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Special Representative for Syria Engagement Jeffrey in Interview with RIA Novosti and Kommersant

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement

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RIA Novosti: Yesterday the U.S. announced new sanctions against Iran and Russia for oil shipments to Syria and issued a warning about significant risk of sanctions for those who will engage in such activity in the future. So what are the criteria for imposing future sanctions and do you believe that imposing sanctions will reanimate the political process?

Ambassador Jeffrey: To answer the last, yes we hope so, and that's one of the reasons we're doing it. Of course all sanctions that we impose on Iran have a specific Iran pressure component because of our extreme concern about Iran's activities in the region. But these sanctions also are focused on Iran working to help Syria out. And we believe that we need to see the political process move forward, we need to see a de-escalation of the fighting in Syria. This has been a terrible conflict that has pulled in many outside powers, including Russia and the United States. It's killed half a million people. And we'll use sanctions, we'll use denial of reconstruction aid, we'll use diplomatic resources — anything we can to try to end this conflict and restore Syria to its people.

Kommersant: First, thank you for doing this, Ambassador. A quick follow-up on sanctions policy, because late yesterday night a member of the Russian Senate said Russia will continue to sell its oil to any partner it wants to despite the sanctions. Do you see that sanctions policy as it is now is working. and are you willing to adjust the sanction policy anyhow?

Amb. Jeffrey: We believe that generally sanctions do have an effect on political decision-making. But it is a long-term and necessarily indirect effect. Obviously Russian businesses can make whatever business decisions they make, just like Volkswagen, for example, makes decisions involving its operations in Iran based upon American sanctions. American sanctions are something that doesn't just involve Russians. There are American sanctions, for example, on Iran that impact any business entity from wherever in the world it does business with Iran. With these particular sanctions, they're targeted primarily on Iran, oil deals, and Syria.

RIA: Earlier you said that the U.S. is trying to persuade Russia that the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria is necessary. So yesterday there was reporting by Axios saying that Russia proposed to ease some Iranian sanctions in return for the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov said that this was not like that, but anyways – what is on the table? What are you discussing with Russia? Is this option being discussed now? What would suit you?

Amb Jeffrey: First of all, we don't get into our specific discussions with the Israelis, with the Russians, or with anyone else in detail about questions related to Syria or any other issue for that matter. I will say that we do urge the Russians to use whatever influence they have with the Syrian government and with the Iranians (because after all the three are together fighting in Syria) to effect the removal of all Iranian commanded forces from the entirety of Syria as part of a solution that would have all foreign forces other than the Russians leave and return to 2011. That we think is reasonable, so we've talked to the Russians about it. Now, what that will require – that's another question. Certainly, were the idea of a trade of Iranian withdrawal for American relief on sanctions on Iran to come up, that's something that under no circumstances would we accept. This is mixing – it isn't even apples and oranges, it's mixing carrots and apples, because they are totally different things. Our sanctions on Iran are related to the nuclear file and our disappointment with Iran's performance around the region. It's not Syria-specific.

Kommersant: If I may ask on the delivery of Russian anti-aircraft systems, the S-300, in Syria – Russia did say many times that it will seriously minimize or limit Israeli abilities to conduct airstrikes in Syria. Would you actually engage in any kind of conversation with Moscow to minimize the threat for the Israeli forces? Have you been involved in these negotiations?

Amb Jeffrey: Again, we do not go into details about what we discuss with our Russian colleagues on Syria. I can only say that we discuss the question of Syria very, very frequently at all levels with Russian officials. Now, concerning the S-300: As we have said before, we see this as a dangerous escalation. And we think that it's a tragedy that – one tragedy, which was the loss of a Russian aircraft and I believe 15

lives, due to mistaken military action on the part of the Syrian military – it leads to giving the Syrian military a greater capability to make mistakes like this in future. So therefore we would urge the Russians to be very careful with this. Concerning Israel: We understand why Israel feels itself existentially threatened by Iranian long-range systems in Syria. And we support fully Israel's efforts to protect its national security.

RIA: So far there are no formalized negotiations between Russian and American diplomats on Syria like we have for instance on Ukraine with Surkov and Volker. In the eyes of the American government, what would such full-fledged cooperation look like and is the U.S. interested in establishing such a permanent channel of communication?

Amb. Jeffrey: You're asking to some degree two separate questions: a question on modalities or mechanisms and a question on cooperation or progress. In terms of the modalities and the mechanisms, we are absolutely certain that we have an effective set of means to exchange views at any time on a whole variety of levels with our Russian colleagues on Syria. As a mechanism, our contacts with the Russians on Syria work very, very well and we see no need to change it. Now, are we producing results? Slower than we would have hoped. But that's not because we don't have the right mechanism, it's because nations have different objectives. Nations have to negotiate. It's a question of time and other things. But that's one thing we tell our Russian colleagues all the time and through you we'll tell the Russian people: we need to move more quickly to end this very dangerous conflict. It's dangerous to everybody: It's dangerous to Russian troops, it's dangerous to American troops, it's dangerous to Israelis, it's dangerous to Syrians, it's even dangerous to Iranians – it's dangerous to everybody there.

Kommersant: Moscow has voiced the concern many times that the American presence on the Eastern side of the Euphrates River and potential Western investment in rebuilding that region can potentially lead to the collapse and separation of Syria. Do you see such a possibility? Do you see Syria's future as a divided country?

Amb. Jeffrey: The United States has supported the territorial integrity of Syria at every point in this conflict and before, and we will continue to do so. The presence of American forces carrying out anti-terrorist operations does not indicate any desire to break apart a country. Two quick examples: The United States provide air support – a no fly zone – over northern Iraq for some 12 years from 1991 to 2003. That did not lead to the break-up of Iraq. The United States had over 100,000 forces in Iraq from 2003 to eventually the withdrawal in 2011. That did not lead to any territorial changes in Iraq either. and the same is true in Syria. The presence of those forces has nothing to

do with our position on the territorial integrity of Syria.

RIA: Next question is about Staffan de Mistura's work. So he is about to quit. Could you please assess the results achieved by de Mistura? And a related question is: have you already set up good relations with the next UN envoy for Syria? And what are your expectations for his work? How different will his approach be compared to de Mistura's?

Amb. Jeffrey: Well, we will see. Our hope is that first of all we have good relations. The U.S. has had good relations for years with Geir Pedersen. We welcomed his appointment and we believe that he is going to be able to build on the success of Mr. de Mistura. Which success? The success that we saw at the Istanbul summit when President Putin joined President Macron, President Erdogan, and Chancellor Merkel in committing to the standing up of the Constitutional Committee in December. That is a commitment of the Russian Federation as well as of three other important European states. So thus we think that Staffan de Mistura has achieved a great deal – unless of course there is a problem with that commitment. But we are doing our best to ensure that this commitment is carried out in the weeks ahead.

RIA: And how different do you think the new envoy's approach should be to resolve the conflict?

Amb Jeffrey: Well, we believe that, assuming those leaders were sincere in making this commitment – and these leaders can do this, it is not something the Syrian government can hold a veto over, that's clear from UN Resolution 2254 – we think that this will happen and that Mr. Pedersen's mission will be to build on that Constitutional Committee, shepherd it's work forward, and prepare the way for the elections also called for in the UN resolution. Now, if we are terribly disappointed and the Constitutional Committees is not stood up, then I think the UN – and I was just up there at the Security Council meeting on Monday, we met with Secretary General Guterres, he'll speak for himself – but the United States certainly, and I think many of those countries that are closely aligned with us – will expect a very different and much more central role played by the UN in fixing this crisis if the efforts by Mr. de Mistura to work with the Russians, to work with the Iranians, to work with the Turks, and to work to some degree with the Syrian government proves to be not successful.

Kommersant: Ambassador, I have to ask you about the [inaudible] the firefight between the U.S. and Russian forces in February of this year in Deir ez-Zor, where allegedly many Russian mercenaries have been killed. U.S. officials provided different numbers, including the President and the Secretary of State. The numbers were up to 200 casualties. Can I ask you for some details on that firefight? Did it

actually happen and how many casualties were recorded?

Amb Jeffrey: We don't comment on specific military actions of that nature. U.S. forces are legitimately in Syria, supporting local forces in the fight against Da'esh and as appropriate – and this has occurred about a dozen times in one or another place in Syria – they exercise the right of self-defense when they feel threatened. That's all we say on that.

Kommersant: Just one quick follow-up: You say a dozen times – were there any other engagements with the Russians?

Amb Jeffrey: As I said there have been various engagements, some involving exchange of fire, some not. Again, we are continuing our mission there and we are continuing to exercise our right of self-defense.

RIA: We are also wondering now what is the U.S. strategy towards Bashar Asad? Do you consider him as a legitimate leader who can represent his country at the UN-led political process? And if he takes part in future elections and if he is elected, would you treat him as a legitimate leader?

Amb Jeffrey: We consider him a disgrace to mankind. He is a brutal war criminal – probably the biggest and most brutal war criminal in the world today. Nonetheless – and America will never have good relations with Bashar al-Asad – nonetheless, we are committed to a political process that is with and by the Syrian people. The Syrian people get to decide who will lead them and what kind of a government they will have. We are not committed to any kind of regime change. We are committed to a change in the behavior of that regime – first towards its own citizens, then towards its neighbors, then towards the international community, be it the use of chemical weapons, be it the use of torture, be it the extraordinary threats to the region it has created by bringing in the Iranians, by unleashing, even if indirectly, the scourge of Da'esh on the region and into Europe, and the flow of millions of refugees that has burdened Europe and Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. There is a long list of things we do not accept or like about that government that will have to change if there is to be a real peace and a real reconciliation with the international community. But that's not specific to Asad.

Kommersant: A real quick question, because of mutual accusations on both sides, for example Russia and Damascus have repeatedly accused the U.S. of using phosphorus bombs in Syria. Is there any truth to this claim? Is there any evidence that the U.S. or its allies in the region have used phosphorus bombs or any other prohibited weapons?

Amb Jeffrey: First of all, we have denied that specific claim. Secondly, the U.S. conducts its military operations consistent with the appropriate and relevant international law.

RIA: Next question is about the Rukban refugee camp. There is a pretty complicated situation there. The Russian military says there are about 6,000 fighters there which would not allow humanitarian access. The first convoy was already there and the next is being prepared as far as we understand. Could you please tell about the U.S. vision of the resolution of the situation in Rukban and about the second convoy with the humanitarian help? Will it be delivered the same way as the previous one was? Are negotiations ongoing?

Amb Jeffrey: First of all, one area of close and very productive cooperation between us and Russia has been the delivery of aid in Rukban. This has involved coordination and de-confliction between the U.S. and Russian militaries. It involved coordination at the political level by my colleagues and myself. It involved work with the UN, with the Syrian Red Crescent and with our local security partners in the al-Tanf region, with Syrian opposition faces, and of course with the people of Rukban. We hope that this cooperation will continue. We're very much looking forward to the second convoy occurring just as smoothly as the first. We have heard the accusations of terrorists in the al-Tanf region. We do not see any 6,000, and remember we are on the ground there with American troops. And these troops are there to make sure that the region is not overrun by al-Qaeda or other terrorists, and we have been very successful. We will continue being successful. And the success of this UN convoy without any actual threat, no shots fired is a good example of not only how we work effectively with our Russian colleagues but also of how relatively safe the region is.

Kommersant: Last one. At the end of November there will be another meeting in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Is the U.S. planning to participate anyhow in the Astana format and do you see these talks as beneficial to the future of Syria or not?

Amb. Jeffrey: We're not planning on participating. We have an open mind as to whether the Astana talks can be productive or not. The United States does not participate in every initiative related to Syria that has been productive. For example we very much welcomed the Istanbul summit at the end of last month with the Russian president and his French, German, and Turkish colleagues. And if Astana can be as productive as the Istanbul summit then we'll be pleased.

Kommersant: Will Astana bring any results at all?

Amb Jeffrey: If it brings results that serve the needs of the Syrian people and international security in the region absolutely we'll be pleased and we will work with the results of it.

RIA: We are expecting a meeting between President Trump and President Putin during the G20 summit. Will the Syria issue be on the agenda of this meeting? And are you preparing from your side any proposals? Can we expect anything from this meeting on Syria?

Amb. Jeffrey: Well first of all there is no official confirmation that the meeting will happen. Were a meeting to happen, if you look at the experience of past meetings between President Trump and President Putin, Syria plays a very, very important role. Syria is very much on the mind of President Trump. He spent a great deal of time in New York at the UN talking about Syria. Those were his words – to de-escalate the conflict and revitalize the political process. That is his policy. He will talk about that length with anyone willing to talk with him. So we'll have to see if there is a meeting.

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