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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

"Axis of Abuse: U.S. Human Rights Policy

toward Iran and Syria, Part II"

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Ackerman, distinguished members of the committee: thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the alarming state of human rights and freedom in Iran and Syria. This is a matter not only of moral urgency, but of vital importance to U.S. national security.

I drafted this testimony sitting in a crowded coffee shop, with free and unfettered access to the internet, on my laptop. I was not worried who might be looking over my shoulder at the screen, nor was I worried about the personal repercussions of what I might say. As I looked forward to briefing this committee, I understood that some of its members or my fellow witnesses might differ with me, perhaps even vehemently. But I had no worry that these issues would be settled through anything other than vigorous debate.

For Iranians and Syrians, none of these activities can be undertaken without significant peril. Freedom of assembly is proscribed. Access to the internet is restricted, and its use is monitored. Security personnel are a pervasive presence. And expressing one's point of view on political matters is often treated as a crime, bringing with it harsh punishment. It is important that we keep this context in mind in order to maintain a proper perspective on this subject; the abuses and repression we are discussing affect not only activists operating on the ragged edge of political dissent, but everyday citizens engaged in everyday activities.

I do not intend to recount here the manifold instances of abuse and repression committed by the Iranian and Syrian regimes. This -- the documentation of human rights violations -- is a vital task, in which many fine organizations and brave individuals are engaged, and my fellow witnesses are more qualified than I am to relate the appalling catalog of abuses perpetrated by the Tehran and Damascus regimes.

Instead, I would like to discuss the role that the systematic abuse of human rights plays in the strategy of the Iranian and Syrian regimes. We must be clear -- this is not a recent phenomenon in Iran and Syria, nor are human rights violations merely an excessive response to the recent uprisings in these countries. These violations are not deviations from normal practice that we must urge these regimes to correct. Instead, the abuse of human rights is a matter of policy for both Tehran and Damascus, and instrumental to the establishment and maintenance of control that is at the heart of their versions of authoritarianism.

The condemnations of Iranian and Syrian human rights abuses that are now in vogue only recently supplanted calls for engagement with these regimes. Visits to Damascus and even Tehran by Western officials were until only recently routine. The expressions of shock and indignation at events in Iran and Syria now emanating from Western capitals are appropriate and welcome, but dissidents in these countries could be forgiven for some measure of chagrin over such statements, given that the abuses have in fact been occurring for decades.

It is vital that we in the U.S. foreign policy community arrive at a proper understanding of the nature of the regimes in Tehran and Damascus, and therefore of why they engage in the atrocious human rights abuses we are here to discuss. These abuses are fundamentally about establishing and maintaining control, and are common to most authoritarian regimes past and present in one form or another. We must not only condemn the abuses that are a symptom of this authoritarianism, but the systems themselves that give rise to them. We must not only seek to prevent the abuses from occurring, but to break the control of

these regimes over their populations. Opposing human rights abuses in Iran and Syria, if such opposition is to be meaningful, requires that we support transitions to systems of government in which citizens' opinions and aspirations are not seen as threats, and the rule of law is not seen as an impediment. It requires, in other words, supporting democracy.

I would like to discuss briefly the nature of the regimes in Tehran and Damascus and of their systems of control and repression, how the recent uprisings in those countries have challenged that system, and what the United States can do to support Iranian and Syrian dissidents.

The Nature of the Iranian and Syrian Regimes

At first glance, the Iranian and Syrian regimes seem quite different. Syria's is an avowedly secular Baathist regime that is wary of religious zealotry. Iran's, on the other hand, is a clerical regime that has co-opted for itself the mantle of religious radicalism and has little tolerance for faiths or forms of worship that do not conform to its own narrow preferences. Yet not only are these regimes one another's closest allies, they have deep similarities that belie their superficial differences.

Like so many authoritarian regimes, both the Iranian and Syrian systems of government are based on the careful cultivation of certain illusions. These illusions are maintained through systems of control and repression from which stem many of these regimes' human rights abuses. Three illusions in particular are important to Tehran and Damascus.

First, the illusion of democracy: despite their deeply autocratic natures, both the Syrian and Iranian regimes have adopted the language and trappings of democracy, something which Freedom House has observed is troublingly common in modern authoritarian states. For its part, Syria has an elected parliament -- but it is a single-party state. It has a referendum on the presidency -- but only one candidate stands for "confirmation." Even with these extreme restrictions, however, the Syrian regime feels the need to manipulate the results of balloting, leading to ludicrous results such as the reported 97.62 percent of voters who supposedly voted to extend President Bashar al-Asad's term in the last referendum.

Iran also maintains democratic pretensions. Iran holds elections for both the presidency and the parliament, or Majlis. However, in both cases the Iranian system provides for parallel institutions -- the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, respectively -- that are unelected and whose authority trumps those of the elected officials. Even with this authoritarian safeguard in place, however, Iranian leaders feel the need to manipulate elections. The candidate vetting process (through which the clerical Guardian Council weeds out reformists or any others who might express independent viewpoints), the voting process itself, and the ballot counting process are all heavily rigged to ensure that the regime's desired outcomes are realized.

To be clear, however, even these trappings of democracy, meager as they may be, are illusory. True power in Iran and Syria lies not in the hands of elected officials, but with small cliques who enjoy the backing of massive and well-rewarded security apparatuses. In Iran, this includes the Supreme Leader and his loyal lieutenants, along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Basij paramilitaries, the intelligence apparatus, and other organizations. In Syria, it consists of President Asad and his family and

close confidants, as well as a number of security and military organs. In neither country do meaningful political freedoms exist.

Second, the illusion of prosperity: both the Baathist regime in Syria and the clerical regime in Iran have long trumpeted a message of social justice to their citizens, promising to restore dignity and prosperity to the poor and dispossessed. In the wake of Western imperialism in the Middle East, they vowed to restore to ordinary people the rich natural resources of the region and overturn the class structure and elitism that they replaced.

Decades later, the regimes still propound this message. It was central to the presidential campaigns of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was mocked by his peers for handing out potatoes to voters in the countryside, but who managed initially to secure at least some support with populist promises of wealth redistribution. It is central as well to the rhetorical fusillades of Ali Khamenei, Iran's so-called Supreme Leader. In promoting Iran's recent subsidy reform, for example, Khamenei claimed that the wealthy of Iran were benefiting disproportionately from government handouts, framing the policy action explicitly in terms of class warfare.

The reality, of course, could not be more different. Despite its massive natural resource wealth, Iran lags well behind other Gulf countries in most economic indicators. In particular, it is plagued by high unemployment and high inflation, and also has elevated levels of poverty and income inequality. Moreover, both Syria and Iran are massively corrupt, ranking 127th and 146th, respectively, out of 178 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. This corruption arises out of the lack of institutional accountability that arises from both countries' systematic flouting of the rule of law, the regimes' need to secure the loyalty of security services and other constituencies, and straightforward rapacity.

In Iran, for example, the IRGC is deeply enmeshed in the national economy, controlling both state-owned industries and religious charitable foundations. Regime insiders, such as Ali Khamenei's son Mojtaba, are rumored to control massive wealth derived from similar sources. In Syria, a similar situation prevails. Key regime insiders and security officials control much of the nation's business activity, whether licit or illicit. The most renowned such regime crony is President Asad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, who is subject to sanctions by the United States. In neither Syria nor Iran can an ordinary citizen's economic aspirations be fulfilled independently of the assent of the regimes.

Third, the illusion of stability: both Iran and Syria have known only two rulers apiece for the last three decades, and against all odds these men -- currently Ali Khamenei in Tehran and Bashar al-Asad in Damascus -- have increased their authority rather than see it wane. In a region notable for its tumult, these regimes have touted their steadfastness in the face of regional and domestic challenges and international pressure. This, too, is illusory. Lacking any mechanisms to relieve or positively channel political or socio-economic discontent -- whether elections, free media, or often even simple freedoms to enjoy art or entertainment without state interference -- these regimes keep a tight rein on their populations through increasingly harsh restrictions and, as I have already detailed, various measures to secure the loyalty of the security services.

Ensuring the passivity of populations that are as desirous of their liberty as any of us requires the Iranian and Syrian regimes to impose and carefully maintain draconian systems of control and repression. The details of each are different -- Tehran enforces adherence to its peculiar brand of politico-religious ideology while Syria sows fear of and loyalty to the state -- but the means are largely the same. In both Syria and Iran, the freedoms enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are systematically denied. There is no freedom of expression -- in both places, speaking out against the regime is a crime subject to the most extreme punishments. There is no freedom of the press -- journalists who dare to write the truth take their lives into their own hands. There is no freedom of assembly or association -- participation in organizations not officially sanctioned by the regimes is not tolerated. There is no freedom from arbitrary arrest or guarantee of fair trials, and no protection from cruel and inhuman punishment. Ethnic and religious minorities are not afforded equality, and in Iran in particular, religious minorities such as Protestants and Bahai are summarily rounded up and subject to punishment and even death.

These regimes' systems of control also extend to the tight regulation of information, which takes both defensive and offensive forms. Access to the internet, to free local media, or to international media is blocked in both places. In addition, both regimes use the state media to push their own propaganda and deeply distorted version of local and international events, and to reinforce the illusions and ideologies I have already detailed. In Iran's case, this propaganda offensive increasingly has an international arm as well, with state media organs such as al-Alam, broadcasting in Arabic, and Press TV, broadcasting in English, targeting audiences abroad.

The list of human rights abuses and mechanisms of control goes on. Numerous organizations -- whether the State Department, the United Nations, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House, or local groups such as the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center -- have catalogued these offenses in horrifying detail, and I urge you to study their work to grasp the full extent to which the Iranian and Syrian regimes brutalize their citizens. It is worth noting that in both places there is an iterative quality to the regimes' abuse and control -- it is not just that security services monitor and oppress the citizenry, but that multiple overlapping security services monitor and report on one another, and that various regime loyalists are played off against one another. This iteration continues in ever-tighter circles until responsibility for the entire system arrives at the feet of a single man.

The Current Uprisings in Iran and Syria

What is clear from this account is that the recent crackdowns in Iran and Syria, while certainly accelerated and undoubtedly horrific, are anything but new. They fit squarely with the pattern of behavior established by Tehran and Damascus over many decades and should not take any of us by surprise. The notion, so popular until recently, that these regimes could be cajoled or persuaded to change their stripes revealed a troublingly short memory on the part of our foreign policy establishment regarding the nature of authoritarianism. Putting an end to their abuses means ceding their control, which these regimes necessarily worry would quickly lead to their demise.

What is new in Iran and Syria, then, is not the behavior of the regimes, but the accomplishments of the Iranian and Syrian opposition movements. What the opposition in Syria and the Green Movement in Iran have done -- with enormous courage and at enormous cost to themselves and their families -- is to

expose the illusions upon which these regimes are based. The regimes have recognized the threat and have responded with predictable fury. The figures are stark -- in Syria, 2,700 protestors have reportedly been killed and tens of thousands detained over the past six months. In Iran, thousands have been arrested and hundreds executed. Such figures, while compelling, have an antiseptic quality to them. Behind each number is a story of bravery and bereavement that in many cases may never be told. Under closer examination, the details are shocking indeed, whether the story of the schoolboys in Deraa, Syria, whose arrest for spraying graffiti and subsequent torture by security services sparked the Syrian uprising, or the group of mothers of victims of regime abuse in Iran, who were themselves harassed and detained by regime thugs for having the temerity to call public attention to the deaths of their children.

Despite the regimes' extreme response, however, and despite Asad and Khamenei's apparent resilience in the face of protests, the Iranian and Syrian opposition movements have already achieved an important victory. In a sense, they have already succeeded. They have shattered the regimes' carefully cultivated illusions, which Tehran and Damascus will find difficult if not impossible to restore. Neither regime can any longer claim to be democratic: in Syria, the opposition has clearly called for an end to the Asad regime and swept away its pretenses of elected legitimacy; in Iran, the Green Movement has refused to abide a stolen election and rallied Iranians around the simple demand that their votes should count for something. Neither regime can claim to champion the prosperity of the ordinary citizen, as international sanctions and the work of domestic groups have shed a searing light on corruption and cronyism in both places. And neither regime can make a claim to stability, having been forced to wage war against their own peoples in a desperate attempt to maintain their viselike grip on power. In both Syria and Iran, the regimes' domestic support base is narrowing and thus becoming increasingly precarious, and their international support is also waning. It is impossible to say whether and in what timeframe these developments will lead to their demise, but it is irrefutable that the regimes are weakened and made more brittle as a result.

Next Steps for U.S. Policy

It has often been asserted that the human rights situation in places like Iran and Syria, however alarming, is of little relevance to U.S. interests. I take strong exception to this view, for two reasons.

First, we as Americans feel a deep sympathy for and moral obligation to people around the world who are struggling for their freedom. We are heirs to the great privilege and great burden of our own freedom, and we feel deeply our debt to our forebears and contemporaries who have laid their lives down so that we might enjoy liberty. Some of us are children of immigrants and owe therefore an additional debt to parents or grandparents who bore great risk so that we could enjoy the benefit of that liberty. We cannot help but seek to support peoples around the world engaged in similar struggles for the same prize, or recognize the advantages that democracy brings to individuals and the world.

For those who cynically view this as sentimentality, I would briefly relate the story of Howard Baskerville. Baskerville, raised in the Black Hills and educated at Princeton, traveled to the city of Tabriz in Iran as a missionary and teacher in 1907. In 1909, when Iranians took up arms against their shah in response to his repression and corruption, Baskerville -- in defiance of the admonitions of the American consul -- organized a small volunteer force and fought alongside the people of Tabriz for the cause of democracy. For

his efforts he met his death, shot and killed on the battlefield at age twenty-four. Baskerville, who remains a hero in Iran, said this by way of explaining his choice: "The only difference between me and these people is the place of my birth, and this is not a big difference."

Foreign affairs is a messy and sometimes discouraging business. But there is something about the simplicity and clarity of Howard Baskerville's actions that resonates deeply with those of us who pursue American foreign policy, and indeed with Americans more broadly. We cannot simply turn away from people in whose struggle we see echoes of our own. It has been rightly observed that we cannot help everywhere, and that in some cases our help is not desired. But where we can help, we should.

There also, however, is a strategic reason for combating repression and human rights abuses in Iran and Syria. It is no coincidence that Iran and Syria, or for that matter other authoritarian regimes, not only terrorize their own people but also sow insecurity among their neighbors and threaten international security. Just as the freedom of their own people constitutes a threat to these regimes' control and thus survival, so too do foreign ideologies, and even in many cases foreign culture or commerce. Whether through economic empowerment, the demonstration of the benefits of openness and liberty, or even the simple relaying of objective facts through the media, the outside world holds a host of threats for the Iranian and Syrian regimes. By cultivating hostility with neighbors or foreign powers or cultivating myths about them, these regimes seek to deepen and strengthen their own control.

Thus, while we counter the external manifestations of the Iranian and Syrian regimes' pursuit of their own survival at the expense of international security, we should not neglect their domestic human rights abuses, which are just as essential to these regimes' power. Whatever temporary measures we arrive at to contain the destabilizing behavior of these regimes, supporting the struggle of the Iranian and Syrian people for democracy represents our best hope for long-term peace and stability in the region. This is not to say that democracies will always be good friends to the United States, or that they will not engage in abuses or hostility; simply that they are far less likely to define their own security in ways that are necessarily threatening to their own people and the world.

To this end, we must not simply condemn abuses and seek to prevent them. We must aid the Iranian and Syrian people in breaking the system of control of which the abuses are part and parcel. As I have mentioned, these regimes are increasingly brittle, and we cannot know when even a marginal or incremental increase in pressure might cause cracks within them to widen. In this effort, I see four primary tracks.

First, we should shed greater light on the struggle of Iranians and Syrians for freedom. I commend President Obama and his administration for the recent steps they have taken, particularly their calls for President Asad of Syria to step down and their targeting of Iranian and Syrian human rights abusers through sanctions. While it is difficult to reach these officials or their assets through sanctions, merely naming and shaming them is itself worthwhile. There is more we can do, however. We must not hesitate to speak out firmly and frequently regarding abuses in Iran and Syria, including on behalf of individual victims. We must not hesitate to meet with Iranian and Syrian dissidents, including in the Oval Office, when they are amenable. We must not refrain from using the bully pulpit of the White House, the State Department, and the United Nations Security Council to advance the cause of Iranian and Syrian dissidents.

Second, we should strive to break the Syrian, and particularly the Iranian, regimes' monopoly on information. This requires a multifaceted effort. We should step up our efforts to broadcast accurate and unbiased information into these countries via satellite, internet, and other means. We should increase our efforts to counter the regimes' efforts to interfere with those broadcasts. We should push back on the regimes' efforts to spread their own misleading propaganda domestically and internationally. And we should do that which is in our power to aid Iranians and Syrians themselves, most importantly, to disseminate news and information.

Third, we should deny to the Iranian and Syrian regimes the tools of repression, and provide their oppositions with the tools of resistance to repression. This means ensuring that Western technology companies are not permitted to help these regimes maintain their control of media or communications technology, or to facilitate their propaganda efforts. It means strictly enforcing arms embargoes and identifying and cutting off the regimes' sources of revenue. For activists, it means doing what we can to provide them with the tools and training they need to organize and communicate, and helping them to protect themselves. The Obama administration has already taken steps in this regard, and this effort should be stepped up and is worthy of full support from Congress and the private sector.

Fourth, we must continue to rally an international coalition against the Iranian and Syrian regimes. These regimes rely on international support, whether from multilateral institutions, friendly authoritarians, or potential clients and proxies who are recipients of Iranian and Syrian largesse. At the United Nations and other international organizations, we should push back on Tehran and Damascus. Around the world where Tehran and Damascus seek succor, we should combat their efforts to make inroads and disrupt their assistance to groups like Hizballah and Hamas. And we must in our diplomacy stress the repressive and authoritarian nature of these regimes to our allies, and urge them to act accordingly.

To this end, I am increasingly convinced that we should now withdraw the U.S. ambassador from Damascus. I consider Ambassador Ford a respected colleague and I admire the courage and tenacity with which he has carried himself throughout the Syrian uprising. There can be little doubt that his activities have given some support to the opposition and proven nettlesome for the Syrian regime. However, this benefit must be weighed against the powerful statement that could be made by recalling him and reappointing him formally as an envoy to the Syrian opposition globally. While his continued presence as ambassador leaves open the possibility of a resumption of dialogue with Asad and provides cover for other countries to retain their diplomatic representation in Damascus, his withdrawal would herald definitively the end of the administration's engagement with the regime, sending the unmistakable message that there will be no returning to business as usual between the United States and Syria.

Defending human rights in Iran and Syria, or for that matter defending against the destabilizing policies of the Iranian and Syrian regimes, also means defending democracy in these places. This inextricable linkage between human rights and democracy was best expressed by Natan Sharansky, who understands intimately the nature of authoritarian control. He said, "A commitment to human rights is above all a commitment to democracy and freedom and to the right to defend them...Only a combination of a robust defense of democratic life and a rigorous denunciation of abuses can uphold and defend human rights."