

Nick Burns: [00:03](#) Good afternoon. You have seen on this stage in the last 36 hours some outstanding U.S. military officers Admiral Davidson Admiral Schultz General Ashley you're just about to see a great American diplomat and American power rest not just on the military but on our diplomats. Ambassador Jeff Jim Jeffrey is one of our very greatest ambassadors of the last 30 years to Turkey and to Iraq deputy national security adviser. He is also as we say in Boston where both members of Red Sox Nation wicked smart and you'll see that in a minute. And I want to give credit to President Trump. And Secretary Mike Pompeo because what they've done on the toughest regional issues. They've hired ambassadors all Holly's odd to be there ongoing in Afghanistan. Ambassador Steve beacon to be there on voice on North Korea. Ambassador Elliot Abrams to be the envoy in Venezuela and Ambassador Jim Jeffrey to be the envoy in Syria for really strong American diplomats. I think the Trump administration has been right to hire them. I just have the greatest respect for Jim and the greatest respect for Josh Rogin Washington Post. Thank you both for being here. Again.

Josh Rogin: [01:21](#) Thank you Nick. Thank you all. For coming. It's been eight and half years since the Syrian people took to the streets to peacefully demand basic rights and simple dignity and were attacked by their own government sparking a civil conflict that has resulted in at least 400000 civilians killed over 5 million refugees millions more internally displaced displaced civilians hundreds of thousands fleeing right now in Idlib for their lives. Tens of thousands of civilians in custody in Assad's dungeons being tortured slaughtered as we speak as we said here and after eight and a half years the most common response we see is for people to turn away. So before we start I'd like to thank the Aspen Institute for not turning away for making time to keep Syria on the agenda. And I'd like to thank Ambassador Jim Jeffrey for not turning away and for dedicating his time to serving our country and to serving the interests of the Syrian people and let's give them a round of applause.

Josh Rogin: [02:31](#) As for those of you who don't know James Franklin Jeffrey has started his service for the U.S. government in the Nixon administration as an infantry soldier serving in Germany Vietnam joined the Foreign Service in 1977 served as for under the George W. Bush administration as deputy national security adviser U.S. ambassador to Albania.

Josh Rogin: [02:53](#) During the Obama administration U.S. ambassador to Turkey and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq. He's known for speaking his mind and to the extent that he is sometimes misunderstood it's mostly due to his Boston accent. Up Ambassador Jeffrey when I

was asking people what I should ask you today at this time I got the same answer over and over again and the simple question is what is U.S. Syria policy.

James Jeffrey:

[03:18](#)

Thanks for raising that direction. Thank you for your comments. Also Nick and again thank you for the Aspen Institute for inviting us here. There are three core misunderstandings about Syria. The first is that Assad is one. No he hasn't. As Charles Lister just wrote in Foreign Policy he has survived so far he has lost his own population we can get into this. He has lost the international community and he's hanging on. The second is that this is a conflict like many others we turn away from in the broader Middle East Libya and South Sudan today Yemen yesterday and tomorrow. This is as you just laid out an extraordinarily dangerous conflict that is both an internal conflict and it's an international conflict. Aside from the Syrian army such as it is we have five outside military forces operating in the US Turkish Iranian Russian and while not publicly acknowledged most of the time the Israeli air force.

James Jeffrey:

[04:26](#)

And believe me that leads to some pretty dangerous interactions from time to time but the third misconception as you just raised is the US doesn't have a policy on Syria. Ah it's an inconsistent one. We hear this from everybody I was with Mike Pompei when we were talking about Syria with none other than Vladimir Putin in Sochi two months ago in May and afterwards Putin spoke to his press and lo and behold after hearing Mike Pompeo lay out in great detail our policy. Putin immediately said the American policy on Syria is incomprehensible and nobody understands. Well let me try to help today. First of all for the last several years we have had a single policy it's not the same policy that we've had over all eight and a half years but it's one that we've been consistent with and we've made public hundreds of times at every level.

James Jeffrey:

[05:20](#)

First of all it's to get all Iranian voices out of Syria. They are an immediate existential threat to Israel but also to Saudi Arabia and other countries. Secondly to ensure the enduring defeat of doosh or ISIS that is another creation of a sides war on his own people this terrible terrorist organization. Only the biggest of several really threatening ones we have now in Syria. And thirdly a political process that changes the behavior of this state in fundamental ways. This isn't regime change. We're not trying to overthrow Assad per say that's for the people to do under a U.N. process that was laid out in the last administration and security council resolution twenty to fifty four. We're adhering to it even our detailed tactics have been laid out. None other than by Donald Trump at the U.N. General Assembly back in

September a year ago he said what we're trying to do is to de-escalate the conflict and to reinvigorate the political process that is in line with in fact it's basically taken from 20 to 54 and this is what we're all doing night and day. So yes we do have a policy. It's the right policy and I'm convinced we're making progress.

Josh Rogin: [06:32](#)

Thank you. Let's take those in reverse order. Let's start with the political solution. No U.N. are acting ambassador to the U.N. Jonathan Cohen till the Security Council it was time to scrap the Geneva effort and think about another way to go about this. That happened in the middle of while you you were traveling to Israel and Russia and lots of other places to try to affect this exact political settlement. So is there a division inside the Trump administration on the way forward for a political settlement and can you tell us what exactly it is that you're negotiating is it for the constitutional commission or is it something more comprehensive than that.

James Jeffrey: [07:09](#)

This is why I didn't want to be interviewed by Josh Rogin. We're off to a really great start.

James Jeffrey: [07:16](#)

Jonathan Cohn is one of my best friends and he was making reference to the repeated failures to get the Russians to live up to their commitments because we don't deal directly with the Assad regime for that matter the Iranians on Syria we deal through the Russians. The Russians have promised us to begin this resolution 20 to 50 for political process for a different Syria with a constitutional committee that would meet and either reform or replace the current constitution.

James Jeffrey: [07:45](#)

We're running into great difficulties when Jonathan made his comments in part because the Russians felt pressured by what he said they turned on the heat they sent their top Syria team my counterparts twice to Damascus. Unusually they met with Assad and suddenly we saw things breaking loose. So Jonathan did the right thing saying what he said when he said it. And now the situation because he said it has changed for the better. We're not there yet. We are looking for a group of one hundred and fifty people from the opposition from the government and from civil society to meet in Geneva under U.N. auspices to try to put together a different Syria. There are a couple of minor technical issues outstanding. Normally from my experience these are the things you resolve in three phone calls. The fact we don't indicates that Assad hasn't taken that final decision yet. And more importantly perhaps President Putin hasn't taken the decision to call him. So we're waiting on that.

- Josh Rogin: [08:44](#) That makes perfect sense. That leads to two follow up questions one. It seems that the Russians have been stringing us along with this political process for about eight and a half years and we were constantly told not just by this administration but the previous administration that we have to test the Russians we have to test their integrity if that's their willingness to go down this road. At what point have they failed the test every day.
- James Jeffrey: [09:05](#) They do not acknowledge that there will not be a military solution to this conflict and that the only way forward the only way to get the half of the population 12 million people who have fled Assad and are now in IDP camps in parts of US Syria Assad doesn't control are in neighboring countries are in Europe to come back. Until that happens there is going to be a continued pressure on Assad on the Russians to try to live up to the resolution that 20 to 54 that they signed in December of 2015. That is our message to them. And we're seeing this on the ground right now in the province of Idlib where despite massive Russian bombings of civilians and a major offensive by Assad's forces against the opposition they're making almost no progress. There is no military solution. That's what we're hammering the Russians with.
- Josh Rogin: [10:01](#) I do want to get to it live but I just want to finish just one point on the diplomatic process. It depends on Assad agreeing. What indication do you have if any that Assad and his regime are ever going to make these concessions that they haven't made name and half years and if they're if it seems to me it seems to a lot of us that the Assad regime has no intention of ever making these concessions because of course why would they when they perceived to be winning on the ground more or less and if they don't make the concessions. What's plan B.
- James Jeffrey: [10:30](#) Well a they're not winning on the ground as they just have seen in Idlib now Idlib is something new. They started that offensive. There was a ceasefire agreed between the Russians and the Turks because the Turks also have troops in Idlib. Back in September under a lot of pressure from President Trump personally and all of us in this administration and throughout the entire international community on the Russians to have a cease fire it was broken largely by the Russians and Syrians two months ago in this last gasp attempt to have a military victory. We are trying to leverage the fact they've made no real progress to show them once again you cannot win this war. You can't take back the 40 percent of the country that 50 percent of the arable land and the two thirds of the hydrocarbon reserves without negotiating with the international community. That's the message we keep on making to the Russians and ultimately

through them to Assad. Are they stubborn. Yes with the Iranians stubborn in the five years they fought in southern Iraq they were they refused to ever consider retreating until one day they retreated. We're hoping something like that will happen.

Josh Rogin: [11:34](#) Is there a Trump administration plan to increase the costs for the Russians as they spend money blood and treasure in Idlib. Aren't there ways that we could make that calculation that leverage even more powerful and are we doing those things right.

James Jeffrey: [11:48](#) Again our plan B is to work with the Russians on this compromise solution step by step through that political process through to U.N. monitored national elections and a government that will actually behave like a normal country in return for foreign forces beginning with the Iranians withdrawing ceasefires. So that's the program that we're putting on the table. Until then we're trying in every way to up the pressure there's military pressure simply by the fact that U.S. forces are with our local allies fighting the remnants of dosh or ISIS in the northeast of the country and along the Jordanian Iraqi border. The Turks are in the northwest again. If you believe press accounts the Israelis are operating almost unchallenged in the airspace over Syria. So there's military pressure. There's economic pressure there are very extensive sanctions on Syria. You heard about some of them from cigar months occurred this morning on the discussion of Iran. They're very closely linked. The sanctions on Iran and they're working for example when the British seized the tanker hitting for Syria several weeks ago in Gibraltar.

James Jeffrey: [12:58](#) That was based upon European Union sanctions against Syria wasn't related to our bilateral Iranian sanctions it was related to EU sanctions against Syria because the EU is our partner in this. We've also been successful in blocking any reconstruction assistance to this regime or any of the areas that the regime controls until we see the political process and that's working finally diplomatic pressure. Syria was thrown out of the Arab League at the beginning of the conflict it is tried with Russian help to come back it was rejected once again in March at an Arab League summit. And we think that the Arabs will hold the line against Syria coming back. So we have pressure from all three sources.

Josh Rogin: [13:42](#) Got it. Thank you. Specifically on Idlib when the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian partners began their assault in September 2018 President Trump to his credit called on his officials to put apply pressure for this all to stop. And he

tweeted after meeting with some Syrian Americans who explained to him the severity of the issue and there is a lot of evidence to say that his actions actually caused the offensive to stop or at least pause at that time. President Trump later said quote I said don't let it happen. And it stopped. You saw that. No one's ever gonna give me credit but that's OK. And I meant it too. And millions of people have been saved President Trump tweeted again just last month. This time the tweet didn't stop the offensive. So it seems as if the president's attention and dedication to this is no longer having the same effect.

Josh Rogin: [14:39](#)

And I'm wondering if you can tell me it inside the administration. How does the President view the current situation inside Syria especially in Idlib. And is he willing to authorize more aggressive steps in light of the fact that the tweets are no longer doing the job.

James Jeffrey: [14:55](#)

Well aside from the tweets not come back to the tweets in a second because they are an interesting example of multilateral diplomacy on several planes.

James Jeffrey: [15:04](#)

The president after seeing that we wouldn't find a lot of coalition partners to take over our role on the ground in northeast Syria after he announced the withdrawal of our forces with the imminent demise of ISIS changed his mind on that because he realized the importance of Syria we're still withdrawing our forces. Bit by bit but we plan on having a small residual force to remain on for an indefinite time. He is much seized with this. We don't give him this ad lib language. He seizes it himself because he's focused very much on it. It does have an effect. Going back to September it was a combination of him raising that the fear of the three and a half million people who are in it live. Most of them have fled from Assad in other parts of Syria fleeing again to Turkey and on to Europe.

James Jeffrey: [15:56](#)

And the fact that both the opposition and the Turks were reinforcing and making it clear that they would fight and all of these things reinforced together. So you had military you had humanitarian and you had diplomatic pressure and then all of our allies the Europeans the U.N. They all got on top of this. Secretary-General the terrorist has spoken out repeatedly including in the last few weeks. We have a similar phenomenon now that offensive is not officially over but it is petered pretty much out. Unfortunately the bombing of civilians is continuing and the Russians were just savaged yesterday in the U.N. and open session over it. And we will be continue to be savaged until we see progress there. So I think that in his own way he succeeded this time too.

- Josh Rogin: [16:38](#) Well let me press you on that because we've seen the Russian Assad offensive in Idlib go back and forth it will go strong for a little while. We'll lose some towns will gain some towns. The Russians will add forces they'll take back forces but the killing continues the effort continues. The suffering continues. And so I would sort of challenge the assertion that it's petering out in the sense that their goals continue and the objectives continue and what we see is hundreds of thousands of people fleeing to the Turkish border. So can first of all take us into your discussion with the Russians about this. What did what. What did they say about what they're doing in Idlib which seems to be a clear violation of everything they've ever promised and then also take us into your conversations with the Turks about this. Are they going to open the border. Are they going to provide for all of these people who are sleeping under olive trees. What's their plan right.
- James Jeffrey: [17:30](#) What the Russians say and it has some truth is that in the cease fire agreement with the Turks back in September the Turks agreed to clear a major terrorist group Hi Toby of Sharm which is an al-Qaeda offshoot that went until recently by the name al Nusra.
- James Jeffrey: [17:46](#) That many people who deal in counterterrorism in this hall are well aware of that they would get them under control disarm them and the Turks have not been able to do that. In fact HD S. as we call it has strengthened its position in Idlib. So that's the first argument the second one is HD FC and other opposition elements have been shelling a Russian base to the south of Idlib. And so from the Russian standpoint this is a violation of the ceasefire from our standpoint this was mine and shelling we didn't see much damage or casualties from it. And it's more an excuse than a reasonable reaction. Certainly nothing would justify the unleashing of these bombing attacks against civilians. So we are willing to work with the Russians and the Turks on the HD issue but we don't see this as a justification for what is clearly an attempt to suck up to Assad by meeting his demand which he kept making after the cease fire in September for the ceasefire to be broken.
- James Jeffrey: [18:45](#) In this piece of territory to be captured as he did all of the others the south west a year ago this summer Aleppo 12 months before and on and on it's not going to happen in terms of the Turks who are our first of all we support their position which is the ceasefire has to be restored.
- James Jeffrey: [19:02](#) The forces have to draw back to their ceasefire lines and we are very encouraged that the Turks are reinforcing their positions all

along. They've had two people killed and over a dozen wounded they've engaged the Syrian army and counter battery fire when necessary. So the Turks are maintaining a strong position there they're supporting the opposition in many different ways. I won't get into but it's effective.

James Jeffrey:

[19:25](#)

But we are talking to the Turks about how we will all together go after these terrorist cells and particularly the terrorist leadership in fact we've offered to the Russians many times that we have as again many people in this hall know very unique capabilities to target terrorist leadership. The Russians keep on saying no so we don't take their claims that they're doing all of this to fight terror very seriously if they wanted to fight terror they cooperate more with us isn't it tough to cooperate with the Russians in fighting terrorism when they find civilians in hospitals and schools and orphanages as legitimate terrorist targets right and anybody in the opposition now officially diplomatically they have the same list that the U.N. has declared as we do. But they essentially in their behaviour by the Russian military go along with the Assad regime's view that anybody who takes up arms against certainly the worst regime I have seen in my 50 years of government service is a terrorist. And that's a problem that we're going to have to deal with.

Josh Rogin:

[20:27](#)

Thank you. Thank you. So you're the Turkish media has reported that you're on the way to Ankara after this. Is that right. And what's the what's on the agenda.

James Jeffrey:

[20:37](#)

Well I can't confirm media rumors that I'm in Ankara all of the time. The reason is that we have a very large agenda on Syria with the Turks. They are our partners in many respects in the northwest in the fight against doosh in an ad lib. They're our partners in the political process. They have good ties with the opposition and often represent them to the United Nations. We're in sync on that. We differ on our role in northeast Syria. We have partnered with the Syrian Democratic Forces which is led by essentially an offshoot of the P.K. AK or group that has had roots with the peak AK which is a Turkish anti Ankara terrorist group. We don't recognize the people in Syria as a terrorist group by then on an hour or the UN's list. The Turks do they feel that we shouldn't be partnering with them and they have threatened at various times to go in and act militarily against them and we're trying to work out what we call a safe zone where those Kurdish forces would pull back from the Turkish border and we would find ways to make sure that the Turks are not threatened.

James Jeffrey:

[21:43](#)

They're going it's going.

Josh Rogin: [21:48](#) To expand on that going I think is a pretty thorough answer five letters and forward progress.

James Jeffrey: [21:57](#) I would say that we understand Turkish security concerns. On the other hand we still have a big mission fighting dash or ISIS in northeast Syria.

James Jeffrey: [22:07](#) I was just there as a caliphate holding territory. They have been destroyed totally but they still have many cells that have infiltrated into areas particularly along the Euphrates and there's considerable back sweeping action by the SDF supported by the US and that's going to have to continue we can't afford to be have a messy situation with the Turks coming in then possibly the regime side would come in. The Russians would come in it would be a terrible mess to sort out.

Josh Rogin: [22:39](#) Well since you brought it up it seems clear that it's even tougher to sort out the security of northeast Syria as we withdraw now as everyone knows when the president announced that withdrawal by tweet. He didn't consult anybody until the joint chairman of the chiefs of staff. I assume that if the George Zimmerman's you the secretary defense didn't get a call him assuming that you didn't get a call Secretary Defense resigned the special envoy for ISIL coalition Brett McGurk resigned but you state. So tell us first of all why you state. Mm hmm. And then second of all you know now that this withdrawal has been mitigated we can't say how many troops there are going to be but they're gonna be a couple. How do we do more with less and how do we show our commitment to fighting ISIS in northeast Syria while we're the president is saying we have to get out. Well the first thing I did.

James Jeffrey: [23:38](#) When I heard about this was to check with my boss Mike Pompeo and we actually learned specifically what the president had decided he wasn't abandoning naughty Syria. This is what he was saying and he raised it before and was talked out of it. We would still stay in northeast Syria with our most important component which is our air cover over the northeast which keeps the four other powers out of it or at least three of the other powers. Secondly we would continue as you said and all al-Assad air base in Iraq a few days later we would continue to use our high end special operations and counterterrorism missions if we identified targets in the Northeast and we would support our coalition coming in.

James Jeffrey: [24:24](#) His logic was hey United States took on the burden of organizing an 80 country and organization coalition against ISIS when ISIS had territory as big as Britain and thirty five thousand jihadists

under its command. We smash that in a campaign over several years. At times we had up to 15000 U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq and Syria. We spent tens of billions of dollars hundreds of airplanes leading this coalition. We basically had completed the job by December he thought. And you know his views on burden sharing and I am in agreement with much of it that we need to turn to our allies to do follow on missions when the big job smashing a caliphate that has very heavy forces very heavy weapons and thousands and thousands of forces is done. That's what we did. We turned to our coalition partners and said Why don't you provide some numbers certainly it would be low lower than 1000 that could stay on and help the local forces keep ISIS from coming back which had happened in Iraq after 2012. And everybody said sorry we're in with you we're out with you. So if you don't stay on we won't be able to provide and contributions. When that was passed back to the president he decided that as I said he would continue his withdrawal of American forces while encouraging other countries to up their presence there but that we would also keep a small contingent for the indeterminate future. That's where we are now. And I think that we will have many more countries participating in our efforts in the northeast than we had a year ago.

Josh Rogin: [26:07](#) Have you gotten commitments from allies including the British and the French to increase their troop levels in the northeast. It's a funny thing about northeast Syria. Even when we do get commitments we don't get permission to publicize the commitments. So I'll do that. You have commitments without permission to publicize.

Josh Rogin: [26:23](#) You know that what it is that is such an unfair twisting of my words because I thought were perfectly clear we read don't make commitments even when we have commitments which I don't have to tell us what the commitments commitments are.

Josh Rogin: [26:35](#) So nobody could get angry at you just there are commitments or there aren't. I am sure that we will have formal commitments from a significant number of countries right now.

Josh Rogin: [26:45](#) No commitments right now. I would say that we are well on the way to getting formal commitments by a good number of countries far more than where they are a year ago and that this will be a satisfactory outcome. Said that I think we understand perfectly.

Josh Rogin: [27:03](#) ISIS ten thousand thirty thousand six. How many are left. What's the best guesstimate. I've heard that that's over 30000.

- James Jeffrey: [27:11](#) I've heard between 10 and 15000 between Iraq and Syria.
- James Jeffrey: [27:17](#) Now bear in mind that is what we call the core. They're very active in the Sinai and Egypt. They're active in Somalia. They're active and just well we're in Syria just forgotten for Syria. For Syria. We don't put a number on that because they float back and forth between Iraq and Syria. They consider it one front. We organized ourselves to consider it one front under one coalition command commanded by a US three star general.
- Josh Rogin: [27:42](#) I heard three hundred and seventy attacks since March attributed to ISIS in Syria alone that match what you're what you're getting and if that or let's say even if let's say it's 100. It seems pretty serious.
- James Jeffrey: [27:56](#) What are we doing to increase our attention to what is clearly a rising in ten minutes and one forward US position in Syria ten days ago I heard heavy machine gun fire from three directions in five minutes. Those three separate attacks by whom we don't know it was a night. In terms of casualties the casualties from ISIS attacks in Syria are still very very low in terms of what we and many of us experienced in Iraq unfortunately. So I would say it is a very low level insurgency in northeast Syria right now. Now it is raging out of control south of the Euphrates in areas that the regime Assad regime is supposed to control. Why. Because their best troops are conducting this vain attack on it live. And ISIS is taking advantage. They just hit the main gas pipeline from Palmyra to the populated areas in the west of Syria. It's also bigger threat in Iraq where ISIS which has its roots is basically the al-Qaeda in Iraq force that I knew when I was there in 2011 and whatever I knew about it has now regenerated itself in some of the areas where they always had supporters. So we're watching Iraq more seriously and not more seriously but we're watching it more closely right now they're not in Syria.
- Josh Rogin: [29:15](#) So it's fair to say ISIS is not yet defeated.
- James Jeffrey: [29:17](#) It's fair to say that the caliphate which was unique which was a physical force that was able to project power in terms of terrorist attacks all over Europe indirectly to the United States and elsewhere that has been fortunately defeated.
- James Jeffrey: [29:34](#) And that was a huge and difficult military task. ISIS as a terrorist group analogous to al-Qaeda is still there and in many other places.

Josh Rogin: [29:43](#) Thank you. Just today the Department of Justice announced charges against an American citizen who became an ISIS emir who was training ISIS snipers. America. U.S. citizens fighting in Syria a relatively small number is that but there are thousands of tens of thousands of citizens from countries all over the world especially Europe who have joined ISIS and are now sitting in camps. Seventy thousand people in one camp. Family members women children for months. What's the plan to deal with them.

James Jeffrey: [30:20](#) OK let me just start with the numbers. There's as you said somewhere over 70000 people in a major IDP internally displaced persons are a camp that's a hole and about 60 thousand of them are Iraqi or Syrian.

James Jeffrey: [30:38](#) So we're working with local partners to get the Syrians back to their homes largely along the Euphrates and Arab areas. And we're working with the Iraqi government.

James Jeffrey: [30:47](#) I was just there twelve days ago to get the Iraqi government to expedite the return of their own citizens in terms of the terrorists themselves is about ten thousand nine to ten thousand prisoners.

James Jeffrey: [31:01](#) About two thousand of them are international a sense of not from Syria or Iraq. The rest are from Syria and Iraq. Step by step we're moving the Iraqis back to Iraq. We're moving the Syrians to justice within the Syrian system in the northeast. And so the main problem is the two thousand what we call foreign terrorist fighters.

Josh Rogin: [31:20](#) Just to be clear also 10000 additional family members women and children.

James Jeffrey: [31:24](#) Right. Right. Who are also not Iraqi or Syrian though you know 12000. Yeah. So in terms of the logistics because we require humanitarian support and U.S. government support to operate these things along with a lot of support from the Syrian Democratic Forces. It's not the major problem the major problem is the numbers Iraqi and Syrian. But in terms of getting those people back that's a huge problem.

James Jeffrey: [31:48](#) The United States takes back people who we believe were guilty of fighting with ISIS and we put them before courts and we have ways to prosecute them. Many of our partner nations particularly the Europeans do not have good ways to do that. They have extremely high bars for prosecution and they're very

nervous about taking people back or they'll have to put out on the street. Nonetheless that's the wrong decision. They can't be left there in northeast Syria indefinitely. We're putting a lot of pressure on them. Lindsey Graham Senator Lindsey Graham suggested they build a European get No.

Josh Rogin: [32:24](#)

Good idea bad idea.

James Jeffrey: [32:27](#)

I've never seen Lindsey Graham idea. I didn't think was pretty good. But I would have to say that the Europeans would have to decide that is one who worked on the Gitmo issue when I was in the Bush White House. It's complicated. Even under the in the American context and it would be extremely complicated for Europeans up in another camp in southeast called Al rock bottom camp.

Josh Rogin: [32:53](#)

There are now I'd say 30000 civilians living within 10 miles of a U.S. military base called Al top two hundred soldiers maybe 300 who knows protecting 30000 Syrian civilians who have fled the regime who don't want to go back to the regime there used to be fifty thousand there. Twenty thousand them actually went back to the regime. They probably got conscripted or detained or killed frankly. These are the 30000 who don't want to be conscripted detained or killed starving. Right. No humanitarian aid. Living in squalor. And their main ask. And because they ask me this all the time personally is for the U.S. government to give them food and medicine.

Josh Rogin: [33:37](#)

Up till now our policy has not been to do that.

Josh Rogin: [33:39](#)

Can you explain why that is and now seeing that the the scheme to negotiate with the Russians to make sure these people don't starve to death has run its course.

James Jeffrey: [33:50](#)

Why not feed these starving people many of them actually the U.N. did a survey do want to go back to their homes in Assad controlled territory but they are as you said very nervous as they well should be because we've tracked what happens to people who do go back. Nonetheless they would go back if assisted with transportation. We're not going to allow them however to be starved into making this decision. Therefore we've pressured the Russians and in turn through the Russians the Assad regime to provide humanitarian relief which the U.N. organized as we did two convoys one in the fall and another one in February. Now the Assad regime again we get back to the Assad regime has said no and we're looking at our options right now.

James Jeffrey: [34:30](#) But this is one of the two or three most serious things that I put time into my job and people at considerably higher levels of me do it.

Josh Rogin: [34:38](#) We have the capability to feed these people.

Josh Rogin: [34:40](#) Why not just feed them.

James Jeffrey: [34:43](#) Because first of all if we feed them it will look like we're going to stay there forever. And there may be other options for them for example in the north east or the north west of the country where you're not under Assad's thumb but that requires negotiation and other things. And secondly we can't commit to a long term presence in all time for any place else in Syria.

Josh Rogin: [35:04](#) That's one thing that you know and while you're at once we feed them we'll have to keep feeding them there is that fear.

James Jeffrey: [35:09](#) Again we're looking at every option available to us at this time.

Josh Rogin: [35:14](#) We're going to I'm going to open up to questions so get your questions ready. But my last question and I've been thinking about this one a lot is that you know when I talk to people out about Syria I'm sure you have the same experience. Americans often say you know that's over there right. We get why that's a tragedy for Syrians. We get why that's a security threat for Israel. We even get why it's a security threat for Europe but Americans that I've found don't understand what's the U.S. interest in Syria. And that's my question. What's the U.S. interest in Syria why. Why. Why must we care.

James Jeffrey: [35:49](#) Two or three reasons. First of all the terrorist threat. We've seen two of the largest terrorist movements since 9/11 be borne out of that conflict. ISIS and HDL. Secondly again it is in the center of the Middle East the Middle East impacts us in so many ways.

James Jeffrey: [36:10](#) While we don't get our oil from the Middle East anymore only minor amounts. Believe me all of our trading partners from India in Japan to Europe do. And that has a huge impact on the global market for oil and your price of gasoline at the pump is based on the global market for oil and that can be impacted as we're seeing to some degree today by our failure to maintain security in the region. Thirdly our allies and partners from NATO ally Turkey to in particular Israel who we have a very close relationship with and is facing an existential threat from Iran and on to many other partners.

James Jeffrey: [36:49](#) And frankly the global order that people can challenge and question how much of a role we play versus others. But at the end of the day I have heard few people other than Vladimir Putin and I would recommend following him who want to replace it with anything. So we need to support the U.N. We need to support our partners and allies in there and we need to end this conflict.

Josh Rogin: [37:13](#) Thank you. Let's go to questions we'll start with Kim.

Josh Rogin: [37:19](#) And please everybody put your comments in the form of a question and we're going to try to get in as many as possible thank you.

Audience Member: [37:30](#) Kim Dozier Daily Beast Ambassador Jeffrey you started with your list of the four goals in Syria with getting all Iranian forces. Sorry. Three getting all Iranian forces out. That was very contested under Mattis as Pentagon. They said this is all about Daish and only day should we're not expanding the mission set to include Iran because hey we would we could be there forever. So do you have buy in from Esper from Bolton from the president on the Iranian mission. And how long realistically is that going to take.

James Jeffrey: [38:08](#) Good question and it comes. There's two ways to answer it. First of all.

James Jeffrey: [38:15](#) And I live with this every day but I'm not here to give you a seminar in political civilian military relations and conduct of U.S. foreign policy but rather what I do in Syria.

James Jeffrey: [38:27](#) Just because something is a U.S. government policy for our diplomacy doesn't mean specifically which tools we use to carry it out. The military does not have a mission in Syria to evict the Iranians. It has a mission in Syria. Aside from defending itself to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS that has been its policy ever since troops went in in 2014.

James Jeffrey: [38:58](#) That doesn't mean that the military by its very presence there by essentially controlling and denying terrain does not contribute indirectly as military presence as military activities do to larger diplomatic goals and objectives our means to get Iran out is a negotiated settlement of this conflict and enabling not only the Iranian forces but the other forces that have entered since 2011 four of the five militaries that I've cited including our own have come in because of this conflict the only one that was there before was the Russians to get them all out. So it's this

economic pressure it's this diplomatic pressure and this idea to do a deal that we're hoping would be effective in getting the Iranians out. How effective will we be. I know that once again this is a very top priority for the U.S. administration and is a very important part of our overall Iran policy that we talked about earlier today as a quick follow up.

- Josh Rogin: [39:59](#) Are you seeing divisions between the Iranians and the Russians especially when it comes to committing resources in the fighting.
- Josh Rogin: [40:08](#) You name two countries anywhere in the world and I see divisions somewhere in our intelligence increasing division.
- James Jeffrey: [40:14](#) I would say they do not have the same objectives for example the Russians do not want Iran to project a long range missile power out of Syria against Israel absolutely believe that whether the Russians have done enough against it.
- James Jeffrey: [40:29](#) That's another question. But on the other hand if you would look at our alliance of the U.N. the Arabs Turkey Israel the Kurds in the Northeast in our policy you would see a lot of divisions among them too. So I wouldn't read too much into the debate between them.
- Josh Rogin: [40:45](#) Fair enough. Next question let's go right in the back. Gentleman in the blue shirt. Yes. You wait for the mike please ambassador just picking up.
- Audience Member: [41:00](#) Let us know who you are sir John Scarlett former head of online sex. Thank you. Picking up your last point there. About Russia aside Iranians and so on is the not so basic risk that we are continuing to misunderstand the objectives and indeed the capabilities of of Russia in particular. I mean they obviously Iran is a challenge for them. But. How really how important is it for them to move Iran and the Iranians out of Syria. Has there been any progress on that at all. And when I say is a misunderstanding or risk of it on the part of the Israelis certainly when I talk to them they place quite a lot of hope. They said a year ago on that. And yet they can't show the Russians like to have meetings and talk about it but nothing has actually happened and the degree and depth of the commitment to Assad which goes back decades. He's still there. He hasn't done too badly. The Russians are feeling quite good about it really. I mean that's you could look at it that way. Can I just hear your comments on that.

Speaker 22: [42:17](#) OK. One the Russians were feeling quite good about it last summer after they gobbled up southwest Syria. It's a year later and the map hasn't changed their feeling at least good about it. And that's something we try to leverage to I can't say that the Russians have complied with our requests on the Iranians because they haven't gotten the Iranians out they have taken some steps I don't want to get into all the details. Those steps were not satisfactory but they've taken some steps on moving back Iranian forces from certain areas. Again was not a I mean in the south.

James Jeffrey: [42:52](#) Yeah. Further their to these. That's right. It was a deal that was done last summer. So there are examples of it. The basic problem is Russia's goal in the Middle East is to replace the U.S. led Collective Security regional system with a great power system that Putin knows how well to play Russia U.S. Israel Turkey Saudi Arabia and Iran their ally Iran's mission in the US in the region is to replace the U.S. led Collective Security System with an Iranian led Collective Security System. So that's the friction between the two of them. But under pressure to try to get a victory they've managed to paper over these differences but the differences are real.

Josh Rogin: [43:38](#) And the last question will come to me.

Josh Rogin: [43:43](#) Ambassador Jeffrey there by my reporting are at least six American citizens currently missing in Syria believed to be held by the Assad regime. There are at least two American citizens who have been killed confirmed to be killed by the Assad regime including one journalist and one activist. Is the Trump administration committed to holding the Assad regime and Bashar al-Assad himself accountable for these atrocities and how he intend to do so.

James Jeffrey: [44:13](#) Absolutely. We're doing this both through the U.N. which has various accountability mechanisms among the most robust I've ever seen and a lot of information mainly from Syrians is pouring into it.

James Jeffrey: [44:25](#) We also in our own detailed description of our policies that have been was provided at the end of February to the US Congress in classified form. We've made it clear that accountability is one of the core issues we want to see with a change of performance or behavior of the Assad government along with no CW no support of terrorism no support of Iranian line written threats to the region.

Josh Rogin: [44:48](#) But are you going to pursue that accountability in the courts now before the Assad regime decides to change and do all the right things are you. Is the U.S. government gonna bring these cases that were going on right now.

James Jeffrey: [45:01](#) Right now the priority is to try to figure out where these Americans are. I can't confirm that they are under Assad's control. There are a lot of rumors or a lot of people reporting out there. They're our priority right now.

Josh Rogin: [45:14](#) And the ones that are confirmed to have been killed by the Assad regime. How long must they wait for justice.

James Jeffrey: [45:18](#) We're collecting data on them. But right now our focus is on these people that are being held by us that. Are we think are being held by Assad or somebody else because there are many groups in Syria.

Speaker 23: [45:29](#) Let's think Ambassador Jeffrey for 45 minutes of real talk about the situation on the ground in Syria. I really appreciate.

Speaker 24: [45:47](#) The final session for this evening we'll begin in a half an hour at 6:00 p.m. at the Greenwald pavilion.