



**Statement of Ranking Member Wilson (R-SC)  
Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism Subcommittee  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

*“Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East”*  
April 3, 2019

Remarks as Prepared

Thank you, Chairman Deutch. The complexities of the Middle East pose enduring challenges to U.S. interests in the region and have vexed both Republican and Democratic administrations alike. It is certainly not a region for the faint of heart. Just a cursory glance at the Middle East can be overwhelming.

At the same time, I am grateful to the Trump Administration for achieving some important successes in such a complicated environment.

The Trump Administration has presided over the defeat of ISIS’ so-called caliphate. This certainly does not mean that the threat from ISIS has been neutralized. But seizing ISIS’ territory denies the terrorist group both a lucrative profit stream as well as a safe haven from which to orchestrate attacks against the U.S. and our allies. There is no doubt that this is a major achievement that has made our country and world safer.

President Trump rightfully withdrew the United States from the flawed Iran nuclear agreement. The Trump Administration has increased the pressure on Tehran in response to its reckless development of ballistic missiles and continued sponsorship of global terror.

This pressure on Iran has yielded concrete dividends. U.S. sanctions have prevented Iran from delivering any oil to its Syrian client, the Assad regime, since January 2nd. In the last



three months of 2018, Iran was sending 66,000 barrels a day to Syria. The Syrian people will also never forget that it was the Trump Administration that finally enforced the previous Administration's "red line," striking Assad twice for use of chemical weapons against civilians.

Sanctions on Iran have also affected Tehran's sponsorship of regional terrorism. Just last week, reports indicated that Iran has had to slash payments to fighters in Syria by a third due the pain of American sanctions. Even employees of Hezbollah have missed paycheck and lost perks. The Administration has also taken the bold move of designating major Iranian-backed militias for terrorism, including Nujaba in Iraq and the brigades of Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries Iran has been exploiting as cheap fodder in Syria's bloody war.

Under the leadership of President Trump, the dynamics of the Middle East appear to be shifting. His first international trip was to Riyadh, where GCC and Muslim countries publicly agreed on the need to counter extremism. The journey is far from complete, but this step was unprecedented and positive. In February, the Administration convened a conference in Warsaw, bringing Arab countries and Israel together to confront the Iranian regional threat. Notably, this came after the Trump Administration's relocation of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a move that many incorrectly predicted would upend ties between the Jewish State and its Arab neighbors.

The Trump Administration must continue to build on these achievements. Like Chairman Deutch, I too was concerned by the August 2018 decision to freeze U.S. stabilization funding to Syria and the December 2018 decision to withdraw troops from the country. There is simply no substitute for U.S. leadership in the Middle East, especially given that Russia and Iran are more than happy to fill the void.



The Administration must also continue going after the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. Some of these militias won seats in Iraq's parliamentary elections in May and stand to receive U.S. taxpayer money sent to the Iraqi government. These groups include those with American blood on their hands, like AAH and the Badr Organization. It's time to correct this long-standing failure of U.S. policy and cut off all armed groups taking orders from the mullahs in Tehran.

There is no way to simplify the thorny challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East. This is a region that will unfortunately continue to trouble U.S. policy makers for years to come. While we may disagree on the details, I think we can all agree on one guiding principle: U.S. leadership and engagement in the Middle East is essential.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses today, and I yield back.

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