The Honorable John Cornyn  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510  

Dear Senator Cornyn:

Thank you for your letter expressing concern with the Department of Defense’s procurement of Russian Mi-17 helicopters for Afghanistan through Russia’s state arms exporter, Rosoboronexport.

I share your concern that Rosoboronexport continues to supply weapons and ammunition to the Assad regime and acknowledge there is evidence that some of these arms are being used by Syrian forces against Syria’s civilian population. We have continuously registered and will continue to register our objections with Russia at all levels and at every opportunity.

However, the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan identified an operational requirement, which was validated by the Commander, U.S. Central Command, for the acquisition of Mi-17 helicopters for the Afghanistan Air Force (AAF). The decision to continue to procure the Mi-17 in support of AAF requirements was made after considering its proven operational capabilities in the extreme environments of Afghanistan. Another important factor of the Mi-17 is its low technical complexity compared to other platforms, making it easier for AAF members to maintain and operate while being supportable within the limitations of the education system in Afghanistan. A change now to add additional aircraft types to the fleet would complicate the maintenance, sustainment, and supply systems required to support the fleet. The Department of Defense estimates that introducing a new helicopter to the AAF fleet would require an additional two years of complete and full scale (maintenance, sustainment, basic and advanced pilot training, logistics, etc) U.S. assistance to Afghanistan.

Rosoboronexport is the sole entity controlling export of military use Mi-17 helicopters. The U.S. Army entered into a contract to procure 21 Mi-17 helicopters directly through Rosoboronexport. To date, nine have been delivered, six are complete awaiting shipment, and the remaining six will be ready for delivery by the end of May. The Department also exercised an option for two additional aircraft and has a requirement from the NATO Aviation Training Command-Afghanistan for an additional ten aircraft. Once this option is exercised, the contract will be complete. Since Mi-17 aircraft have fixed flight hour life limits that cannot be extended, sustained support to Afghanistan may require replacements for the oldest Afghan Mi-17s.

The United States directly purchases Mi-17s through Rosoboronexport, which has reduced the risk of acquiring counterfeit aircraft and spare parts and has given us unprecedented access to the original equipment manufacturer’s technical data that we would have not otherwise received. This ensures the safe operation and airworthiness of these aircraft, which are routinely flown by U.S. aircrews mentoring the AAF crews. Options for procuring used Mi-17 aircraft on
the secondary market do exist, but new Mi-17 helicopters are only manufactured in Russia. In addition, these aircraft are delivered in a full military mission-ready configuration, including spare parts and a one-year warranty.

The Mi-17 acquisition effort is critical to building the capacity of the Afghanistan Security Forces, and supports the President’s continuing efforts to build improved relations with Russia. This in no way excuses Rosoboronexport of its activities with Syria, but our acquisition of these Mi-17 helicopters is a key part of our on-going strategy to hand over the security of Afghanistan to the Afghan people.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

James N. Miller
Acting

cc:
The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510