facility. So they knew exactly how much money was there on any one day and basically what it averaged every week and what would be the best day to strike it. They said that because, they sort of figured that was the idea. They told us —at max —it was over a billion US dollars and a billion dollars roughly in Iraqi Dinars that had been stashed in there. About half of that was money that had been left when the US was there. We put a lot of cash into the Iraq economy. The other half was money just taken by the Islamic State through extortion, taxation, etc. The point is, nobody in the intelligence committee could tell us that. We got a authoritative assessment from a senior official and staff in a few hours and within a period of a month, General McFarland and his targeteers had developed a weapon, a bomb that was incendiary and it bombed the central bank vault and-

Michael Doran:
A bomb designed to burn money.

David Asher:
It was and when it was deployed in January 2016 it burned over a billion dollars at least, and sent the Islamic State leadership into a tizzy.

Michael Doran:
I love that story because it shows that you don't always have to have a complex, nefarious CIA operation or an extremely expensive NSA surveillance operation. You just have to ask the right question and know who to ask. If you just take the right guy out to lunch, you can find out what needs to be done. I think we'll start wrapping it up here. Let me just first start by asking you, is there anything that any of you want to interject and then I'll give you each, an opportunity to make your closing remarks. But is there anything that we should have been covering here that we haven't covered from your points of view? No. Nothing. Okay. So Ambassador Jeffrey, do you have any closing remarks?

Amb. James Jeffrey:
Sure. In 50 years of being involved in the pointy end of American security and diplomatic activities around the world, I've never seen a regime that poses more threats to its region and to the American idea of how the world should be organized than the Assad regime. We need to keep the pressure on. Chemical weapons are a particularly, vicious and particularly terrible example of what this regime does. As we've discussed today, there are others. We think it's particularly important to keep the focus on chemical weapons. We thank the IIT team for their very bold and very, very well documented proof that the Assad regime as it says at high levels
was responsible for this. We thank the OPCW and we thank the UN Security Council and the UN for supporting the OPCW. And let's get back to work.

**Michael Doran:**

Thank you. DAS DiNanno.

**Amb. James Jeffrey:**

Thanks, Mike. I agree with everything Ambassador Jeffrey said. Look, I know there's a lot of scrutiny around international organizations right now. We spend a lot of money worldwide, but under the leadership of Director General Arias, the OPCW has done an incredible job of being impartial, of balancing national interests. Right? Of course, we have great interests, but also understanding that all the signatories of the CWC have a seat at the table. From my perspective that is sort of quiet diplomacy things that are lost on most people, even sophisticated people that are involved in Washington think tanks. But I think that's a great return on investment and a testament to the work that our delegation does out there as well as the work that Director General Arias does. This was a very bold, brave and professional effort and they deserve kudos.

**Michael Doran:**

I agree with you so much. I know from the time when I spent in government things like this because people who've been reading the newspaper have heard that the Assad regime is doing this for so long. To have an international organization verify it doesn't seem like a big deal, but it allows the US then to go take actions that it can't take just on the basis of its own intelligence and knowledge. So I really appreciate that too. David, any final words for us?

**David Asher:**

Just that I want to applaud the administration. Really, they came around. We had a tough moment not that long ago, a couple of years ago or less. The president wanted to pull everything out of Syria. I think he was persuaded by the ambassador and others that keeping really a quite small footprint, with a determined effort led by the State Department and with support from the NSC could turn the tide against this regime. I think that tide is turning right now as we speak, is with one reasons why we wanted at Hudson to have this event. One last thing I want to say is as a guy who worked extensively in support of the US Special Operations Command, I do feel very importantly, the contribution of our Joint Special Operations Task Force on the ground and in the region is critical.

It's hard to give them credit, but they're out there. They're making a big effort and I think they need to stay. That's just my own personal view. I think it would be a big loss if we were to pull back, unnecessarily an organization whose effect in this is, is really quite high and whose cost is very low. We lost almost no one in combat and we survived some significant onslaughts, including from the Russians, who learned to not mess with SOCOM. So on that note, thank you very much.

**Michael Doran:**

Okay, well thank you and thanks to all of you for coming. I really appreciate it.