

Joel Rayburn: Good evening, everyone. This is Joel Rayburn. I'm the director of the American Center for Levant Studies, Very pleased to have you with us this evening, Very pleased to have Professor Ahmed Uysel from the ORSAM Center in Ankara, He's the director of OSRAM, which is the Middle Eastern Studies Center in Ankara, And Dr. Ahmed is also a professor of political sociology at Istanbul University, where he teaches in the international relations department. And he is a longtime expert on Turkey's relations with the Arab world, among other things. So welcome, Ahmed. It's good to be with you this evening.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: Thank you, Joel. Very nice to be with you also. Wish you good luck with the football soccer game against the U.K. That's right. That's right. But they may have one eye even those who are listening here may have may have the game on in the background. Certainly the Americans or the English. But beyond that, it's a good evening to be talking about the situation in Syria, because the situation in Syria needs some talking about. It's a dangerous situation in Syria.

Joel Rayburn: It's an important situation in Syria where we have essentially a restart of the conflict in northern Syria that has erupted from time to time over the past, well, a couple of decades, but certainly over the past decade and had a significant flare up in 2019 during Operation Peace Spring, Turkey's foray into northeastern Syria. Anyway, the situation is pretty dynamic. The situation is pretty risky. The situation is pretty significant not just for Syria, but geopolitically speaking, there are a lot of implications. And what I'd hope we could do tonight was just sort of review what the situation is. And then, Ahmed, I'd love to get your summary of Turkey's position, what Turkey's intentions are, and we can also then discuss what are the likely intentions of the other parties that are involved in this situation and what are the implications depending on which direction the whole this whole crisis goes in. But anyway, welcome again. Having said that. So here's what we'll plan to do. We'll speak for about the next hour, I think is what we have allotted for this discussion. Ahmet, you and I, I think can speak back and forth for a little while. And then once we've both, I think, presented the situation from our respective capitals points of view and explored some of the implications of that, then at some point we'll also open it up for questions. The idea is that we'll conduct this conversation in English. But if there are questioners who need to ask their question in Arabic, then we will have the ability to interpret the question into English, and then we'll answer back in English. So if that's okay, then why don't you could you start us off with a description of

the situation in the North? From Turkey's point of view and how we got here and where is it headed, where Turkey headed, the situation?

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: Yes. Let's look back. You know, the PKK is attacking Turkey for a long time and finding a refuge in the West mostly, but also had good relations with the Syrian Assad regime and Iran and even sometimes with Russia. I mean, the terrorist organization and most of them say they are a terrorist organization. And this organization is supported, hidden for a long time against Turkey. And also after the, of course, Arab Spring, again, the Assad regime, maybe with the guidance of Iran, left some of the Kurdish areas because to the PKK, probably they thought they couldn't control these areas, so they left Qamshli and Kobani and other areas Afrin to the PKK groups. Also, they had previously good relations with the Ocalan. And this, of course, made a big problem for Turkey. And then when, of course, ISIS came and America used the PKK against ISIS, but by then they named it differently. They said PYD and YPG as a surrogate, as an alternative naming, but we know this is the same organization with American resources. This is the Obama thing that Obama did and as a punishment not to fight in Syria. They want to leave. I mean, maybe they hoped that Turkey would fight with Iran in Syria. Of course, this is going to be a regional war. And we thought, I mean, we should do it together with America. And of course, Obama promised many things with red lines, chemical weapons, but forgot all of this. And then they I mean, they began to punish Turkey with by supporting the PKK, PYD. And I mean, with the disguise of fighting ISIS, but they could have easily found any other Turkish group with the resources they have because the PKK don't have much following. Actually. Still, they don't represent the whole Kurdish population. They chose this communist ideological group as an ally. I mean, they could have found liberal Kurds or nationalists or I mean, other types of Kurds like maybe Barzani type or Talabani type or other ones, But they chose PKK as a as an ally to fight ISIS. But they gave the whole north of Syria to this organization. Of course, this is a big threat to Turkey because this group was fighting Turkey for a long time. And it's a threat, direct threat to Turkish national security and interests. Also. We see it also in line with the Barzani referendum. If you remember at that time, 2016, I think it was like a complete shutdown of the Turkish border with the Arab world. So we don't want Turkey be isolated from the Arab world. Even the Barzani Now, there are some American officials, not all of them were involved in encouraging Barzani. He said, I'm selling a lot of gas and oil through Turkey. What I'm going to do if Turkey shut it down. They said, we have northern Syria as an

alternative. We can make an alternative route, don't worry. And they kind of seduced him to do this referendum. Of course, it failed, but it created a kind of chaos. I mean, to make it short, in the meantime, America kept supporting the PKK. I mean, not only diplomatically, militarily, financially, American budget, you know, they gave money directly to them. They we know they gave a lot of arms. They give diplomatic support. And also, operation wise, they collect the members in the West in they collect money. But America keeps saying that all the Western allies keep saying that they are different organization. And last week in the 13th of November, the PYD member, they attacked Istanbul in a civilian touristic place and it is well connected to an Arab and also from an Arab origin. We know that STG also was operating because of Turkish pressure. You know, they keep saying that these are Kurdish, but they want to enlarge this group to add more Arabs. But they are becoming a puppet to PYD organization, PKK organization as an auxiliary. And the bomber came from outside. And in the recent years, the PKK couldn't do anything from inside. So Turkey's operations, Turkey's measures were very effective to stop any kind of terroristic activity from inside because the internal minister and security services, intelligence services were also the military were working effectively with the Turkish drones and all this and intelligence, etc. And now, I mean, we are very disappointed that our allies are supporting them outside the country and PKK/PYD and YPG attacking Turkey from outside, from the American controlled areas, from northern Syria mostly. But sometime in the northern Iraq, where America and Iran are cooperating to support the PKK. And this is disappointing. After the terror attack in Istanbul, of course, Turkey had several operations against them before. But now it became necessary, maybe again, to conduct a land operation that to expel the PKK from Turkish borders. I mean, of course, they are threat all over the world against Turkey, but when they are closed, they can shell I mean, civilians, which they already did the last week that they attack shelled Gaziantep City and killed one child and a teacher. I mean, they keep saying that they don't target civilians, but they do the opposite. So Turkey is very frustrated, very disappointed, but also taking the measure necessary as it did before. But it was in the mostly Turkey was seeing more understanding from Trump than Obama-Biden Geo. And again, unfortunately, Biden has some bias against Turkey, which is generally against other American allies. I mean, as problems with Arabs, problems with Turkey and Israel. I mean, Israel not as much, but now I mean, try to repeat the nuclear deal with Iran. So this is an Obama line, I think, causing a kind of friction between Turkey and the United States. So the situation, of course, Turkey is feeling threatened by this terrorist activities in its borders. And also,

I mean, it hurt Turkey. So the government cannot wait idly, you know, hope that this thing doesn't happen. Of course, terrorist group, especially Turkish economy was becoming stronger and in the lira still stabilized but was getting stronger. And this Istanbul terrorist activity targeted Turkish economy and tourism. I mean, it is of course, it didn't succeed because still the tourists are coming. But we can say that the purpose was obvious and we don't we cannot wait. You know, this thing happen again, especially from outside. That's maybe the summary.

Joel Rayburn: There are a number of things that there are a number of things that I like to respond to. But before I do, can I can you add to your summary that what are Turkey's intentions? I mean, where is this going? Is Turkey going to mount a ground invasion and with what objective and how?

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: Invasion. We want to clean the PKK/PYD/YPG, whatever you call it, they are all the same for us and we want to clear them from our borders. As long as they don't attack Turkey, they are a secondary threat. But now there is an urgent primary threat from these organizations from northern Syria. And of course I'm not going to decide, but I think if now they are doing this claw operation from the air. I think they will continue on this if they need to maybe they also can use ground operation. But let's see, without jumping to the conclusion, let's see your perspective, Joel. I mean, how the Americans see it and then maybe we can discuss what can be done and what is what are the risks and also maybe the possibilities. Thank you.

Joel Rayburn: Well, the first thing is thank you for that, Ahmet. The first thing is that I don't there's the American perspective is very different on the same sequence of events, a very different explanation, a very different description of American intentions. A couple of things that you said, which I believe you are probably in the mainstream understanding in Turkey, you used the word punishment. You said the United States was working with what became the SDF as a punishment in order to punish Turkey for not joining the fight against the Iranian regime. And you attributed that to the Obama administration, but I don't think that is accurate. First of all, the Obama administration was not looking for a conflict with the Iranians, so they weren't going to penalize Turkey for not wanting to join a conflict with the Iranians. But also.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: I mean, not to interrupt, but Obama said, you know, NATO's number two army. They didn't want to take them when the journalist criticized them, you know, not doing anything. And he put the blame on Turkish army. So as a hint, I mean, of course I respect you.

Joel Rayburn: I don't think this I don't think this had anything to do, though, with the sequence, with the way that the local partners in Iraq and Syria wound up emerging. I don't think there wasn't any. I mean, I was in the Department of Defense at the time. I was a military officer and I had some visibility on the planning. I was out in Baghdad for a while in Kuwait assisting with the campaign against ISIS in the early days, 2015. And I saw no sign at all that there was the idea that working with what became the SDF was intended as a punishment of Turkey. I don't think it figured in the I don't think that figured as a factor at all. In fact, there was a lot of frustration on the US side because there were very close discussions between the US side and the Turkish side on trying to form a majority Arab force, Syrian Arab force that could be used against ISIS, and it never materialized. That was that was the case in the Obama administration and the early Trump administration for sure. So I think the SDF sort of emerged by default. There wasn't a strategic idea of punishing Turkey behind it. And your point about so that goes to the point you made, which I also am sure it is, that the received opinion in Turkey that the US could have chosen any other Syrian partner group, but chose, as you put it, the PKK and then wound up giving it the whole of northeastern Syria. But I was involved in some of those events and it didn't unfold that way. There wasn't a purpose behind it and also for quite a while. There was there were other US partner forces, but they sort of fell by the wayside. A lot of them wound up falling under the sway of the Nusra Front and just sort of passed out of the zone of acceptability as partners to the US. And there were a lot of there were a lot of relationships that the US explored that just sort of fell apart when those people came under pressure from the Nusra Front and Da'esh and so on. So I don't think it's not that the US could have chosen any other Syrian group. I'm not aware that there were other Syrian groups that sort of presented themselves in the same way.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: There was the Training and equipping group. There was an American project, big project. What happened to it? Train and equip against the Assad regime.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, but that was different than conducting a campaign against Daesh.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: they could have, you know, produced a lot of fighters, maybe not hostile to Turkey, but they weren't serious. They, I mean, a couple of people they trained, but they said they made a big propaganda. We are preparing Syrian opposition and we're going to topple down the Assad regime. But this this project came nothing I mean, almost like zero impact.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, but having been there, I can tell you that there wasn't it wasn't that well, we have all these different partners to choose from. Let's choose an offshoot of the PKK by design in order to punish Turkey. That just didn't enter into it at all. That wasn't that wasn't a consideration. There also wasn't a plan to have the SDF be responsible operationally for the whole of the Northeast that developed as things as the rocket campaign went. And in fact, it was still in question up until the spring of 2017. I was present for that for that decision. You also just a couple of other things that I want to try to I want to try to clarify. In addition to that, you said that US officials encouraged Massoud Barzani or even you use the word seduced Massoud Barzani to do the referendum. But I was one of those US officials and our policy. We urged him very strongly not to do the referendum. We sent envoy after envoy out there and I myself was involved in trying to persuade the KDP not to go ahead with the referendum because we foresaw a lot of the fallout. So it certainly was as a as an administration.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Joel True, but do you remember the picture they had published, you know, several Europeans and Americans kind saying that these were with us in the referendum, the Barzani people? So I mean, these guys not the one responsible. Actually, I respected your position more than them.

Joel Rayburn: But you're putting this Ahmed into a bigger explanation where you would say the US is consciously taking steps against Turkey's interests through Kurdish groups in both Syria and Iraq. And the evidence you use is you say look at the data point where the US worked through the YPG in Syria and here in Iraq that the US encouraged Barzani to do the referendum, which wound up being a thing that was that Turkey decided was against its interest. And you close the border with Iraqi Kurdistan and so on. But I can just tell you that the US policy, which there was no room for doubt, I was in those meetings, there was no room for doubt that the United States did not.

And I don't know anyone in the US government who encouraged the referendum of 2017.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: You should ask McGurk, maybe Joel

Joel Rayburn: No, no, no, no, worked very closely with Brett McGurk at that time, and I can tell you that he was totally against the referendum. And not only that, but we had guidance from the very top of the US government to discourage the referendum. At no point did we encourage the referendum. The other bit is you also said that the United States and Iran are cooperating in supporting the PKK in Iraq. But I don't I don't see that at all. We don't have any kind of relationship with the people in Kandil. And in fact, there's been a lot of friction between the US and Kandil over time. So there's no again, I wouldn't doubt that that is a mainstream assumption in Turkey, but in my experience, there's nothing to it. And in fact, there have been many times that the United States assisted Turkey in trying to discourage PKK attacks or PKK activities along the border, certainly in Iraq. And that was a long standing relationship between the United States and Turkey. Anyhow, but your last point was the Turkey's frustrated and believes that the current US administration is biased against Turkey. And then you said as a result, the Turkish leadership feels it can't stand idly by and do nothing.

Joel Rayburn: Okay. I, I don't doubt that that too, is the sentiment and the view in Ankara where now we get down to what to do. And I don't doubt that Turkey has some legitimate security concerns along the border in the United States Administration has said that as well. I think where you run into the big problem is when you leap from that shared view where so you have an agreement, and understanding with Washington that there are threats to Turkey's security along in the border zone. Then when you leap from there into therefore, Turkey will conduct a military operation that carries a great deal many risks. That's when that's when we're no longer obviously on the on the same page, the US and Turkey. And I'm concerned because first of all, I see this as a danger. It could threaten to disrupt the US Turkey relationship, the alliance overall. Secondly, it really Risks disrupting the campaign against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. And ISIS is still a threat there. Unfortunately, they're the kind of threat where if you relieve the pressure. They just come back over and over again. The third thing is that if Turkey and the US are not on the same page, and if Turkey and the US are particularly not on the same page about the US military presence in Syria, then you also run the risk of undermining

what the pressure policy, the international pressure policy against the Assad regime and its allies, the Iranian regime and Hezbollah and so on in Syria. And the last thing is, this is the fourth thing I think you risk is dividing the United States and Turkey. Dividing Washington and Ankara at a time when they really need to be on the same page so that they can so be confronting the situation with Russia together and not being at odds with one another and offering a fracture between them that the Russians can then take advantage of to fracture the NATO alliance, which has been so uniformly strong in its support for the Ukrainian resistance to Russia. So what do you what do you think about from the Turkish perspective? What are you what are the views on those four big risks?

Yes. One about the ISIS is a more direct threat to Turkey than America because we are fighting them. They are accumulated in northern Syria and some in Iraq, and they are posing more direct pressure, sometimes infiltrating into Turkish borders and Turkey, capture them and also capture them in the Free Syrian Army controlled areas. And so we are fighting with ISIS and the PKK at the same time. And your war is about ISIS is not more than us. We are also target of I mean, ISIS target also Turkish cities and several times and glad that it is weakening, but it's not supposed to be you clean one terror group with another terror group. I mean, it can backfire and it can also be used. And Turkey is not hurting anything. It's not doing anything to hurt. I mean, you should get the maybe feeling or the sense in Turkey. Turkey is not doing anything to harm or to weaken American interests. But we see the support for the PKK, I mean, hurting us. And this is the frustration. This is the understanding we should get from American allies. You know, we don't get that. And that's the's the problem with the Assad regime. Also, we don't see America sometime attack some regime facilities, maybe sometime Iran, but we don't see a real fight with Assad regime. I think I mean, my understanding, America is happy with this status quo. But we should actually we have more common things with the democratization and the constitutional committee that is supposed to work.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: But no pressure on this on Russia or other parties in this. I mean, we are for democratic Syria together. And, you know, no push on this, no pressure. Even, you know, Assad's regime delays and plays also not only delays with the committee sometimes show up, sometimes don't show up and not even like verbal pressure or diplomatic pressure that's visible to us. I mean, we have more concern I mean, more common interests to bring a more stable, democratic and developed Syria. But America

is I mean, of course, there are many Americans, but, you know, is seem indifferent in many of these and looks like this they are happy with the status quo. Leave it as it is. And Iran is controlling somewhere and the PKK and the PKK is controlling PYD, I mean, controlling a good part of Syria without any legitimacy. And they these areas have water, oil and very fertile lands. And these are kind of we see this occupation by the PKK, no democratic elections, no nothing. And I mean, it's just I mean, if Turkey leaves them alone, it's going to be a pseudo state, then it's going to be another threat. So we see we have to do something about it. And especially our concern is the border security. And the more they are closer to the border, the more their cannons and shells can reach reach the Turkish cities. And we need to bring this together. Joel. I mean, I don't know what Americans are thinking, but this is a real threat. I mean, naming and theorizing and everything. But we are we are getting hurt by this.

Well, the I mean, it's one thing, but we go back to the point that I was making, which is it seems to me the Turkish position is something must be done and this military operation is something therefore this must be done and we skipped over some possible steps, skipped over the idea of strategic dialogue, skipped over the idea of maybe of returning to trying to do a security roadmap and so on, and to do it in partnership. Those as I say, were skipped right over in the. Military operation.

Yeah, but, I mean these are your allies you can just tell them not attack Turkey.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal :

I mean, that's very simple, Very easy. Also, if you say we cut down your funding against either I mean, presence or activities. You give a lot of money and you have leverage on the PKK. Looks like you are not telling them.

Joel Rayburn: I'm not in the position now, so I don't know what's being told to the SDF or not. When I was in the position, frankly, I did see a difference between the SDF and Kandil. I saw it happening and the United States had no relationship with Kandil at all. Sometimes it was difficult to tell who was doing what in northern Syria. I think it was difficult sometimes for Turkey to see who was doing what in northern Syria. But the stakes for the US and the rest of the global coalition in keeping the SDF operating and intact were pretty high. I think one of the things about is the assessment that I've seen from the US side over time is that Turkey were to go in again on a military operation

designed to try to push what is the SDF out of that zone in the northeast that President Erdogan has talked about from time to time of 30 kilometers, that it wouldn't actually happen, that in the same way that Operation Peace Spring had to be shut down because of pressure. Well, economic pressure and political pressure from the United States, but military pressure from Russia and the Assad regime. I don't see why the same thing wouldn't happen again and if Turkey wound up doing a military operation that caused a disruption or the collapse or the fracturing of the SDF. I think all that would happen is that portions of the SDF would continue to operate, but they just continue to operate with Russian and Iranian and Assad regime assistance rather than the United States being there to sort of supervise and shepherd. And at the same time, you would just have a vacuum where the SDF had to pull back or the operations collapsed. The US footprint might become untenable, but I think in many places you would have a vacuum that all of the bad elements, all of the shared adversaries between the US and Turkey would fill. ISIS, the Iranians, Hezbollah, the Assad regime, the Russians, the Wagner Group, and so on. This is who would move in, not Turkey. So I think you just make the situation worse. That's my own observation. But it was that was the US assessment as well. So it seemed to me, just like it seemed to many, many people on the US side, that a Turkish ground invasion into the Northeast for sure would be counterproductive and would hurt, would not just hurt the tactical situation, but hurt Turkey's strategic interests and put the alliance at risk. In addition to the political fallout where Turkey's concern in places like Washington and the European capitals. That's how it seems to me.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: Okay. One, one question. I mean, what is the difference for Turkey? Let's say a terror group attacking Turkey, either an ally of, you know, you said SDF would maybe work with the Assad regime or Iran or Russia, but they are the main enemy attacking Turkey. What is the difference if they are working with America or working with Iran? There is no difference for Turkey. And I mean, yes, you say also if PYD may be weakened, ISIS may come. But if also as a common interest, Free Syrian Army is not the enemy of America also or the West, I mean, they can take over and also can be Syrian more than PKK, because PKK leadership at least are Turkish, outlaws or whatever, renegade, whatever you call it. And so why you don't want to give up on the PYD?

Joel Rayburn: Well, your question is, why should Turkey see a difference between if it's America working with the SDF versus Iran or Assad or working with the SDF? I'll tell you, there's a big difference, because whatever happens, whatever danger there might be, whatever threat might emanate from an SDF zone in northeastern Syria, while the United States is partnering with the SDF is something that the US opposes, is something the US would try to use its influence to stop. It's something the US certainly wouldn't support if you have the Quds Force of Iran there, or Hezbollah or the Assad regime or the Russians, they would have an interest in encouraging those kinds of attacks against Turkey. So certainly you would get a lot more of them. So, yeah, there's a there's a big difference. Not to not to split hairs, but of course, isn't Turkey right now working with what is an internationally designated terrorist group, the Nusra Front, or Hayat Tahrir Al Sham in the Northwest and using it against and have been using it against other terror groups and so on. I often found the Turkish side when I was diplomat would say, well, why don't you just you just sever your relations with the SDF and pick some other pick some other partner. And it's not so simple to do that. I don't see that as an option. In the same way we used to ask our Turkish counterparts. So why don't you just sever your ties with Hyat Tharir Al Sham? And they would say, not so simple. And there and there really isn't another alternative.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: HTS is a little bit different. You have also I mean, tolerating them because they are many people stuck in Idlib and nobody want to mess with them again, like honey house. And HTS is not Turkey's partner or ally. We are bearing with them and trying to make them maybe more moderate but we don't control them. The thing with the PYD, why don't you at least tell them not to attack Turkey? I know you Americans spend a good bunch of time to convince Muslim Kobani and. And some I mean he's not general of course who gave him a channel he's a terrorist but in any case he fought with you and spend some time to not to attack Turkey. To prove they are not terrorists. But I mean, the latest attack came from Kobani, you know, and all the evidence is now present, you know, with and they also probably they want to use with the attack in Istanbul, they want to use I mean, they were going to ship this lady, you know, evidently and gladly that Turkish security forces, police caught them on time, but they were going to ship her to outside. Then they would say that, you know, some ISIS or any other group did it to to stir, maybe backlash or big reaction to the refugees we have before the elections in addition to the economic and but this why at least I mean

we know you cannot maybe stop the PKK, but why not at least stop the YPG and PYD guys not to attack Turkey or at least stay away from Turkey?

Joel Rayburn: Well, listen, I can tell you, I mean, just about every day when I when I was in the US government, there was a very clear message from the US to the YPG element of the SDF that no attacks against Turkey would be tolerated. And so I can't imagine that that's not the same message now. I think, of course it is, because the military folks on the US side, many of them are the same general Kurilla from CENTCOM is the same. I mean, there there wouldn't be a situation where the United States just sort of says, oh, there are their attacks against Turkey going on from some zone in Syria that our partners have a presence in. And we would just shrug our shoulders and say, oh, well, it doesn't matter. I mean, of course, I think there would probably be a very strong message from the US side not to tolerate that kind of that kind of threat to Turkey just simply wouldn't be tolerated. I think what we have is just a fundamental Failure to reconcile differing priorities in Syria between the US and Turkey. This has always been the problem. I don't think it's been the problem that there are conspiracies on either side. It's just there's definitely a clear difference in priorities for the US. The top three priorities in Syria have been the counterterrorism campaign against ISIS. The need to try to push back on the destabilizing Iranian presence in the region and then the need to try to continue the pressure against the Assad regime in order to try to end the conflict. And then, of course, Turkey.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : So three purposes, Joel, We don't have any objection. Let's work on this together and then, you know. We can have an outcome.

Joel Rayburn: That was always my wish. That was always my wish. What I always found and on every trip I made to Ankara or they made or Ankara made to the US or elsewhere, and we had this discussion. I wanted to have a strategic dialogue with Turkey on those issues, and it was very difficult. Every time we might start, it would last about 30 seconds before we got into the conversation was hijacked by the YPG issue, and it crowded out every other issue, including the need from time to time to try to push back against Russia, which was exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and so on. Whether it was the political process or whatever the issue was. I always found that Turkey, of all the issues in Syria. Let's say there are 100 issues in Syria, the top 90 or the YPG, and then everything else is down at the very bottom. Whereas for the United States and the other parties that have a stake in the conflict and the Syrian people

themselves, you know, it just wasn't that way. Assad, ISIS, and Iran were at the top and they're just we just couldn't get the reconciliation of that, that vast difference in priorities. That to me is the problem. And, and it took the idea in the Trump administration was right, we can't bridge this gap with Turkey. What we can try to do is mitigate it by having a very close partnership with Turkey and a constant conversation over what can be done to mitigate all the concerns. I do feel it looks to me like that has not been happening over the last almost two years. And that is one of the reasons that the situation is deteriorated to the degree that it has, it seems to me.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal: Yes. But, Joel, you are underestimating. Yes, underestimating the impact of the terror YPG PYD, whatever SDF are posing like they are stabbing us. And you say, oh, this is one of the problem, but this is serious. This is hurting people. This has impact on politics, economy and people's life. I mean, people close to the border, don't feel safe. And, you know, you don't know if they're going to attack today or tomorrow. And our frustration is that you are not telling them you're not preventing them to shell or to attack like this. Parachute mortar parachutes that they came last month. They came again with your area by parachutes because they cannot operate inside and they tried to attack police station. I mean, they should have stopped this long before. If they are like a non-terrorist organization and they want to live in peace in Syria. But I mean, you underestimating the Turkish suffering or Turkish damage

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Joel Rayburn: I think I think you and I are saying the same thing, which is that the United States and others don't see the situation, don't see what you're saying. And I think in Turkey, I think on the Turkish side, you don't see the concerns from the others as well. In the same way.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : You can agree, is Turkey hurting the United States? No. But American indifference or supporting the PYD is hurting Turkey. So the damage or the level of concern is not is not the same. You're saying ISIS may attack.

Joel Rayburn: we'll see. What happens if the ISIS campaign collapses because of a Turkish military incursion? And we'll see if ISIS doesn't attack the United States and the United States interests or not. So this has been pretty good arm wrestling match between yourself and me, Ahmet. But now why don't we open it up in the time that we have left to some questions from some of the listeners. So we have Rania Kisar from

our center who has been keeping track of the questions. Rania, do you want to go ahead and can you facilitate some of the questions?

Rania Kisar: Well, before I do that, I have my own question, if I may, to both of you gentlemen. Thank you so much for doing this. It's very important to the Syrian people. However, for the last 48 minutes now, you both have discussed the repercussions, the impact on your nations without discussing the impact of these new operations on the actual Syrian people. The division that is being empowered in Syria is very, very alarming to the Syrian people. That's number one. Number two, we are talking about the regional repercussions of what's going on. For example, on the same first day where Turkey attacked the northeast of Syria, Russia and the regime began attacking the northwest of Syria. On the next day, the PKK terrorist militias attacked Azaz using Iranian missiles and many civilians died because of that. And what I would like for both of you to please consider and discuss is: are you guys considering the impact of these battles on the actual civilian society community in Syria? Does it matter to you if civilians are dying or not? And finally, I want to end with this. I think it's really important for both of your countries to know one thing and that's the way the Syrian people view what is going on right now, which is that everybody is in agreement to kill the Syrian people. This is how Syrians view it and until both of you gentlemen can tell us, no, that's not the situation, we're not trying to kill the Syrian people, we think that the Syrian people and I'm speaking on their behalf now, we think that there is. There's a collusion between the administration in the United States and the administration in Turkey to basically just allow more death, more blood like it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. So I would like you, Dr. Ahmed, to touch on that, please. Thank you.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Yes, we sympathize with the Syrian people from the beginning. But Obama left them alone. And after all kinds of promises, even maybe provoke some of the rebellions that they trusted Obama. And with red lines, all this, they left them alone. And we didn't leave them alone. We still want the democratic transition continue with the constitutional process and the UN agent process. Plus, I mean, we are after the PKK, not after the people. But when Turkey does something to PKK, PKK attacks Syrians, I mean, there is a difference. I mean, we don't attack Syria. I mean, the PKK leadership, most of the Turkish people and terrorists. And why they attacking Azaz or I mean, previously also they bombed. And we're going to send you more refugees. I mean, this was how what they do before and we oppose that. And they punished the Italy people

and they are threatening that we'll send you more refugees. We are against this. We sympathize with the Syrians inside the country and also outside, especially the ones in Turkey.

Rania Kisar: The Syrian people, the Syrian people view this operation as a possible occupation of Syria's north. The Syrian people inside their homes are petrified that they will never be liberated from Assad or from another regional country. The Syrian people are worried and petrified that these battles are going to cause more bloodshed. They see their children dying from both sides for no fault of their own. This is a conflict between the PKK and Turkey, not between Syrians and Turkey. This is a conflict that if Turkey truly cares about Syria, would try to handle would try to handle Dr. Ahmed will try to handle in a different approach.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : For example, who is invading the east of Euphrates? Not Turkey, of course. I mean, the precious land is invaded by the PKK and which under any legal base. No, no legal base. I mean, Turkey is only after the PKK will be happy to Syrians. I mean, to see Syrians decide for themselves democratic process also. Mean, we don't go with the arm twisting. We have a legitimate security, terroristic concerns. And not only the PKK, also ISIS. I mean, please don't confuse Turkey with others. Thank you.

Rania Kisar: Okay. We have a question from Mr. Meshal Badoui. The question is in Arabic, it says, who is the party responsible for buying the Toyota cars that ISIS used?

Joel Rayburn: Mr. Rayburn, can you answer that question? Well, I mean, those Toyota Hilux trucks are easy to get. And there were many, many of them that were captured when ISIS over ran the military bases in both Iraq and Syria. I don't think anyone there was many people trying to outfit ISIS with the Toyota trucks, certainly not the United States.

Rania Kisar: Would you not agree that those cars were probably confiscated in Mosul, sir.

Joel Rayburn: Many in Mosul and Fallujah and Anbar province, Tikrit, there were a lot of military bases that there were a lot of Iraqi units that were overrun and their equipment fell into ISIL's hands. That's for sure. 20, 2013, 14, 15. Absolutely.

Rania Kisar: Okay. We have another question for you from Um Tarik in Canada. She said, Can you ask him, Rania, with all honesty, what is required of the Syrian people towards America to help him or to help America get rid of Assad terrorists and all the occupations?

Joel Rayburn: Okay, so I take that one on.

Rania Kisar: Yes. It's for you, sir.

Joel Rayburn: I always said when I was asked that same kind of question, I thought the most important priority for the Syrian opposition was to try to unify, which I don't think they've succeeded in doing. That's the first thing. The second thing is encourage the international Partners of Syria, of the Syrian people like the United States, the Europeans, Turkey, some of the leading Arab states to continue a pressure policy against the Assad regime, because the Assad regime is so weak, so brittle, really, if it were under concerted pressure, political, economic in addition to the military pressure that it's already under from other directions, then I think you would have room to make some progress and look at how weak. The Syrian regime's economy is they are quite vulnerable. It's just that right now the pressure hasn't been maintained. So I want to see that pressure stepped up again because I think it was leading in the right direction sanctions, pressure, political isolation, accountability and justice pressure, all of those things. Those are the things that I would focus on.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Assad regime. Joel and Rania are using these drugs to poison the Arab countries, including the Gulf, also to Europe to fund their economies. And we don't see any pressure on this or even like the reports we have in ORSAM center, we publish the report. But I mean, this is this is like poison.

Joel Rayburn: It's huge. There needs to be more pressure. I think you're going to see now that the House of Representatives starting in January is going to be changing control in the United States Congress and I think going to see more action coming from the House of Representatives for legislation against Captagon trafficking by the Assad regime and Hezbollah. I think you'll see more, more action. But it's been slow in coming and it's frustratingly slow. Once it does come, I think it will have a big impact because Captagon. The Assad regime is taking in billions in revenue from Captagon. I believe

Captagon is the Assad regime's number one source of revenue. And I don't think they have an alternative to replace that stream of revenue if it's disrupted. So hopefully we can get more international action to disrupt that Captagon revenue and then bring the Assad regime back into a position where they're compelled to comply with the political process.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Hope so. Thank you.

Rania Kisar: Question for Dr. Uysal: What is the safe zone model that Turkey is promoting through the ground invasion in light of what happened in Afrin in the past weeks and the expansion of the HTS terrorist organization in Afrin? And in light of what Turkish investigations revealed about the terrorist infiltration that carried out the attack through the Afrin area, which is controlled by the Turkish army. That's for you, Dr. Ahmed.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Okay. Okay. I am trying to check the Afrin area. The Turkish main Free Syrian Army still active there. And, of course, the PKK had some ground in this area. Always try to provoke or kind of disrupt the regular flow of the social life. They were attacking again, the civilians and the bazaars and everything. And there were some maybe HTS incursions, but it is over now with some internal and some internal groups. They fought each other. I mean, it's kind of a symbolic for the PKK, always kind of use different sides, but I don't see it is left to the HTS. Thank you.

Rania Kisar: Okay. The second question is. In light of the repeated Turkish statements about the restoration of relations with the regime and the need to coordinate with Assad against the SDF. What is the role of Assad in the Turkish operation, and why does Turkey not adopt the same approach it takes with the regime, with the SDF? Given that Assad detonated a car bomb in Turkey and killed dozens of people. Sir. Dr. Ahmed.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Assad is a threat to the whole region, not to Turkey only and he's weakened and cannot do much. And now the PKK is attacking Turkey. So everybody has to worry about the urgent or emergent threat that's coming from the PKK. So fighting, the PKK is an urgency. And I mean, the deal with the Assad regime is overblown. Turkey said maybe we can meet him, but it doesn't mean that Turkey is going to accept him as a legitimate force. This is overblown, I don't think. There is this

serious possibility that Turkey sits down with Assad, with the Assad regime. We also know that the Assad regime doesn't have a real power. The sponsors have the real power. So Turkey is dealing with this sponsor more than the Assad regime and doesn't need to worry about the Assad regime as much. Thank you. But doesn't mean that he's not a threat to Syrian people. Thanks.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah, I think that's where here we get to the disconnect between Turkey's priorities and everybody else's priorities. I mean, certainly and it's fair for Dr. Ahmet earlier to say that the United States has not been very active on the counter Assad front lately. However, I mean, from my perspective, and this was true in the Trump administration, Bashar al-Assad is the number one problem in Syria. All the other problems, including the problem with Turkey's concerns of security along the border are made worse by Bashar al-Assad and his regime. So as I've been analyzing different issues in Syria, I always start from the position that the almost the entire situation, almost every crisis that goes on in Syria, its Assad himself who is the root cause. And I was disappointed to see Foreign Minister Cavusoglu and President Erdogan talking about, sure, we should we're open to engaging with Bashar al-Assad and at some point soon, because at the same time of such an aggressive, such a forward leaning, aggressive action against the YPG, because I think it sends the message that Turkey is willing to. Tamp down, withdraw, trade away its opposition to Assad, who again, I see as the fundamental problem in Syria in order to secure some tactical advantages concerning the YPG in the Turkish northeast. I mean, we just get back to the disconnect. I think that messaging fed the idea that there is a disconnect and that the Turkey, in fact, is willing the Turkish leadership is willing to trade away opposition to Assad in order to get some local military advantages concerning the YPG.

Rania Kisar: Doctor?

yes. I want to say that I mean, Turkey is more against the Assad the Assad regime than America. I don't I mean, with respect, of course, with all respect to what you say, but I don't see how Americans are worried about the Assad regime. They are you know, they are more worried about ISIS and their interests in the region and maybe on Russia. But I don't see they are trying to weaken him. If they do, they would maybe push for the constitutional committee to work and design, maybe get the timeline or something. But they are not pressuring the Assad regime. So I don't think Americans are prioritizing the Assad regime. Thanks.

Rania Kisar: Okay. We're going to take. We're already 6 minutes into the second hour. We're going to try to take Michelle. He speaks English. So he has a question. And if there's anyone that speaks English and would like to get an immediate answer, please raise your hand and I'll give you the mic. Go ahead, Michelle.

Hi. Good afternoon, Dr. Ahmad, my friend. Good morning. Maybe Mr. Joel in America. Actually, I heard your answer about the car of Daesh and I don't understand, but I can I can understand in Lebanon, when there's a car explodes and Hezbollah killed Rafik Hariri in few days they know the car was stolen from Japan and transport to Dubai, come to Beirut. And even the car was the biggest part of the car, one millimeter, one millimeter, and the biggest part of the car. After the explosion. I couldn't understand the really the CIA of America. They couldn't know Toyota selling 2000 car serial number. They don't know the American the intelligence of American. They don't know for which part, which human, which company is selling this Toyota, of course, the American know. Of course. Of course. We are not stupid, Mr. Joel. Of course. No, wait, wait a second, Rania, please. Please. And thank you for United States that the fighting ISIS in the north of Syria. I have a question. Why this only where is the American why they are not on Homs? Why not in Latakia? Why not in Daraa? Why not in Damascus? Why? Why, why? Why only in the small corner? And they called what you what you call the alliance of the international I don't know what the American Coalition. The 70 countries in the world and America is the head of this and they didn't finish ISIS from 12 years. Actually. ISIS don't have 150,000 prisoners in their jails.

Syrians are killed every day by Assad and America come to Turkey to protect us from ISIS and this I don't know. Ghost Dash,
Actually, I don't know what the Americans do in Syria. Actually, I hope they move soon out of our land because they are supporting Assad.
They are supporting Assad. The first country supporting Assad is The American.
Thank you.

Okay.

Go ahead, you say? Yeah. I mean, I'm sorry, but it's not correct. The United States is not supporting Assad. United States has done an awful lot against Assad. I think everything short of sending troops in against the Assad regime. And in fact, the United

States had two military campaigns against Bashar al Assad. I mean, they only lasted a few minutes in 2017 and 2018, but it was the first time the US government had bombarded the Syrian regime in history.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : In ten years, like two operations, we had more operations against Assad, then Turkey had more operations against the Assad regime then America then.

Joel Rayburn: Well, of course you're neighboring Assad and in my view you should have done more operations against Assad. I think if Assad were in Mexico then you probably would see the United States more active even than Turkey has been against the.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Yeah but you have huge presence in the Mediterranean in Iraq. You can hit them everywhere. We don't have these long range missiles.

Joel Rayburn: And that's what you want?

Rania Kisar: Dr. Uysal, If Turkey wanted to take out Assad, Turkey would have taken out Assad back in March of 2020. Turkey was already winning the battle. But yeah, okay. All right. I'll stay quiet.

Joel Rayburn: That was my sense.

Yes, exactly.

All right. Yeah. The CIA did not provision ISIS with Toyota trucks. Didn't happen.

Rania Kisar: Yes.

Mr. Joel: Sorry for a second. You have one journalist arrested by Assad. You couldn't make it free. How you can help the Syrian people, even you couldn't help the American people in Syria. How you can help the Syrian How? Tell me how. What do you do? You give some money for

No, no. I mean, look at what From the Caesar Act to political pressure to maintaining the US military posture in the Northeast to working with allies to try to coordinate

economic and political and military pressure against the Assad regime. That's what the United States that's what the United States can do.

Rania Kisar: Let's take a second question from Ahmed Address, president and founder of UFUK Company, a very prominent company that does websites and IT services. Go ahead, Mr. Mohammed.

Okay. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Dr. Rana. And thank you for everyone. Good evening. Actually, I have one question for the American administration, which is Mr. Rayburn, is part of it or was part of it. What about these sanctions now? Is it still in action, especially in the efforts of Jordan and Egypt and Israel, to remove the sanctions from the Assad regime, especially about which is about the pipelines toward Lebanon? That's my question. Thank you very much.

Joel Rayburn: The Caesar act, of course, it's still in law. It's still acted. I've been disappointed that the enforcement of the Caesar Act has not been more energetic over the last year and a half or so. I think with some of the new leaders of the House of Representatives you're going to see from January, some of them have been very active in supporting the Caesar Act. So I think maybe you'll see more demands from Congress that the Caesar Act be enforced more, more energetically. I think that that will come. As far as the pipeline goes, I think that pipeline idea is dead. I think you'll see Congress, key members of Congress oppose that idea. My own position, which I've said publicly, is I think that the pipeline concept, as it's been described, I think violates the Caesar Act, not just the spirit of the Caesar Act, but the letter of the Caesar Act. So I frankly, I don't think you're going to see that pipeline happ

It was a long day. But I mean, let's wrap it up. I mean, in a couple of minutes and I want to say that with Assad, Turkey was pushing, I mean, to weaken Assad, also to curtail Assad regime's to barrel bomb the Syrian people. They are still attacking with missiles and stuff. But Turkey disabled many of these barrel bombing capacity to Assad regime. But unfortunately, America and Russia agreed on against Turkey, unfortunately.

Joel Rayburn: Oh, not at all. Not at all. I was there.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Against the PKK? No. They were going to get out of Manbij and other areas. They didn't keep their promises also. So I wish I mean, then when Turkey realized that America is not going to do anything so that they forced them to sit with Russians, we didn't choose that.

Joel Rayburn: There are two sides of that story as well. I was involved in that as well. But that would take a separate discussion on another day.

Rania Kisar: Right. We do have a lot of questions. We're going to let Dr. Kilani ask his question very quickly and hopefully we'll be able to wrap up. And how about in just another 10 minutes, if that's okay? Dr.Uysal.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Sure. Sure.
Okay, great.Dr. Kilani, please hurry up.

Hello and good evening to everyone on this wonderful space that you have opened. And I may express that I am a journalist and I'm an investigative journalist under oath Of the Syrian people. I have followed several accounts to Bashar Assad and Rifaat Assad and have exposed Rifaat al-Assad money in Spain and France. And I also trace Bashar al-Assad in Granada, money in Granada, Moscow and other places. Now, if you are talking about the law that was imposed by Trump over the administration of Trump, I don't think it hurt the regime. I think it made him more determined to do his illegal stealing of the Syrian fortune. And I think everybody is participating in that, including what is the United States?

Rania Kisar: What is the question?

My question, why? Why we, the United States and Turkey do not agree upon removing Assad together with Russians as they agreed on dividing Syria invisibly without any borders till now? Thank you.

Okay, we're going to take Majda Mahfouz, hear her question, and we'll take Lemma here her question, and then we'll let Dr. Uysal and Mr. Rayburn answer. Go ahead, Magda. Hi Rania. Hi, everyone. I want to cheer for asking the questions that every one of us is afraid to ask. To asked it alone, even alone.

I just want to ask both of your guests. This time. Will they keep their promise? Will they protect the Syrian people or will start to be again and rejecting the promise to the Syrian people. I think it is clear that the US and NATO support Ukrainian peoples and they have a right as we all support the Ukrainian peoples but it's not the same in Syria. The question is are they able to give this promise to say to the Syrian peoples that they will protect Syrian peoples at any conditions and do whatever the situations change it. This is the question Thanks very much. Good evening. Thank you, Professor Ahmed. Thank you, Mr. RAEBURN. I want to ask Professor Ahmed, my question. Last September, the Turkish President and his minister expressed Ankara's desire to calm the game with Damascus and to turn the page of the World War and the fall of Bashar al Assad. This declaration had worried Syrian people and refugees. Exactly. What do you think that is possible?

Rania Kisar: I think they already discussed this earlier, but I'm sure they will touch on it again. Okay. I'm sorry. No, no, that's okay. That's fine. Okay. Dr. Uysal, I know that it's very late where you're at, and I don't want to keep you much longer, but if you can, please just take maybe two or 3 minutes to answer, and then we'll let Mr. Rayburn answer his questions. We will not take any more questions. And any mike requests? Go ahead, Doctor.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : Yes, thank you very much. And for me, this meeting with the Assad regime, I mean, they are more for the public consumption. I mean, of course they can if they need to. They can meet. But it doesn't mean this is going to be a solution. I mean, the UN and democratic solution is the real solution. But we don't see especially Western and American support for the Syrian people who paid the price. I mean, they toppled the Assad regime three times, actually, but every time it was about to fall, a foreign power or foreign force came Lebanon first and Iran then even ISIS helped the Assad regime. And then at the final end came Russia. And even Lavrov said that if we didn't intervene, the Assad regime was going to fall down. And unfortunately, our allies who were saying human rights and democracy for a long time, they did not show a real support, even if they like. The whole West is united against Russia right now. I mean, I of course, refuse the Russian invasion of Ukraine and sympathize with Ukrainians. And now, if 10% of the support was provided to Syrians, it would mean they would topple the Assad regime ten times, maybe easily. But this help didn't come. And these guys fought with their bare hands. I mean, they

didn't they were not even given the MANPADS and anti-tank tank weapons. So they suffered a lot. But we still sympathize with them. No sympathy with Assad's regime and their supporters. But of course, Turkey is not a superpower that can impact everything. We have to do a lot of bargaining and a lot of pressuring and stuff. But unfortunately, I mean, Syrian people paid the price and we paid the price. So that's my summary. Thank you very much.

Rania Kisar: Thank you, Dr. Uysal. Mr. Rayburn, would you like to wrap it up?

Joel Rayburn: Yes, sure. Dr. Ahmet said that President Erdogan's statements about meeting Assad and his statements about meeting Assad were, quote, for public consumption, unquote. But I think that's the problem, is that the public did consume those statements. And the public I think a lot of people got demoralized by the idea that Turkey might soften its position concerning Bashar al-Assad. I don't think that's real. I don't think it will happen because I think the Assad regime and Turkey have incompatible objectives. But I think the messaging part of it was very unfortunate. And I think there were many people disappointed. And I understand why. Ahmet is right that I think it's true. Had the Syrian people receive the same amount of support, same kind of support, even a fraction of it that the Ukrainians have received, then there would have been a complete change in the situation over the last 11 years. I agree with that 100%. One of the reasons that it didn't happen is because it was the Assad regime had a strategy of distracting trying to fracture the international coalition of pressure against it. And they succeeded in many ways in doing that. And there were many people, many different countries outside Syria began to have different priorities in Syria other than the Assad regime. It's true that a lot of the Western countries and others prioritized the threat over the danger of Bashar al-Assad, even though Bashar al-Assad's regime was fundamental to the to the emergence of the phenomenon of ISIS in the first place. And of course, Turkey prioritized from a fairly early stage the PKK issue over Assad. So I think Bashar al-Assad has always benefited from being not at the top of the priority list for all of the international players. And it's the Syrian people who have suffered as a result of that. Well, let's leave the discussion there. We could go on, on and on. I think that's all the time that we're going to be able to spend this evening, especially considering Dr. Ahmed's late hour. And he was very, very generous with his time. And we were glad to be able to do these questions. I think maybe Ahmad we should come back and do this again sometime and discuss as the situation continues to develop in

Syria. Obviously, it's these are these are questions that we need to take a lot of time to get to the bottom of. And also, I think if we can take down the questions, then maybe we can have maybe we can have a video session or another follow on Twitter space where we would take the questions, answer the questions that we didn't get time to answer tonight.

Dr. Ahmet Uysal : We do it maybe again in the future. And I think it was a useful discussion. But we need our allies to understand Turkey's concerns and we understand them. They have to understand us also. Thank you. I know, Joel, you understand that. But not all Americans or experts, want to listen. They have some arrogance. And, you know, it should be like one sided. Now it is two sided.

Joel Rayburn: I just I hope I hope all the all the allies involved in this situation can get back on the same page quickly, because I think it's the Syrian people who suffer most of all when we when we don't. But anyway, I appreciate everybody's attention.

I appreciate the questions. Rania, I appreciate you moderating and taking questions. Thanks to all those who supplied questions. And we'll try to do this again soon. And I wish you all the very best and I wish the very best for the situation in Syria. I would prefer to see this conflict end on all fronts, including the one on the Turkey-Syria border for the best. So I continue to hold out hope for that and try and we try to steer the conversation in Washington toward that end, if we if we can in our small way. Anyway. All right. Good night, everyone.

Thanks, everyone. And we'll repeat this maybe in the future.

Joel Rayburn: Yep. Thanks again Rania for good management and also being emotional about the Assad regime.

Rania Kisar: just before you go, Doctor Uysal as a Syrian now, it's not emotional as much the need to the message of the Syrian people. But just before you go sir, I want to ask you as a Syrian, because you know us very well. Please consider the well-being of all the Syrians and the futures that you want to have with Syria. And I'm sure that there are different ways of combating terrorism without launching a full-fledged military battle. But that is, again, a discussion for another time. Thank you.

Thank you, Doctor Uysal;. Thank you for giving me the chance.



Dr. Ahmet Uysal : I Defended The Syrian case. I paid the price for this. I was they were lynching me, an Internet, defending Syrian rights. And, you know, their suffering. So we wish the best hope that this will be over soon.

All right.My Salama, everyone.

