

Next Steps in Syria

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Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Lugar:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Over my years of working in Syria and Lebanon, I followed closely the committee's hearings on Syria and U.S. attempts to deal effectively with Bashar al-Assad's regime. I think I speak for all my Syrian friends and their families in thanking the committee for convening this hearing at a key time in the Syrian people's attempt to end over forty years of tyrannical rule, and for taking the big next step of helping to build a better, more democratic Syria. If Washington's limited policy of diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and piecemeal support for the opposition continues as is, however, I fear the next government in Syria will more likely than not be both suspicious of and hostile to U.S. interests. The reason is simple: Washington invested too much time in diplomacy at the United Nations instead of directly helping the Syrian people hasten Bashar al-Assad's demise. This should now include the provision of lethal assistance to elements of the Syrian opposition with which the United States can acquire agreements on codes of conduct and end use. The good news is it is not too late to change course. But time is very short.

Situation on the Ground

The death toll in Syria's seventeen-month uprising is now around 20,000, with 30,000 in detention or missing, putting the conflict on par with that of the Libyan Revolution. An uprising that started out as civil in nature has in response to the Assad regime's use of live fire, shelling, helicopter gunships, and fixed-wing aircraft morphed, quite naturally, into an armed insurrection. The Assad regime, armed to the teeth by Russia and Iran, continues to implement what they call the "security solution" to cow the opposition into submission. Much to the regime's chagrin, it can militarily clear areas but cannot hold them. Akin to the carnival game "Whac-a-Mole," every time Assad attempts to hit the opposition's head, it disappears, only to pop up somewhere else. The rebels are confronting the regime with opposition it cannot decapitate, which slowly wears down Assad's forces—but, sadly, not before the regime and its killing machine take thousands more Syrians with it. Before Syria achieves its slow motion revolution, it seems set to suffer a slow motion massacre.

Washington's Response

Washington's response to this worsening situation has been to isolate Assad, sanction his regime and its members, and pursue UN action that, if achieved, would open the door for a multilateral effort to bring the regime down. It has not worked because Russia continues to veto resolution after resolution on Syria, most recently a Chapter VII resolution to enforce the Action Group for Syria Communique of June 30—a skeleton transition plan for Syria. Meanwhile, Washington has

given its Middle East allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar a nod to support the opposition with lethal as well as nonlethal assistance. And some dedicated people in the U.S. government have spent the last few months reaching out to the opposition inside Syria, mapping their positions, and providing limited nonlethal aid to the nonviolent opposition.

The picture is still far from clear, but the Syrian opposition can perhaps be best described as headless but not leaderless with a generally flat structure. Had we based our strategy last winter on what was happening on the ground in Syria, we would have much better visibility in terms of both military operations and these groups' political aspirations. YouTube videos streaming out of Syria tell us how they fight, and their immediate goal of bringing down the Assad regime. But they tell us precious little about their long-term political aspirations—assessments that can only be achieved kinesthetically through working with groups directly on the ground. And by not directly working with the Syrian opposition—armed and unarmed—the United States will know little about how to influence them. In some cases it will be because we do not know them. But if we continue on our current path, it is more likely they will be angry that the United States stood by and did far less than it could have to accelerate Assad's demise.

Third Forces Afoot

Others forces, some inimical to U.S. interests, are stepping in to fill the void. Anecdotal and media reports indicate that individuals and governments in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as well as others, are sending much-needed lethal support to the opposition. In terms of state policy, all openly support the U.S. short-term interest of bringing down the Assad regime. But it is far from clear if they support U.S. long-term interests of a democratic and secular Syria that respects minority rights and shuns terrorism, let alone supports Middle East peace. In addition, "third forces" such as al-Qaeda affiliates, including Jabhat al-Nusra, have established a presence in Syria. There are increased reports over the last few months of increased foreign fighters entering Syria.

The Mass Atrocity Red Line

More and more members of the Syrian opposition, especially the armed or unarmed elements inside the country, realize that it is up to them to take down Assad. While the exiled opposition continues to argue over chairs and positions, albeit while doing some laudable work on preparing for a post-Assad Syria, all aspects of the opposition continue to advocate direct U.S. intervention—airstrikes, no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors, and safe havens. It is unclear which option may occur and when, especially in the face of repeated U.S. and allied announcements about the limits of all military options in Syria, but mass atrocities and/or the use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) would seem the most probable triggers.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Washington has repeatedly demanded that Assad desist from employing the most brutal tactics against his own people—only to see the regime use them anyway. With the recent assassination of four senior regime members coming only days after reports that Syria is moving its chemical weapons stockpile, the U.S. government must now draw a line in the sand for Assad. And this time, the Obama team must stick to it, or risk a humanitarian and national security calamity.

Recent news that the regime is moving its chemical weapons has set off speculation within the U.S. government about what Assad may be prepared to do with those weapons as his control over the country deteriorates. It would be comforting to think he knows that using such weapons of mass

destruction would be crossing a red line—but unfortunately that would be too optimistic. After all, Assad has ignored every other international ultimatum directed at him since the beginning of the revolt.

The same pattern has held true with attempts to force Assad into a negotiated transition through the UN Security Council, where Russia and China recently vetoed for the third time a resolution that would have imposed sanctions against the regime if it did not end its brutal crackdown.

This must end. Washington and its allies must lay down and enforce red lines prohibiting the use of Syria's chemical weapons—one of the Middle East's largest stockpiles. To do so, Washington should lead its allies in the "Core Group" of the Friends of the Syrian People gathering—Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—in issuing a stark warning to Assad that mass atrocities in Syria will be met with an immediate military response.

Assad's most recent moves are part of a well-established pattern of testing and pushing U.S. and NATO red lines. The Assad regime has increasingly deployed artillery and combat aircraft to suppress the Syrian opposition, despite Washington's warning not to do so. A few weeks ago, Syria shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter jet, a provocation for which it received only verbal condemnation by NATO. The Syrian government's history of such reckless moves stretches back years: in 2010, Assad reportedly transferred Scud D missiles and M-600 rockets to the U.S.-designated Lebanese terrorist group Hizballah, essentially handing strategic weapons to a third party and removing his ability to restrain the self-proclaimed Party of God.

When Bashar was master of Syria, such behavior was seen as an annoyance rather than a threat to U.S. national security interests. Today, all that has changed. The Assad regime is mired in a grinding conflict with the Syrian opposition in which it is steadily losing control, as demonstrated by the July 18 assassinations of senior regime figures in the heart of Damascus, as well as recent battles there and in Aleppo. Furthermore, a number of massacres by Alawite forces in Sunni villages around the cities of Homs and Hama indicate that Alawites and the regime they dominate may be attempting to clear Sunni villages in order to set up a rump Alawite enclave in their historic homeland along the Syrian coast in the event of regime collapse.

The international community therefore faces a dilemma: should chemical and biological materials be put at the disposal of those running a possible Alawite rump regime and those directing the *shabbiha* "armed gangs" roaming the Syrian countryside, there is much greater likelihood of atrocities or genocide. And it's not only the pro-Assad groups the United States must worry about: as the Syrian regime loses its grip on power, the roughly forty-five different CW facilities and tons of chemical weapons materials that U.S. officials estimate are scattered throughout the country could fall into the hands of Sunni extremists. Like the regime, these extremists cannot be counted on to act responsibly about CW: they might be tempted to use CW against the regime and its supporters.

The time to act is now, before disaster strikes. By leading an effort to warn the Syrian regime about the dire consequences of using its chemical weapons stockpile, and raising the possibility of a military response in the event that effort fails, Washington will be communicating to Assad that he would be sealing his fate if he crosses this red line.

End Game

My best estimate is that it will be those on the ground who are now taking the shots against the Assad regime that will be calling the shots after he is gone. While the Obama administration is reticent to intervene militarily in Syria—in some cases for good reason, while in others not—actively assisting the opposition “within Syria” to take power would be a foreign policy “threefer” for Washington: Assad and those directing his killing machine would be gone, we would have an opportunity to foster a new relationship with the emerging political entity or entities in Syria, and we would eliminate a major ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Levant. Getting there will be hard, but if Washington does not start now, it runs the risk of playing catch-up when it is too late. I see no way of effectively doing that without U.S. intervention of some type. Given the Obama administration's open reticence to intervene directly, indirect intervention through provision of lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition is the next best option for affecting a rapidly deteriorating situation in Syria. I am not advocating simply dropping weapons on the Syrian opposition and wishing them good luck, but rather reaching out to them, identifying which groups we can work with, supplying them with what they need, and watching closely what they do militarily and politically in what remains a long and bloody fight for freedom in Syria.

Respectfully submitted,

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