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“Iran and Syria: Next Steps”

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Madame Chairman,

Madame Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee to discuss U.S. policy toward two critical states in the Middle East—Iran and Syria. It is appropriate that the committee address U.S. policy toward these states together because—as the principal poles of the region’s anti-West, anti-American, anti-peace axis—there is an organic linkage between them.

The Urgency and Opportunity of Change in Syria

Four months ago, I had the privilege of testifying to this committee when the hope and optimism of the potential for democratic change in the region was at its height. Now that we have seen what reactionary forces in the region can do in an effort to snuff out the will of the people, using the most repressive and inhuman tactics, I come before you today with the region in a more sober and somber mood. However, it is important to note that we are still witnessing the early days of the vast tectonic shift that is underway in the Middle East. While we need to be vigilant about who we embrace in the march of change sweeping the region and be appropriately cautious to prevent new authoritarians from reaping the benefit from the fall of the old ones, we should not be so frightened of the possibility of change that we fail to see the enormous opportunities that change can bring.

Nowhere is this more the case than with Syria. While the U.S. military is engaged in an important *humanitarian* mission in Libya, the Middle East’s real *strategic* drama is being played out in Syria. At stake is not just whether millions of Syrians will finally find freedom and liberty after four decades of dictatorial rule by the Asad family—though that is surely a critical component of the Syrian story. And at stake is more than the survival of a regime that has been a consistent source of tension, threat, and challenge to U.S. interests on numerous fronts for nearly all of the Asad family’s decades of control—though that too is a key aspect of U.S. concern for the fate of the country. Rather, at stake is the opportunity to strike a painful, perhaps decisive blow to the axis of anti-peace, anti-Western, anti-American regimes that is headquartered in Tehran, runs through Damascus, then on to Beirut and Gaza, and has aspirations to extend its reach to Baghdad, the Gulf, and beyond.

Syria is the weak link in this axis. Ethnically, religiously, and ideologically, its secular Alawite Baathist leadership is the outlier in an otherwise Shi’ite-led, radical Islamist coalition. Despite the odd pairing of Baathist Syria and Islamist Iran, the Damascus-Tehran connection has proven to be the most resilient and enduring political alliance in the modern Middle East. Breaking that alliance, and thereby severing a critical link in the Tehran-to-Beirut-to-Gaza chain that is vying with America and its friends and allies for regional influence and domination, would be a strategic achievement of immense proportions.

Given this strategic objective, Syria stands out as a case in which U.S. interests and U.S. values complement, not collide with, each other. In contrast with Egypt, for example, where America's commitment to democratic change may have been tempered by regret at the demise of a long-time partner in the Middle East peace process and a helpful player in the regional fight against terrorism, there should be no cause for regret or hesitance in pursuing change in Syria. U.S. interests vis-à-vis Syria are clear—America will benefit from the demise of the Asad regime. No successor regime will be as committed as the Asad regime has shown itself to be to implementing a broad range of destabilizing and dangerous policies, from pursuing a clandestine and illegal nuclear weapons program, to arming and supporting radical Islamist militias in Lebanon and in the Palestinian arena, to facilitating attacks on U.S. troops via foreign fighters in Iraq. And while the United States should work with its friends and allies to do everything possible to ensure the emergence of a successor regime that is pluralistic, representative, democratic and mindful of minority rights, the emergence of a new regime that falls short of that objective—a distinct possibility, I regret to note—will still constitute a substantial blow to our strategic adversaries in the region and will therefore serve U.S. interests. Indeed, the argument that Asad represents "the devil we know" has lost purchase—not only among many American strategists but among European, Arab, Israeli, and Turkish leaders and strategists as well. (Indeed, the mood shift in Turkey against the Asad regime is especially significant and should be viewed as even more important in the Syria context than was the Arab League's endorsement of international action against Libya.) Now is the moment to capitalize on this strategic convergence, take steps that hasten the demise of the Asad regime, and invest wisely in the potential for the emergence of successor leaders in Syria who share our interests in regional peace and security.

President Obama has been laudably supportive of the Syrian people's thirst for change, and the administration has taken some important steps to hasten that process. Sanctions that specifically target Bashar al-Asad and his close circle of political, military, and economic cronies have been powerful both substantively and symbolically. Condemnation by the Human Rights Council has had an important emotive impact in tightening the noose of legitimacy around Asad's neck. And sanctioning Iranian governmental entities that have played a role in the repression inside Syria has been especially helpful because it shines a spotlight on the true nature of the Iranian-Syrian alliance, i.e., a friendship based on Iran teaching Syria the lessons from its own violent and brutal crackdown on democracy protests in 2009, from how to control the flow of information to how most efficiently to round up opposition leaders and torture them. All these measures to further the isolation of Asad's regime have been useful and positive.

At the same time, however, U.S. efforts to hasten change in Syria have appeared to many in the region to be tentative, hesitant, and overly cautious. Compared to the lightning speed with which U.S. policy toward the Mubarak regime evolved—from "stable" ally to "the transition must begin now" to "now means now," all in less than two weeks—the pace of U.S. policy toward Syria has appeared to be in slow motion. The argument that U.S. efforts cannot outpace the leverage Washington wields—and in an adversarial state like Syria we certainly wield far less influence than in an allied state like Egypt—is serious and deserves scrutiny. But in the final analysis, the United States will suffer greater damage to its regional interests if it permits a chasm to open

between its public posture on Syria and the tide of popular opinion inside Syria and across the region that America professes to support. In other words, “leading from behind” on an issue of such strategic importance as Syria is not leading at all.

In this, I reject the arguments of some observers of the Syrian political scene that the Syrian people are split on their attitude toward the Asad regime, that a sizable percentage—perhaps even a majority—are still “on the fence,” and that it would be hasty to conclude that “the Syrian people” actually want change. To the contrary, I believe that the Syrian people have displayed at least as much disgust with their leaders as did the people of Egypt and Tunisia, as evidenced by the large numbers of Syrians who have joined protests in numerous cities throughout the country, with the only exceptions being central Damascus and Aleppo, and have shown remarkable courage in braving merciless repression in the form of arbitrary arrests, heinous torture, and mass killings—a situation faced by neither the protestors in Egypt nor those in Tunisia. In other words, I believe we can state with certainty and clear conscience that the Syrian people have spoken with as much clarity and determination as is humanly possible in one of the world’s most controlled and repressive states; it is time for the United States to speak—and act—with similar clarity and determination.

Despite the fact that Syria is a long-time adversarial state over which U.S. influence is much more limited than it is with our authoritarian allies, America’s ability to affect the situation via unilateral and multilateral means is not inconsequential, especially given the political isolation and economic weakness of the Asad regime. Specifically, I believe Washington should consider action on the following fronts¹:

- **Raise the level of our bilateral consultations with key regional players**—Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel—on their assessment of the Syrian situation and their individual, joint, and collective contributions to assist the Syrian people.
- **Create an international contact group on Syria** that underscores the intense concern and interest among important regional players for the fate of the Syrian people. The purpose is both political (to highlight the deepening isolation of the Asad regime) and operational (to organize refugee support, supply of humanitarian goods to besieged areas, etc.).
- **Consider the establishment of "humanitarian relief zones"** in specified areas along Syria's borders with its neighbors. In addition to providing a supply of goods and relief to refugees and, perhaps, to embattled communities inside the country, such zones would underscore the idea that the international community recognizes that change in Syria began on the periphery and is inexorably moving toward the center of the country, as evidenced by the rising tide of protest in virtually every major urban area, including the key cities of Homs, Hama, and the suburbs and environs of even Damascus and Aleppo.

¹ For many of these suggestions, I draw on the fine work of my Washington Institute colleagues David Schenker and Andrew Tabler (see “In Search of Leverage with Syria,” PolicyWatch no. 1815, June 14, 2011, <http://washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3368>), as well as the collected wisdom of other members of the Institute’s senior research staff.

- **Raise the level of U.S. dialogue with the transitional leadership of the Syrian opposition and find ways to provide the opposition with funds, training, materiel, and support** so they can begin to play a more effective role. Assist them in working with regional players and the Syria Contact Group. Help them take the lead in delivering goods and services to refugees and to operate within the proposed “relief zones.”
- **Engage more deliberately and comprehensively with Syrian expatriate communities,** which provide potential sources of information about the situation in Syria and platforms for communicating with Syrians inside the country.
- **Tighten the economic noose by targeting Syrian energy.** Syrian oil production has been in steady decline since the mid-1990s and is now around 390,000 barrels per day. Of that, Syria exports around 148,000 bpd, with revenues accruing directly to the state. According to various U.S. estimates, oil sales account for about a third of state revenue. Accordingly, the Obama administration should prod the chief buyers of Syrian oil—Germany, Italy, France, and Holland—to stop purchasing the regime's heavy crude. It should also pressure multinational energy companies operating in Syria—Royal Dutch Shell, Total, Croatia's INA Nafta, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), Canada's Tanganyika, SUNCOR, and Petro-Canada, and China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinochem—to leave the country. In addition, it should ask Britain to halt the operations of Gulfsands Petroleum, the one-time Houston-based company specializing in extracting heavy oil from depleted fields. The firm relocated to Britain in 2008 to avoid U.S. sanctions on Rami Makhoul, Asad's cousin and the regime's primary businessman.
- **Expand the targeted sanctions on businessmen who prop up the regime.** Elite defections could play a key role in pressuring the regime to either cut a deal with the country's Sunni majority or leave power. To date, the most effective U.S. sanction levied against Syria has been the Rami Makhoul designation. Along those lines, Washington should impose costs on other Syrian businesspeople who continue to back the regime.
- **Pursue additional unilateral sanctions.** Washington should add to its robust and growing set of measures against the regime by considering a U.S. investment ban based on the Syria Accountability Act. The EU is also investigating tougher trade restrictions, though multilateral sanctions via the UN are unlikely at this point. To further ratchet up pressure, Washington should urge Syria's leading trade partner, Turkey, to adopt trade sanctions (excluding food and medicine, as the United States does). It should also press Gulf states—particularly Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia—to curtail their business investments in Syria, which have been a lifeline for the cash-strapped Asad regime in recent years.
- **Seek UN appointment of a special human rights rapporteur on Syria.** Washington should press the UN Human Rights Council to designate a special rapporteur on Syria. To date, the Asad regime has failed to cooperate with the council. The mere discussion of a rapporteur would serve as a point of annoyance for Damascus and keep human rights

issues in the spotlight. Given the heinous atrocities underway, it would be difficult (or at least both embarrassing and clarifying) for China and Russia to prevent this step.

- **Ratchet up pressure on weapons of mass destruction issues.** Washington should further tighten the isolation of Syria by pressing for referral of Syria's massive NPT violations (e.g., its undisclosed nuclear program) for action by the UN Security Council. In addition, the United States should organize international consultations to discuss the fate of Syria's chemical and biological weapons stockpile in the event of deepening uncertainty about the fate of the regime. Even some of Syria's political sympathizers, such as Russia and China, have an interest in ensuring the safety of Syria's WMD stockpile to ensure it does not fall into even more nefarious hands than the ones in control of it now.
- **Use the bully pulpit to agitate for change.** Beyond this litany of measures, I believe the time has come for the president himself to adopt a clearer position on the urgency of political change in Syria. Last month, the president's formulation was that Assad needs to either reform or "get out of the way." There is now ample evidence that there will be no real reform coming from Damascus—only sham reform (if you will excuse the pun: "Sham" is an Arabic term for "Damascus.")

I recognize the logic that drives the administration's reluctance to state publicly that Assad has lost the legitimacy to govern and should therefore step aside. Such a statement will certainly invite questions about what the administration is doing to bring about that objective, including questions about whether (and when) the administration will deploy force to bring about change, as has been the case with Libya.

However, the reluctance to face tough questions and the fear of appearing inconsistent should not prevent the administration from doing the right and smart thing. To the contrary, the lengthy list of non-military actions cited above underscores the fact that there is a lot for the United States to do to hasten the demise of the Assad regime without the resort to military force. Somewhere, sometime, the administration is going to have to say that it cannot fight wars everywhere—people are themselves fighting for democracy, but that fact should not itself constrain us from siding with those people and offering them all the nonmilitary help and support that we can summon. This is another reason why Syria should be viewed as an opportunity, not a confounding problem—it provides an outlet for the president to place our support for democratic change within a well-defined strategic framework and to explain the contributions we will make to support change in Syria in that strategic context. So far, that strategic context is sorely missing from the administration's explication of policy toward change in the Middle East.

From Syria to Iran

As noted above, hastening the demise of the Assad regime both celebrates American values and advances American interests. In terms of the latter, it is important to recognize that Syria is a critical front in one of the two great competitions that define the Middle East today—the challenge from Shiite Islamist supremacist ideology, led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the

challenge of Sunni Islamist supremacist ideology, led by al-Qaeda. Thankfully, al-Qaeda is on the decline, due to a combination of its own vacuous ideology, its operational overreach, U.S. and allied countermeasures, and the ideological alternative millions of Arabs and Muslims have decided to embrace—democratic change. While it remains a potent force, still capable of wreaking havoc in the American homeland and around the world, its potency as an alternative pole of influence and ideological attraction is dissipating. Iran, however, still retains hegemonic designs, still sees American power in the region waning, and still has its sights on expanding its influence in the Arab East, the Gulf, the Levant, and elsewhere.

As outlined above, winning the Syria battleground in the great regional confrontation with Iran would be a major strategic achievement. But Syria is not the only arena in which the United States should “up its game” in countering Iranian ambitions. A more comprehensive approach is needed.

First, it is important to recognize that the tumultuous events of the last several months have had the effect of limiting our attention span for Iran and dulling our collective anxieties about the Iranian threat. There has simply been so much to attract our attention in Arab countries—Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, etc.—that there have not been enough hours in the day for senior officials to devote what is necessary to Iran. To the administration’s credit, it has undertaken some noteworthy efforts to remind the national security community about the enduring strategic threat posed by Iran; see, for example, the major address on Iran delivered by National Security Advisor Tom Donilon to The Washington Institute’s annual Soref Symposium last month.² Regrettably, Mr. Donilon’s important message was drowned out by events abroad and the president’s own distracting speech on Arab-Israeli peacemaking soon thereafter.

Second, as we have naturally focused our attention elsewhere, the Iranians viewed regional change generally moving in their direction. Even before the “Arab Spring,” Iran counted as successes expectations for U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, the emergence of a Hizballah-dominated government in Lebanon, the ongoing control of Gaza by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), and the crushing of their own internal dissent following the emergence of the Green Movement in June 2009. Over just the past six months, Iranian leaders reveled in the demise of U.S. allies in Egypt and Tunisia, the departure of the pro-American ruler of Yemen, violent clashes in Bahrain, and the deep tensions that have emerged between Washington and its two most significant strategic pillars in the region, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Only with the emergence of a serious challenge to the Assad regime has the democratic wave begun to pose a threat to Iranian interests.

Third, there is reason to believe that the direct threat posed by Iran—especially the nuclear aspect of the threat—is more acute today than before the “Arab Spring.” IAEA reports highlight

² The full text of Mr. Donilon’s address can be found at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/DonilonRemarks20110512.pdf>.

the continuing progress of Iran's nuclear program, problematic military-related experimentation that Iran has undertaken, and the ongoing stockpiling of fissile material. Moreover, on a political level, it only stands to reason that Iran looks at the Libya situation and, through its eyes, sees what happens to a country that reaches a nuclear bargain with the West—it eventually gets bombed by the same countries with whom it did the deal. The logical conclusion for the rulers in Tehran is to speed up their nuclear program. In this regard, it would be foolish to assume that external delay efforts, such as the reported Stuxnet virus, have had strategic repercussions for Iran's nuclear program.

Fourth, it bears repeating that Iran's acquisition or development of a military nuclear capability would dramatically transform the strategic balance in the region, with implications that are severely damaging—even disastrous—for U.S. interests. It would empower the most radical tendencies in the region; provide a defensive umbrella for the region's most dangerous states, militias, entities, and terrorist groups; undermine the appeal of the democratic option now gaining traction throughout the region; embolden fifth columnists in critical countries; spur a proliferation race (both among U.S. adversaries and—no less problematic—among U.S. friends, like Saudi Arabia, who may view U.S. failure to stop Iran's nuclear program as a watershed moment that exposes the abdication of U.S. regional leadership) that could make the region exponentially more threatening to U.S. interests and allies; and provide a cover for Iran to act more aggressively to realize its strategic objective of expelling America from the region and anchoring itself as the preeminent regional power. On top of all this, one cannot rule out the possibility that—in certain circumstances—the apocalyptic trend in Shiite theology may win the day and Iran's rulers may actually contemplate the use of nuclear weapons (or even the threat of use) against the United States, Israel, or local allies of the “Greater” or “Lesser Satan.” Therefore, it should be apparent that the United States has no more urgent priority in the region than preventing Iran's acquisition or development of a military nuclear capability.

Fifth, despite this threat, there is reason to fear a certain international ennui about the Iranian threat, the sense that many governments have gotten so used to the idea that Iran will eventually get a nuclear bomb that they are unwilling to act against it and will not be surprised when it happens. Indeed, a startling article on an Iranian Revolutionary Guards website, revealing on many levels, recently speculated that when—not *if*, but *when*—Iran explodes a nuclear device, it will suffer no repercussions because the world has sufficiently accommodated itself to the idea of Iran having the bomb. Changing Iran's calculus on this aspect of the issue is essential.

Against this backdrop, a sound U.S. strategy will recognize that it is essential to counter Iranian ambitions with some strategic setbacks. The three places where the United States can most effectively strike a blow against Iran are Syria, Iraq, and Iran itself. On Syria, this testimony has already discussed at length the strategic context and what Washington can do. And on Iraq—a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this testimony—the key is to deny Iran the opportunity to extend its influence by cementing a new security relationship with the Iraqi government.

On Iran itself, U.S. efforts should focus on two areas—first, making more real and believable U.S. commitment to using all means necessary to prevent Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability, and second, expanding support to Iranian democrats and antiregime elements who stand the best change of triggering the fundamental change of the Iranian regime that will solve the Iranian strategic challenge once and for all.

On the first point, the most important contribution the United States can make is to restore the credibility of the military option vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear program. Without confidence in the commitment and efficacy of the military option—confidence that is shared by our adversaries and allies alike—there is ultimately little likelihood that other measures will succeed in achieving a peaceful resolution of this crisis. Restoring credibility requires more actions than words, signals than speeches. It is done through deployments, maneuvers, prepositioning, and visible partnerships with key players in the region. With changes coming in both the civilian and military leadership of the Pentagon, now is an especially propitious moment to implement such measures.

As for support to Iranian democrats, the administration has indicated its interest in expanding outreach to the Iranian people and, in the language of the day, “breaking the regime’s communications monopoly.” This is important and deserves support. Recent steps taken by the administration to provide access to software that enables Iranians to circumvent state censorship is welcome, if long overdue. A bureaucratic change that allows Iranians to receive multi-entry visas to the United States is helpful to Iranian students. The resumption of cultural and artistic connections, after a lengthy suspension, is a positive step. But these are all modest measures, when there is so much more to be done—on such issues as hammering home in international forums outrage over Iran’s reprehensible and systematic violations of human rights; on improving, expanding, and deepening our international broadcasting to Iran; on countering Iranian interference with satellite transmissions into the country; and on establishing broad networks of distance learning for Iranian students who thirst for the humanistic and cultural educational offerings now denied in Iranian universities.

Most importantly, the United States—at the highest political level—should be prepared for the day when Iranians join Egyptians, Tunisians, and Syrians in rising up against their rulers. Today’s testimony focuses on “next steps”—that is, what should be done now. But it is still not too early for the administration to prepare for the day when the Arab Spring morphs into the Persian Spring. When that day comes, and when the strategic opportunity to trigger real change is at hand, Washington needs to be ready with words of support and meaningful and effective actions to back them up.

Thank you again, Madame Chairman, for the opportunity to present my views to the Committee.