

“Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis”

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs

By

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Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Risch, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this subcommittee on a topic of great moral and strategic importance to the United States. The topic of today’s hearing is the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which is of a scale with few parallels in the world today. However, it is not possible to divorce this humanitarian crisis from the conflict which has given rise to it, nor is it possible to craft a successful policy to address the crisis without a successful policy to resolve the conflict. There is nothing humanitarian in providing assistance to the victims of a conflict we are doing little to end, when it is within our power and our interest to do far more.

In the Syrian civil war we see a confluence of moral imperative and strategic interest; where so often these impulses conflict, here they coincide. The moral case for action is clear – the United Nations has asserted that 70,000 civilians have been killed in Syria since March 2011, and almost four million, out of a population of twenty-two million, forced from their homes, about 1.2 million of whom have fled Syria entirely. These numbers overwhelm comprehension, yet still fail to convey the full extent of Syrians’ suffering – the violence visited upon children, the terror inflicted upon civilians by indiscriminate air and missile attacks, or the deprivation imposed on both sides by war.

The case made by this grim toll is bolstered by the cause for which the opposition fights – freedom from tyranny and repression. It is prudent to harbor grave doubts that the overthrow of the Assad regime will yield democracy or even stability, and our policy cannot be based on the expectation of such an outcome. But our realism need not give way to cynicism – Syrians’ struggle for liberty, with which Americans can uniquely identify, is genuine.

Nevertheless, it has been rightly observed, including by President Obama, that we cannot solve every humanitarian crisis. If a compelling moral case were our threshold for intervention around the world, we would find ourselves overextended and quite likely unsuccessful.

The moral case in Syria, however, is paired with a clear American strategic interest. The fighting in Syria poses a threat to regional stability, having already spilled over into Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Iraq – all of Syria’s neighbors, and all allies of the United States. The massive flow of

refugees from Syria into some of those countries, furthermore, poses an additional threat to their stability, and places severe strains on local economies.

The fall of the Assad regime, on the other hand, would deal a severe blow to the Iranian regime, which has long used Syria as a forward operating base from which to project power into the Levant. This is not to say that Assad's fall would leave Iran at a total loss – Iran has proven adept at operating in unsettled environments and cultivating alliances of convenience even with groups to which it is ideologically opposed. Truly disadvantaging Iran would require the eventual emergence of a stable, sovereign state unwilling to serve as Tehran's proxy.

To the extent the United States follows up on our calls for Assad's departure with action to bring it about, we will also underscore the credibility of our warnings and our willingness to act to advance our interests. There is a perception in the Middle East – shared by our friends and our foes – that the United States has lost our will or even our capacity to act in the region, as demonstrated by our talk of a "pivot" to Asia, the removal of a Carrier Strike Group from the Gulf, and, not least, our passivity in the face of the Syrian conflict. The message we send – whether by our action or our inaction – will not be lost on friend or foe. A new regional order has been forming in the Middle East since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, and America's place in it will largely be decided by our handling of Syria and Iran.

Current Policy

Current American policy on Syria has not been effective either in addressing the humanitarian crisis or advancing our strategic interests. Our policy appears designed to contain the Syrian conflict while crafting a negotiated solution between the Assad regime and the opposition. Neither aim is succeeding. As previously noted, the conflict has increasingly spilled over into neighboring countries; and a diplomatic solution has proven elusive, as Assad has refused to stand aside, the opposition has despaired of negotiations with him, and his international backers have proven steadfast in their support for him and opposition to action in the UN Security Council, despite two years of diplomatic efforts by the Obama Administration to sway them.

The ineffectiveness of our approach two years into the conflict naturally raises the question of what could prompt a change in our course. The red lines that the US has articulated – use or transfer of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, or the commission of a mass atrocity – lack credibility or effectiveness: Credibility, because reporting over the course of the conflict make it unclear that Washington would detect the movement or use of chemical weapons or commission of an atrocity in time to prevent such actions, and because it is unclear that the Administration would truly be willing to commit military assets in response given US officials' estimates of the force required to achieve even limited objectives in Syria; Effectiveness, because US and international warnings have not prevented tens of thousands of civilians being killed by other means. Our red lines also cede control over the question of international intervention to Assad; if we are to become more involved in this conflict, we should do so according to our schedule, not the regime's.

We are wrestling in Syria, in a sense, with the legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan rather than the challenges of the Syrian conflict itself. Americans are justifiably war-weary and wary of wading into yet another Middle Eastern conflict which on its face has little to do with us and seems unsolvable. Our economic circumstances and fiscal challenges do not lend themselves to new overseas engagements. But we must beware short-term thinking; whatever lessons one draws from Iraq and Afghanistan, the lesson of Syria years hence may be that inaction, just like action, has costs and consequences. The Middle East remains vital to American interests; turbulence there will have an impact on our own economic and national security, and any credibility we sacrifice in the region will need to be re-won many times over.

It may be that neither our allies nor the American public will support a bolder policy in Syria. I would argue, however, that we will not know until we make the case.

Policy Options

An assessment of our policy options must begin with a reassessment of our objectives. It is insufficient and outdated to assert that Assad must go – Assad is in a sense gone, as he no longer governs wide swaths of Syria and is fighting to survive rather than for control; nor to pledge support for the opposition – the opposition is divided between relatively secular forces we can support and extremists we cannot; nor simply to provide humanitarian relief without addressing the conflict which drives the humanitarian crisis.

Instead, our strategic objectives – beyond the provision of humanitarian assistance and aid for refugees and their hosts - must reflect the current reality of the conflict in Syria. First and foremost, we should seek a quick end to that conflict, which almost certainly will require removing the Assad regime; in doing so, we should seek to limit any deeper involvement by Hezbollah or Iran in the conflict or the dispersal of Syria's WMD and other arms; given that the opposition may at this point be held together by little other than their mutual opposition to Assad, we should also seek to forge a broad opposition consensus behind principles for a post-Assad Syria and encourage the formation of a broad-based interim government; we should seek to deter post-war score-settling and sectarian conflict; and we should seek to preserve Syria's territorial integrity to avoid the cascade of conflicts that could attend its disintegration.

In pursuing those objectives, we face serious obstacles. The armed opposition inside Syria includes extremists, who by some accounts are the best-organized of the various rebel factions and may receive assistance from US allies in the region. It is unclear to what extent Syria's Kurdish minority is interested in being ruled from Damascus after the fall of Assad. The Assad regime apparently continues to enjoy support from some Syrian minority groups who worry about the intentions of the opposition and distrust Western assurances. The regime continues to receive support from abroad as well, in particular from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. And the regime retains dangerous capabilities such as chemical and biological weapons which it may employ in a last-ditch effort to survive.

To accomplish our objectives despite these obstacles, I propose a three-pillar strategy, focused on people, funding, and material support. For each pillar, we should design one set of actions focused on undermining the Assad regime, and another focused on bolstering the opposition and preparing for a post-Assad Syria.

People

While there have been numerous defections and casualties among the senior ranks of the Syrian military and the Assad regime, support for the regime appears to persist among the Syrian population, especially among the Alawite and Christian communities. Undermining that support requires a two-sided policy. On the one hand, the US and our allies must be forceful advocates for Syrian minorities, working actively to ensure their representation in opposition bodies and guaranteeing their protection in post-Assad Syria. This is easily said, but more difficult to do, as mere verbal assurances are not likely to be deemed credible by these communities. It will require ensuring that these minorities are integrated into post-Assad planning efforts from the start, and after Assad's fall it may ultimately require the establishment of safe zones policed by international peacekeepers, to deter sectarian bloodletting.

The other side of this coin is incentivizing military officers and other high-level supporters of the regime to defect as many of their colleagues have. The US and our allies can play a role in this by offering clemency to all but the commanders most responsible for the regime's war crimes, and encouraging the Syrian opposition to do the same. This need not preclude immunity being offered after Assad's fall even to officers who do not defect – that will be a question for Syrians themselves, who should be guided by lessons from Iraq and elsewhere - but those officers should not expect to be spared sanctions and other penalties during the conflict.

When it comes to the opposition, our focus should be on supporting responsible, democratically-minded leaders of the political and military opposition, and helping them to govern and deliver services in areas where Damascus has lost control and planning in earnest for a post-Assad Syrian government. The Obama Administration has recently taken some welcome steps regarding the former, notably by committing funds to begin building local institutions in opposition-held areas. On the latter front, however, we should encourage the opposition to form an interim government which can serve as a focal point for opposition efforts, build a set of principles beyond merely seeking to topple Assad that can bring the opposition together, and serve as a channel for international aid and coordination. This point is key – if we want such an interim government to have genuine influence, we should channel our support through it to the opposition. This may, at times, not be the most effective way of delivering aid to those who need it, but is important for building up a viable, non-extremist alternative to the Assad regime.

Funding

Despite the strong sanctions that the US, EU, and others have imposed on the Assad regime, it is reportedly continuing to receive imports of good critical to continuing the conflict, as well as

revenue for exports. A recent report by Human Rights First provides some details on the countries and international banks that are complicit in providing this financial lifeline to the Assad regime. Washington and our allies should strengthen our sanctions regime to target those governments and entities which are doing so, using the example of similar sanctions enacted against Iran and North Korea.

Funding for the opposition, on the other hand, continues to lag. On the humanitarian side, the United Nations stated recently that it has received just one-fifth of the \$1.5 billion it believes to be necessary to fund its Syria relief operations for the first six months of 2013. The Obama Administration recently announced an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance, bringing the US total to \$385 million, but it is clear that our allies need to step up their support in this regard. The US should be at the forefront not only of providing funding, but of the diplomatic effort to secure funding from others, as the refugee crisis implicates the security of close allies such as Jordan and Turkey and threatens the fragile stability of countries such as Lebanon, all of which are important to broader American interests in the region.

Even less impressive, however, is the assistance provided to the Syrian opposition to prevail in its fight against the Assad regime. The Obama Administration recently announced that it would contribute an additional \$60 million in nonlethal support to the opposition, bringing the US total reportedly to \$115 million, though this figure may exclude other forms of support being provided. This figure pales in comparison to support being provided in support of other American strategic interests in the region, few of which are as urgent as the Syrian conflict. Secretary Kerry's announcement of new aid to the Syrian opposition, for example, was closely followed by an announcement of \$190 million in budgetary support for Egypt, which has been using aid in part to defend the value of its currency. It is hard to square this discrepancy with any reasonable prioritization of US interests in the region, or estimation of the return that the investment of US foreign aid dollars will yield to our national security.

Material Support

Few questions have been as contentious as what level of military involvement in the Syria conflict is appropriate, if any. The best way to reach this decision is again to first consider our objectives, rather than to begin merely by debating tactics. Bringing the conflict to a quick conclusion requires breaking the rough stalemate that has developed between regime and opposition forces. This argues for degrading the regime's military capabilities, enhancing the opposition's, or both. But promoting stability in Syria after Assad's fall requires developing a professional, non-sectarian security force, which argues for direct military assistance to the opposition. With regard to both, we should seek to avoid open-ended commitments, and focus instead on discrete goals achievable in the short- to medium-term.

As the ranks of regime forces have suffered attrition, it appears that Assad has come to rely increasingly on air power and missile forces. Eliminating these would erode much of the regime's advantage over opposition forces. To this end, the United States should seek NATO support – since

the UN route is effectively closed due to Russian and Chinese opposition – for limited air strikes in Syria against the regime’s key military assets. This too is easier said than done, and will require significant diplomatic effort, which makes it all the more important that this effort begin immediately.

An equally important effort – and practically speaking, one which can be more quickly implemented – will be to deprive the Syrian regime of the assistance that it is receiving from abroad. While the regime appears to be receiving most of its weapons from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, the aforementioned report by Human Rights First details a number of countries and entities which are providing military goods to Assad, whether weapons, communications technology, or fuel. A more robust effort to disrupt this supply chain – either through sanctions or interdiction – is needed.

Regarding the opposition forces, it has been widely noted that while they are receiving arms and other forms of military support, that support seems to be disproportionately benefiting extremists who in the long term may represent as much of a threat to US interests as does the Assad regime. Given our strong interest in helping to establish a stable, moderate, and democratic government in Syria after Assad’s fall, we should seek now to build a professional, friendly security force that can not only hasten the regime’s demise but assume security responsibility afterward. While various reports suggest that the US is already providing a limited amount of training and other assistance to opposition forces, realistically speaking our influence will be limited if we are not also providing lethal assistance, including arms. While this certainly creates a risk – both of small arms proliferation in the region and of fueling a post-Assad civil conflict among opposition factions – the risk of not doing it, and leaving the field strictly to the extremists, appears greater.

It would be far preferable if no international military involvement were required in the Syrian conflict. It is likely that had we taken bolder action earlier in the conflict, such measures would not be necessary or would have entailed fewer risks. Having passed the strategic inflection point at which Syria’s peaceful uprising became an increasingly fragmented armed conflict, however, we must contend with the reality that confronts us today.

For this three-pillar strategy to be effective, it cannot and should not be carried out by the United States alone. Rather than simply implementing it unilaterally, we should seek support from our allies both inside and outside the Middle East. In particular, it is important that we strive to build a consensus among our regional allies, who have had starkly different approaches to the conflict. Some of these differences stem from diverging interests and ideologies, but they are also in large part the result of the United States’ failure to stake out a strategy and exercise leadership.

I do not make these proposals lightly; bolder action carries risk, and of course may be less effective than I hope. But while the outcome of a different policy is as yet unknowable, the consequences of passivity and inaction must now be regarded as clear – a conflict which is deepening, not abating, and which is drawing in the region, rather than remaining contained. This is precisely the sort of crisis which on both a moral and strategic basis calls for American leadership; if we decline to

exercise such leadership, the consequences – for the Middle East and for our position there – may be grimmer still.