

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

October 15, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Mark T. Esper  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Esper:

We are writing to express our profound concerns about President Donald Trump's immoral and reckless decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northeast Syria. The President's decision betrays the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who helped our nation battle the brutal Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), leaving the SDF to face an ongoing and rapidly escalating Turkish incursion.<sup>1</sup>

President Trump's decision was reportedly made after a telephone call with Turkish President Recep Erdogan, during which he invited President Erdogan to visit the White House. Turkey launched military operations into northern Syria shortly thereafter.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria represents a betrayal of a key U.S. partner in the campaign against ISIS. It undermines the SDF and the stability and security they promote for millions of people still recovering from the terror inflicted by ISIS. It also risks emboldening the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and its Iranian backers as the SDF is forced to search for protection against Turkey, further escalating tensions throughout the region.

We are also deeply concerned that the President's actions will exacerbate the already staggering humanitarian aftermath of the campaign to defeat ISIS, potentially contributing to the long-term ideological survival and resurgence of ISIS.

When the SDF and Iraqi Security Forces liberated territory from ISIS, they captured thousands of ISIS fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters from around the world. Many of these individuals have expressed a clear desire to strike targets within the region as well as in

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, *Statement from the Press Secretary* (Oct. 6, 2019) (online at [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/)); *Trump Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy*, New York Times (Oct. 7, 2019) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/trump-turkey-syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/trump-turkey-syria.html)).

Europe and the United States, if released. Already, the SDF has said it may be unable to continue to guard these detainees if forced to defend itself against a Turkish incursion.<sup>2</sup> In addition, President Trump has made clear that he does not intend to take any responsibility for or assist with maintaining the security of the areas holding these detainees in northern Syria. Together, these factors create an environment that could result in the release of thousands of individuals sympathetic to ISIS and fuel the terrorist group's resurgence.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the ISIS fighters in detention, more than a million women and children are living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) across Iraq and Syria, including more than 70,000 at the al-Hol IDP camp in northeast Syria.<sup>4</sup>

At al-Hol, two-thirds of the population is under the age of 18, and more than 20,000 residents are under the age of five.<sup>5</sup> In a report issued on September 11, 2019, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported that residents at the al-Hol camp are living in "deplorable and inhumane conditions," which has resulted in the preventable deaths of at least 390 children due to malnutrition or untreated infections.<sup>6</sup> The camp is also sheltering thousands of foreign women and children from countries outside of Iraq and Syria, many of whom are either unable or unwilling to repatriate them.<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch has described conditions in the al-Hol IDP camp as "a dustbowl inferno."<sup>8</sup>

Many of the women and children residing in these IDP camps are the dependents or

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<sup>2</sup> *Top Kurdish General: Watching over ISIS Prisoners Now a 'second Priority'*, NBC News (Oct. 7, 2019) (online at [www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/top-kurdish-general-watching-over-isis-prisoners-now-second-priority-n1063496](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/top-kurdish-general-watching-over-isis-prisoners-now-second-priority-n1063496)).

<sup>3</sup> The White House, *Statement from the Press Secretary* (Oct. 6, 2019) (online at [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/)); *Pentagon Won't Take Over Islamic State Prisons if U.S.-allied Kurdish forces withdraw, officials say*, Washington Post (Oct. 8, 2019) (online at [www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/pentagon-wont-take-over-islamic-state-prisons-if-partner-forces-withdraw-officials-say/2019/10/08/32ba187e-e9d9-11e9-9c6d-436a0df4f31d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/pentagon-wont-take-over-islamic-state-prisons-if-partner-forces-withdraw-officials-say/2019/10/08/32ba187e-e9d9-11e9-9c6d-436a0df4f31d_story.html)).

<sup>4</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress: April 1, 2019—June 30, 2019* (Aug. 2, 2019) (online at [www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/](http://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/)).

<sup>5</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress: April 1, 2019—June 30, 2019* (Aug. 2, 2019) (online at [www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/](http://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/)).

<sup>6</sup> *Escalating Violence and Waves of Displacement Continue to Torment Civilians During Eighth Year of Syrian Conflict*, United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria (Sept. 11, 2019) (online at [www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24972&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24972&LangID=E)).

<sup>7</sup> *In a Crowded Syria Tent Camp, the Women and Children of ISIS Wait in Limbo*, New York Times (Mar. 29, 2019) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/isis-syria-women-children.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/isis-syria-women-children.html)); *For ISIS Children, Returning Home to Europe Meets Resistance*, New York Times (Aug. 15, 2019) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/world/europe/isis-children-belgium.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/world/europe/isis-children-belgium.html)).

<sup>8</sup> *Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families*, Human Rights Watch (July 23, 2019) (online at [www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families](http://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families)).

forced spouses of Iraqi and Syrian ISIS fighters and cannot return to their local communities because of real or perceived affiliations with ISIS. The vulnerability of this population, coupled with the likelihood that many of them have already been indoctrinated to ISIS's ideology and propaganda, significantly increases the risks of further radicalization and recruitment.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Lead Inspector General for Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, ISIS is already "seeking to establish safe haven in al-Hol" and attempting to recruit residents who are "potentially susceptible to ISIS messaging, coercion, and enticement."<sup>10</sup> The situation at al-Hol has been described in news reports as "a big ticking time bomb" and "an overflowing vessel of anger and unanswered questions."<sup>11</sup>

Across the border in Iraq, human rights organizations have raised significant concerns about the treatment of ISIS detainees in the custody of the Iraqi Government. In the northern province of Nineveh, for example, three pretrial detention facilities—Tal Kayf, Faisaliya, and Tasfirat—have a combined capacity of 2,500, but instead are holding 4,500 prisoners and detainees, resulting in extreme overcrowding.<sup>12</sup> International legal experts have warned: "Confessions are sometimes obtained through torture or coercion, some judges are biased, and defendants routinely lack adequate legal counsel."<sup>13</sup> As described in one press report:

[P]erfunctory trials in special counterterrorism courts are sweeping up bystanders and relatives as well as fighters and executing most of them in a process more concerned with retribution than justice.<sup>14</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, by the end of 2018, Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government authorities had detained approximately 1,500 children for alleged ISIS affiliation. Once apprehended, "security officers often interrogated and tortured them until they confessed to

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<sup>9</sup> *In Overflowing Syrian Refugee Camps, Extremism Takes Root*, Foreign Policy (July 29, 2019) (online at [www.foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/29/in-overflowing-syrian-refugee-camps-extremism-takes-root-syria-bashar-assad-islamic-state-isis/](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/29/in-overflowing-syrian-refugee-camps-extremism-takes-root-syria-bashar-assad-islamic-state-isis/)).

<sup>10</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress: April 1, 2019—June 30, 2019* (Aug. 2, 2019) (online at [www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/](http://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/)).

<sup>11</sup> *Islamic State: The Women and Children No-one Wants*, British Broadcasting Corporation (Apr. 12, 2019) (online at [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47867673](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47867673)); *The Islamic State's Refugees are Facing a Humanitarian Calamity*, Washington Post (Apr. 2, 2019) (online at [www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-islamic-states-refugees-are-facing-a-humanitarian-calamity/2019/04/02/e5e1ca42-54aa-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.161afe7b2aa5](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-islamic-states-refugees-are-facing-a-humanitarian-calamity/2019/04/02/e5e1ca42-54aa-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6_story.html?utm_term=.161afe7b2aa5)).

<sup>12</sup> *Iraq: Thousands Detained, Including Children, in Degrading Conditions*, Human Rights Watch (July 4, 2019) (online at [www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/04/iraq-thousands-detained-including-children-degrading-conditions](http://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/04/iraq-thousands-detained-including-children-degrading-conditions)).

<sup>13</sup> *France Hands ISIS Suspects to Iraq, Which Sentences Them to Hang*, New York Times (May 29, 2019) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/middleeast/france-iraq-isis-trials.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/middleeast/france-iraq-isis-trials.html)).

<sup>14</sup> *A 10-Minute Trial, a Death Sentence: Iraqi Justice for ISIS Suspects*, New York Times (Apr. 17, 2018) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-trials.html?module=inline](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-trials.html?module=inline)).

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ISIS association, regardless of whether they were actually involved.”<sup>15</sup> In other areas of Iraq, “ISIS continues to recruit ... drawing from perceived weaknesses and failures of the Iraqi government.”<sup>16</sup>

We believe President Trump must immediately reverse his catastrophic decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria, restore the security mechanism, and de-escalate the conflict between Turkish forces and our partners in the fight against ISIS. It is a moral imperative and a national security necessity for the United States and the international community to ensure that ISIS is not permitted to resurge and restart its brutal terrorist campaign.

This will also require a clear, whole-of-government, U.S. strategy that addresses the post-conflict security situation in Iraq and Syria, including a comprehensive, State Department-led plan for assistance to international humanitarian organizations, support for the secure and humane detention of ISIS prisoners in Iraq and Syria, criminal justice and rule of law reforms, as well as deradicalization, reconciliation, and reintegration programming.

We implore both of you, as our nation’s top diplomatic and military officials, to bring to bear all of the authority and gravitas of your positions to convince President Trump to immediately reverse course. Every hour counts.

Sincerely,



Eliot E. Engel  
Chairman  
Committee on Foreign Affairs



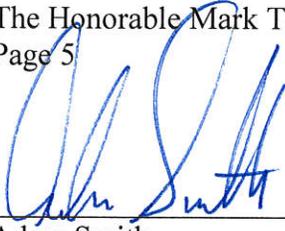
Ted Deutch  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North  
Africa, and International Terrorism  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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<sup>15</sup> “Everyone Must Confess” *Abuses Against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq*, Human Rights Watch (Mar. 6, 2019) (online at [www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq](http://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq)).

<sup>16</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress: April 1, 2019—June 30, 2019* (Aug. 2, 2019) (online at [www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/](http://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/1926689/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/)).

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Adam Smith  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services



James R. Langevin  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging  
Threats and Capabilities



Elijah E. Cummings  
Chairman  
Committee on Oversight and Reform

cc: The Honorable Michael McCaul, Ranking Member  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

The Honorable Joe Wilson, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

The Honorable Mac Thornberry, Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services

The Honorable Elise Stefanik, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities  
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The Honorable Jim Jordan, Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Reform