

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-1304

February 23, 2018

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write to urge immediate attention to the catastrophic humanitarian crisis unfolding under the barbaric Syrian government bombing of the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta. The massive attack led by Syrian President Assad's forces is considered one of the most violent in the country's seven-year war, with horrific civilian casualties -- many of them children -- in what United Nations human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein called a "monstrous campaign of annihilation." You previously argued that "heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the last administration's weakness and irresolution" and then called on "all civilized nations" to help end the "slaughter and bloodshed in Syria" when you launched a missile strike on that nation last year. As such, I request that you follow through on your words -- including putting genuine pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin to rein in his client-state proxy Assad and end Russian obfuscation in the UN Security Council as these likely war crimes mount.

For six days, Syrian government warplanes supported by Russia have relentlessly bombarded the eastern Damascus suburbs. According to local physicians and monitoring groups, the killing of at least 32 people on Friday brings the death toll from the past several days to more than 400. The number of casualties has overwhelmed rescuers and hospitals, 26 of which have also been bombed (a particularly heinous tactic of the Assad regime). As the bombing continues, doctors in the area describe a health care system pushed to its breaking point, with medical staff forced to prioritize resources and leave grievously wounded patients to die. A doctor in eastern Ghouta reported, "We have a horrible situation here. We're being targeted with all kinds of weapons nonstop. We lack everything, water, food, medical supplies, shelter. This is a disaster. Everyone is waiting to die." UN Secretary General António Guterres called eastern Ghouta a "hell on Earth."

A UN Security Council resolution calling for a 30-day ceasefire across Syria to deliver humanitarian aid to millions and evacuate the critically ill and wounded offers a possibility for relief. Unfortunately, Russia is blocking this effort and cynically wants to delay any ceasefire. French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel already sent a letter on Friday to President Putin asking for a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta. I urge you to similarly demand that Russia end this senseless bombing of innocent civilians and allow medical and humanitarian relief to reach the area's victims. Any such discussion with Putin must also address deeply troubling -- and seemingly ignored -- reports that Russian mercenaries controlled

by Yevgeny Prigozhin (who was recently indicted on charges of running a troll factory targeting American voters) attacked US Special Operations Forces in Syria with approval of the highest levels of the Kremlin.

Despite the important achievement made by our military in destroying ISIS in Syria (and Iraq), Syria will remain a monumental security, humanitarian, and governance challenge for the United States and its allies, including Israel, for years to come. Iranian and Russian proxies are all vying for the spoils of the civil war, with civilians paying the highest price. As such, the United States must continue to work with world powers to help contain the Syrian upheaval and minimize human suffering.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator