

Written Testimony of Martin J. Palmer

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Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Martin Palmer. I am here to testify to my personal experience working alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, during my time in active duty—not to comment on U.S. policy or military strategy in Syria.

By way of background, after graduating from West Point in 2009, I spent nine years in the Army, first as an Infantry Officer with the 82nd Airborne Division and later as a Special Forces Officer with 5th Special Forces Group. During my military service, I was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, two Bronze Star Medals for Meritorious Service, and I was the 2018 recipient of the U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award. I served three combat deployments: to Afghanistan in 2011-2012, Iraq in 2016, and Syria in 2017. I left active duty in July of last year.

In 2017, I spent seven months in Syria serving as the commander of a Special Forces detachment. During this deployment my team of Green Berets partnered with the SDF, of which the Kurds comprise a large portion. Through numerous combat operations, I saw firsthand the commitment, dedication, and resiliency of the SDF. Their efforts proved critical to our ability to combat the Islamic State.

During a combat patrol one night on the front lines, my team and I received effective machine gun fire from multiple ISIS positions. Upon receiving contact, the SDF soldiers at our position fought alongside us as we attempted to locate and destroy the enemy positions. Within minutes, the SDF area commander arrived at my position with additional soldiers and was by my side during the fight, even as bullets peppered our position, and we were able to eliminate the threat. This type of “stand-and-fight” mentality is not one I often witnessed in other partner forces during my previous deployments to the Middle East. This was the first of many experiences during my time in Syria when I observed firsthand the commitment, bravery, and dedication of the SDF as they partnered with my detachment in the fight against the Islamic State.

Beyond their admirable qualities, the Kurds were an effective partner force. They made remarkable progress in turning back the Islamic State and liberating several key Islamic State-held towns, including its self-proclaimed caliphate of Raqqa. The Kurds raised their hand to fight the Islamic State at a time when few else did. I witnessed these tactical successes regularly on the battlefield as the SDF fought with discipline and resolve. On numerous occasions when the SDF and my team would drive through areas recently liberated from Islamic State control, the Syrian villagers would cheer and even cry, a moving testament to the immense contribution the SDF has made in liberating people from the horrors of life under the Islamic State.

But this success came at a cost. SDF casualties were a regular and tragic occurrence during my time in Syria and thousands of Kurdish soldiers gave their lives for this mission. During one operation, an Islamic State fighter detonated a car bomb at one of the positions of the SDF unit with whom I was partnered. The car bomb instantly killed eight SDF soldiers and wounded close to a dozen more. My team worked to provide first aid for the wounded, many of whom had gruesome injuries. I saw firsthand, in a very real and powerful way, the magnitude of the sacrifice the Kurds were making in the fight against the Islamic State. Moreover, the SDF continued their offensive the next day, demonstrating a resiliency and commitment that was prevalent throughout my deployment.

Our relationship with the SDF was a true and critical partnership. Just as my team benefitted from their commitment and tactical abilities, the SDF could also not have been as successful against the Islamic State without our support. During one operation, SDF fighters were within a few hundred yards of a strategic Islamic State objective when they started receiving sustained effective fires and suffered several casualties. The SDF did not have the capability to unilaterally suppress the threat and were prepared to withdraw to a safer position to prevent further casualties, negating days of hard-fought gains. However, my team was able to provide the necessary combat power to ensure the safety of the SDF and enable them to successfully press forward with their mission: seizing the Islamic State position. This was emblematic of our relationship with the SDF: a partnership built on mutual trust, support, and necessity.

These examples are but a few of the many instances that illustrate how valuable the SDF were as a partner force for my detachment. The SDF stood shoulder to shoulder with us and fought courageously and effectively time and time again; their loyalty and dedication to the cause was pervasive in every operation. I will always value the relationship my team had with the SDF and will never forget the sacrifice they made for the cause of defeating the Islamic State.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I hope my testimony will help shine a light on what it was like to work shoulder-to-shoulder with Kurdish soldiers throughout the seven months of my deployment to Syria.