

November 30, 2023

Dear Senator,

I write to urge you to approve S.J. Res. 51, which would bring the current American military mission in Syria to a close within 30 days unless Congress subsequently holds a debate and votes to authorize a clear and time-bound mission. We owe our soldiers serving there in harm's way a serious debate about whether their mission is, in fact, achievable. Absent a debate and authorization of such a mission, our troops should be removed. Consideration of S.J. Res. 51 is an important opportunity for the Senate to take a step towards that necessary outcome.

The current mission is ostensibly to obtain the "enduring" defeat of ISIS. US special forces and Syrian militia allies, led by an extreme leftist Kurdish faction, captured the last ISIS territory in Syria in March 2019. Since then, our forces working with that faction have degraded ISIS capabilities to a low but steady baseline. Progress has plateaued in the past two years. Most importantly, as reported in the quarterly combined State and Defense Department Inspector General reports, ISIS lacks the capability to direct attacks against the United States. However, stopping all local recruitment into ISIS is not a task that US Special Forces can achieve given the bitter political divides and economic stagnation in Syria. Notably, serious fighting erupted this year between the Kurdish faction with whom we partner and local Arab communities. That fighting will help ISIS recruit. After almost nine years of direct U.S. military operations in Syria, there is no strategy to achieve more towards the "enduring" defeat of ISIS, no benchmarks to judge further progress, and no timeline.

In the meantime, our forces are regularly subject to attack by pro-Iranian militias allied to the Assad government. While no soldiers have been killed in Syria since 2019, a strike from an Iranian-backed militia killed an American contractor in March. Attacks have escalated over the last six weeks: since October 17, U.S. forces in Syria have been attacked 37 times. So far, these Iranian-backed militias have launched only one or two rockets or drones in the great majority of their attacks against our forces in Syria. They could launch more powerful attacks if they wish. Thus, we are risking our soldiers in an open-ended military commitment in Syria that has so far cost at least \$15 billion and cannot achieve more on the ground against ISIS.

A vote to end the current military mission in 30 days would require the administration to return to Congress for authorization if it seeks to continue the military presence in Syria. Congress should before authorizing the continued deployment require from the administration a detailed explanation of the strategy to achieve an "enduring" defeat of ISIS, benchmarks to confirm future progress and timelines, as well as metrics by which to evaluate success. If

S.J. Res. 51 is approved and signed into law, I would also urge Congress to consider passage of a very targeted authorization to give the administration additional time to withdraw US forces so that the administration could engage diplomatically with key states to allow for a smoother transition of security responsibilities in eastern Syria.

In this context, instead of backing an ill-defined mission for U.S. troops still in Syria, I recommend that Congress press the administration for more creative and vigorous diplomatic approaches, as well as preparation for externally based counter-terrorism operations, to secure our counter-terrorism goals in Syria.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert S. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "R" and "F".

Robert S. Ford
U.S. Ambassador to Syria, 2011-2014
Political Counselor and Deputy Chief of Mission
at U.S. Embassy in Iraq, 2008-2010