



[Why U.S. Congress Members Visit Rebel-Held Syria](#)

By Loretta Wolchko

This week saw the first U.S. delegation visit to a war-torn Syria in six years. The last visit was led by Sen. John McCain in 2017 to meet with opposition fighters in support of increasing U.S. aid to the opposition. This most recent delegation included Republican Congressmen Ben Cline, Scott Fitzgerald, and French Hill. The Congressmen were welcomed by orphans who live at Wisdom House, a school for orphans started as part of the U.S.-backed Syrian Emergency Task Force which facilitated the delegation. Community members in Hill's home state of Arkansas have been some of the leading donors to Wisdom House and the Wisdom House Project, based in Little Rock.

As Syria enters its twelfth year of civil war, having claimed over six hundred thousand lives and displaced millions thus far, the nation is no closer to resolution. The trip comes at a volatile time for the stability of Syria as the war continues with issues arising all over the country, under both the Syrian government and the opposition. Last week, protesters in the government-held regions of the country gathered in opposition to President Bashar Al-Assad's regime and poor living conditions. The U.S. has received criticism for its inaction towards Assad in recent years. Congressman Hill in particular has been outwardly critical of the Biden administration and the lack of action being taken against Assad, his corruption, and crimes against his people. This recent visit was likely a calculated move to call more attention to the situation in Syria and call out Biden's inaction. The Congressmen visited a zone in the northwestern part of the country which has been under the control of rebel forces. The arrival of the Congressmen comes less than two weeks following U.S.-imposed sanctions on three leaders of the Syrian National Army (SNA), formerly the Free Syrian Army, in northern Syria. The U.S. Department of Treasury imposed the sanctions due to reports of the commanders in question allegedly committing human rights violations against residents in the area. The use of sanctions against places the U.S. has determined to be state sponsors of terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but for the most part, has been an ineffective strategy.

The SNA is backed by Turkey. These sanctions were intended to serve as a message to Turkey to rethink its current strategy in how it governs the territory. Turkey has recently been turning away refugees looking to flee and deporting those who escaped the warzone that was once their home. It is unlikely that sanctions will persuade Turkey or any parties in Syria to alter their policies. There has been little change. The people of Syria are still subject to immense suffering and cruelty at the hands of its government. There are also certain groups in rebel-held areas that have allegedly violated international human rights law.

The reactions from the people of Syria to the U.S. visit were mixed. The orphans and teachers who greeted the Congressmen welcomed the group with flowers and hugs, saying it was an honor for the group to come visit. Not far from the country's border with Turkey resides families who have been displaced by the recent earthquakes. Neither the families staying at the camps nor those volunteering their time to manage the camp were aware of the

delegation until after they were gone. They did not seem to care much about the visit upon learning about it. The trip was not publicly announced due to safety concerns, but the indifference of those in the makeshift camps still shows the skepticism surrounding what change will come now that the U.S. has finally set foot in Syria once again. It seems that many of these communities have this same doubt.

The U.S. is constrained in how much action it can take in regard to the Assad regime as well as the maltreatment of those in the rebel-held territory. French Hill has actively voiced his thoughts on how imperative it is that the Biden administration and other nations continue humanitarian support for Syrians. A new law called the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023 aims to hold Assad and his allies accountable and deter normalization. This bill shows that Congress will continue to pressure Biden and future presidents to uphold the sanctions against the Assad regime. However, without the U.S. dismantling the Assad regime itself and assigning a provisional government, it is unclear just how far the U.S.'s efforts can go. It is the hope of many that this visit and the introduction of new bills targeting Assad will begin a domino effect dismantling the dictatorship, but this still remains unlikely.