

WRITTEN STATEMENT
JEFFREY D. FELTMAN, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS

SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EASTERN AND
SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

“U.S Policy on Syria”

November 9, 2011

Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Risch, Distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss our goals with regard to Syria and the strategy we are implementing to achieve them.

Much has changed both within Syria and in the international response to what is happening inside Syria since the unrest began eight months ago. Protests that started in the provincial village of Dara'a have spread to every city and every major town in the country. The Syrian people have demonstrated an irrepressible hunger for a change in the way their country is governed. They are no longer willing to tolerate the blatant denial of their universal rights and trampling of their dignity. They are no longer willing to remain quiet about the rampant corruption, brutality, and ineptitude of the mafia-like Assad clique that has hijacked the Syrian state and transformed it into an instrument whose sole purpose is to retain power in the hands of a small group of self-interested elites.

The protestors in Syria have overcome the barrier of fear. They are out on the streets of cities and towns all over Syria every single day despite the relentless and indiscriminate violence that the regime has deployed against them. According to the estimates of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, over 3,500 Syrians have been killed since the protests began. Tens of thousands have been detained, and many of those have been tortured. In a report of her findings in August, the High Commissioner noted “a pattern of human rights violations that constitutes widespread or systemic attacks against the civilian population, which may amount to crimes against humanity.” The violations included murder, forced disappearances, summary executions, torture, deprivation of liberty, and persecution. But the regime’s overwhelming use of force has not been able

to suppress the street protests. Peaceful street protestors have passed the point of no return. They will not stop until Bashar al-Assad and his clique are gone.

The Syrian army has been forced to occupy its own country. Even small towns are continuously occupied by tanks, armored personnel carriers, and battalions of foot soldiers along with plain-clothes intelligence personnel and regime-sponsored armed groups who do much of the dirty work. The pressure is starting to wear on the army. It is not just the fast, unsustainable tempo of operations and unending redeployments ordered to quell every manifestation of dissent – the soldiers of the Syrian army are increasingly rejecting a mission that calls for them to kill and brutally repress their own countrymen, in some cases people from their own tribes and hometowns. Military defections, primarily by conscripts and junior officers, are on the rise, and the pressure on senior officers continues to mount.

The violence is still continuing. In its desperation, the regime is executing a deliberate and bloody strategy of channeling peaceful protest into armed insurrection. It is stoking the fears of Syria's minority communities with blatant propaganda about foreign conspiracies and domestic terrorism while cynically claiming that the regime is their only protection from sectarian violence. Make no mistake: the regime is driving the cycle of violence and sectarianism. The Syrian people are resisting it, but the regime is working diligently to fulfill its own prophecy of inter-communal violence.

Assad and his inner circle know they cannot contain or manage peaceful opposition, so they assault it with violence and with terror. They believe they can handle a violent resistance because violence is a medium they know well. Mass arrests, *shabiha* thuggery and outright regime violence have forced peaceful protestors to adapt their methods. They now arrange gatherings of smaller groups on short notice and disperse before security forces are able to respond. And as they are literally beaten off the streets, protestors are learning new forms of peaceful resistance such as boycotts and strikes. Security forces have responded to civil disobedience such as last week's general strike in Dara'a with intimidation and vandalism.

While, for the most part, the opposition has thus far refused to be baited into responding with violence, armed resistance to the regime is on the rise, with some taking up arms in self-defense. This is not surprising

given that they are faced with increasingly brutal repression and are still denied the political space to organize and make their voices heard peacefully. But it is potentially disastrous to their cause. Forcing the opposition to become violent is the deliberate strategy of the Assad government. The regime is confounded by protestors chanting "peaceful, peaceful" and shopkeepers who shutter their stores in solidarity with those killed and arrested, but it knows precisely how to handle armed insurrection: with brutal and overwhelming force. By working diligently to channel non-violent opposition into a proto-insurgency, the regime seeks to discredit the opposition, scare minorities into submission, unite security forces against a common enemy, fragment international consensus and tear Syria apart along sectarian lines. This must be resisted.

On the economic front, the regime's financial situation is growing increasingly dire. Tough, targeted sanctions from the United States and the European Union have squeezed the regime's cash-flow. Oil revenue, which used to make up about a third of government revenue, is drying up. Europe used to buy more than 90% of Syria's crude. Today it buys none. As a result, the Syrian government has had to dramatically cut oil production. All its storage tanks are filled to capacity. Despite months of desperate efforts to entice potential new buyers with offers of deep discounts, the regime has been unable to find alternative customers.

Meanwhile, we have required U.S. persons to block Syrian regime property and the EU has frozen assets of two Syrian banks for their role in facilitating the regime's access to the international financial system. Even non-U.S. and non-European companies that are not directly affected by our sanctions have come to the conclusion that it is not in their interest to do business with this regime. And it is not just the United States and EU that are tightening the financial noose around the regime. Canada and Japan have deployed sanctions of their own.

But more than sanctions, it is the financial ineptitude of the Syrian government that is driving Syria's economy over a cliff. The Syrian economy was already in a precarious state before this crisis. The regime's mismanagement and attempts to buy its way back into political favor have vastly exacerbated the problem. This is why we have urged our Arab and European partners to increase their pressure on the regime now, before Bashar al-Assad precipitates a complete collapse of the Syrian economy.

Turning to the Syrian opposition, one of the more promising recent developments is the establishment of the Syrian National Council, a coalition including secularists, Christians, Islamists, Druze, Alawis, Kurds and other groups from both inside and outside Syria who have joined together to form a united front against the Assad regime. When you consider that for the past forty years, the Syrian people have been prevented from engaging in any political activity or even political discussion, it is truly remarkable that in a matter of just a few months, the SNC has managed to bring together such a broad array of groups into a united coalition, despite the regime's relentless attempts to thwart their efforts. We have not endorsed any specific opposition group – only the Syrian people can decide who can legitimately represent them. But we take the advent of the SNC very seriously, and we support the broader opposition's efforts to focus on the critical task of expanding and consolidating its base of support within Syria by articulating a clear and common vision and developing a concrete and credible post-Assad transition plan.

There are still many Syrians who, while they are appalled by Bashar al-Assad, see his continued rule as preferable to alternatives they fear will be worse. It is up to the opposition to convince those Syrians that a credible alternative exists and that Assad's departure will not mean chaos, civil war, or a new form of tyranny, but rather a representative, pluralistic, secular and accountable government that will operate by rule of law, respond to the needs of its people, and uphold and protect the rights and interests of all Syrians, regardless of sect, ethnicity, gender or class. The United States understands Syrians will determine their own formula for government by the consent of the governed, but we will not support an outcome that replaces one form of tyranny or repression with another.

We continue to meet regularly with members of the opposition, including, but not exclusively, many SNC members, and we encourage other governments to do the same.

The positions of Syria's neighbors have changed dramatically since March. Whereas, the initial inclination of many leaders in the region was to support Assad as the "devil they knew" and putative guarantor of stability, nearly all of the regional leaders with whom I engage now recognize that Assad and his regime are driving the instability. They recognize that Assad is part of the problem, not the solution and -- some quietly, some not so quietly -- admit to wanting him gone. They recognize that if Assad is

allowed to continue, he will precipitate their worst nightmare: the collapse of the Syrian state with violence spilling over into the rest of the region. This crisis could easily spread beyond Syria's borders; Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon already host thousands of refugees.

The Gulf Cooperation Council has described the Syrian regime as a killing machine. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said he believes the opposition will be successful in their “glorious” resistance to the ongoing government crackdown. During a September visit to Libya, he said, “Those who repress their own people in Syria will not survive. The time of autocracies is over. Totalitarian regimes are disappearing. The rule of the people is coming.”

The continuous coverage of the Assad regime's brutality in the pan-Arab media has decimated Assad's standing on the Arab street. A recent poll by the Arab American Institute suggests that Assad has become a pariah in the Arab world. The poll, conducted in early October surveyed over 4,000 Arabs in six countries. Just three years ago, a region-wide poll of the same six countries asked respondents to name a leader, not from their own country, that they most respected. Bashar al Assad scored higher than any other Arab head of state. Today, however, the overwhelming majority of Arabs side with those Syrians demonstrating against the government (with support for them ranging from 83% in Morocco to 100% in Jordan). When asked whether Bashar al Assad can continue to govern, the highest affirmative ratings he receives are a mere 15% in Morocco and 14% in Egypt, with the rest in low single digits.

The Arab League has repeatedly condemned the regime's violence and called for a peaceful political solution while insisting that the Syrian regime meet a set of reasonable conditions before any negotiations begin. The League dispatched its Secretary General to Damascus on September 10 and a Ministerial-level delegation on October 26. After strenuous efforts to wiggle out of or dilute the League's conditions, on November 2, the Syrian government accepted the terms of an Arab League plan that includes:

- a cessation of violence,
- the release of political prisoners,
- the withdrawal of security forces from populated areas,
- free access for journalists and Arab League monitors, and

- an Arab League-hosted national dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition.

We welcome the efforts of the Arab League to stop the Assad regime's assaults on the Syrian people, but success of the Arab League mission will depend not on what the regime says, but on what it does. The regime must comply with each of these obligations fully – not within weeks but within days. It must not be allowed to exploit this process to buy time through half measures, token gestures, and endless discussion of technicalities, while more Syrians are killed and imprisoned. We strongly support free and unfettered access to Arab League monitors throughout Syria, but they should be complemented by internationally recognized professional human rights monitors as well as journalists. Syria needs credible witnesses throughout the country that can document and deter the regime's violent excesses.

As for dialogue, it is up to the opposition to decide whether or not it wishes to discuss with the regime the terms of Syria's transition from dictatorship to democracy. Under no circumstances should a dialogue be a precondition for ending regime violence against Syrian citizens. Nor should the regime be able to dictate which oppositionists should take part in discussions or where those discussions should take place.

Since the Syrian regime "agreed" to the League's conditions on November 2, scores of innocent Syrians have been killed. Security forces remain deployed in most cities and towns. Tanks and artillery continue to fire into residential areas in Homs. Thousands of peaceful protestors remain in detention. Arrests continued unabated. If the regime continues to spurn this most recent "last chance," we hope that the Arab League will take additional, clear measures to express its condemnation of the Syrian regime and solidarity with the Syrian people while taking a leading role in building international pressure for a political transition in Syria, including at the United Nations.

The topic of Syria is consistently raised in diplomatic conversations with Arab leaders. And in those conversations, almost all the Arab leaders say the same thing: Assad's rule is coming to an end. Change in Syria is now inevitable. It is only a question of how long Assad will fight to hold onto power and how many more innocent Syrians have to die before his rule

ends. Some Arab leaders already have begun to offer Assad safe-haven in an effort to encourage him to leave peaceably and quickly.

Iran continues to be complicit in the violence in Syria, providing material support to the regime's brutal campaign against the Syrian people. Cynically capitalizing on the Syrian government's growing alienation from its Arab neighbors, Iran is seeking to increase its influence in Syria and help Assad remain in power as a vital conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon. But public statements last month by President Ahmadinejad calling for Assad to stop the violence and enact reforms might indicate that even the Iranians doubt the sustainability of Assad's rule. Still, Iran has provided political, financial, and material assistance in support of the regime's brutal crackdown against the Syrian people.

We remain actively engaged in ratcheting up the pressure on Assad bilaterally and multilaterally. Following President Obama's statement on August 18, governments from every continent echoed the President's call for Assad to step aside. Since the beginning of the Syrian unrest, we have pursued targeted financial measures to increase pressure on the Syrian regime and its enablers. We have specifically targeted those responsible for human rights abuses, senior officials of the Syrian government, and the regime's corrupt business cronies. The Executive Order signed by the President in August blocks the property of the Syrian government, bans U.S. persons from new investments in or exporting services to Syria, and bans U.S. imports of, and other transactions or dealings in, Syrian-origin petroleum or petroleum products. These measures represent some of the strongest sanctions the U.S. government has imposed against any country in the world.

In addition, European sanctions banning the purchase of Syrian petroleum products -- the regime's most important source of foreign exchange -- and freezing the assets of select Syrian banks in Europe have had an arguably greater impact given the larger volume of Syrian trade with Europe. We are also working with our international partners, including our Arab allies, to block efforts by the Syrian regime to circumvent American and European sanctions. The United States and European Union will continue to deploy new sanctions against key regime figures, regime enablers (including the regime's corrupt businessmen cronies), and companies and organizations that support the regime. These sanctions

include asset freezes and travel bans targeted to affect the regime while sparing the broader economy to the greatest extent possible.

We have led the effort to hold two special sessions of the UN Human Rights Council on the situation in Syria. At the second special session, we worked closely with many of Syria's Arab neighbors, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan, to ensure unified regional condemnation of the Syrian regime and to establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the on-going human rights violations. We expect the Commission of Inquiry to be permitted to carry out its mission without restrictions. We believe that the introduction of more witnesses will play a critical role in proving to the world what is really happening in Syria and mobilizing fence-sitting nations to join us in bringing greater pressure to bear on the regime.

Despite the October 4 veto of the EU-sponsored draft resolution on Syria, we remain committed to pursuing multilateral sanctions at the Security Council. But if Russia and China cynically continue to stand in the way of international efforts to end the violence in Syria, the United States and other allies of the Syrian people will consider other steps to ensure the Syrian people are protected. The UN is one important channel but not the only one. Nevertheless, we will continue our efforts to convince Russia, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa to change their positions regarding sanctions against Syria, and we will encourage our Arab allies and the Syrian opposition to aggressively engage with those countries as well.

In the meantime, we would suggest that these countries ask and answer some basic questions. Does the regime permit peaceful protest? Does it allow the peaceful opposition to organize, discuss and deliberate without fear of assassination or arrest? Does the regime permit the UN commission of inquiry to enter Syria and do its internationally-mandated work? Does it allow human rights monitors and journalists to witness the situation on the ground? Has the regime met any of its self-imposed deadlines for reform or for ending violence against civilians? The answer to all of these questions is obviously no.

Complementing our international efforts, Ambassador Ford has been doing exceptional work in providing Washington policy makers with a clear perspective of what is happening in Syria. Thank you for confirming him. He has boldly delivered strong messages to the Syrian regime and met repeatedly with opposition figures and civil society. His courageous efforts

show our resolve to pressure the Syrian regime to end its senseless killing, demonstrate our solidarity with the Syrian people, and help to shine an international spotlight on the gross abuses of the Assad regime. This Administration's principled stand against Assad's brutality, and the Ambassador's own actions to show solidarity with the Syrian people, have led to attacks and intimidation by the regime against Embassy Damascus and Ambassador Ford himself. He is currently in the United States on leave, and we expect that he will return to his post before long. For as long as we are able, we will maintain an embassy and an ambassador in Damascus. Robert Ford will continue to interact with the Syrian people and the Syrian government.

Overall, the Administration is following a careful but deliberate and principled course. This is necessary given Syria's complex and unique circumstances. We do not seek further militarization of this conflict. Syria is not Libya. Nor, for that matter, is it Tunisia, Egypt, or Yemen. The way forward includes supporting the opposition while working with our international partners to further isolate and pressure the regime through diplomatic and financial means. We will work with the Syrian people and our international partners to do what we must to ensure that Assad and his regime are prevented from murdering Syrian citizens and tearing the Syrian state apart.

The Syrian people are entitled to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, basic rights enshrined in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the Syrian republic is a signatory. The Syrian people are seeking a government that abides by these principles, and which governs only with the consent of its citizens. The emergence of such a government in Syria is in the interest of the Syrian people and in the interest of the United States.

We ideally seek a peaceful Syrian-led political transition that includes the end of Bashar al-Assad's rule and the replacement of the corrupt, incompetent and violent regime he built and tolerated with one responsive to the needs of the Syrian people. One thing I have learned from the events of the Arab world in the past year is humility regarding my own ability to predict the outcomes or timelines of these convulsive and transformational processes. I cannot tell you exactly how long it will take to achieve this outcome in Syria. It has the potential to be a long, difficult process, but the sooner the better for Syria and the region.

While the United States sympathizes with Syrian military defectors and average citizens attempting to protect themselves, we urge them to think strategically about how best to accomplish their goals. We still believe that violent resistance is counterproductive. It will play into the regime's hands, divide the opposition, and undermine international consensus against the regime. We urge the opposition, and our regional allies, to continue to reject violence. To do otherwise would, frankly, make the regime's job of brutal repression easier. At the same time, all Syrians must know that they have the support of the international community.

How do we stop spiraling violence? As a means of creating greater protection for civilians, documenting human rights abuses, and ensuring that undecided governments have a clearer view of what is really happening inside Syria, we continue to press for immediate, unfettered, and sustained access for internationally recognized human rights monitors, the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry, and independent journalists. If skeptics on the Security Council still believe Assad's propaganda about armed gangs, let them join the call for monitors and journalists who could prove it. The introduction of credible witnesses throughout Syria would both deter and ensure documentation of the regime's worst excesses. And it would diminish the temptation for protestors to put down their placards and pick up weapons. The Arab League has already insisted that Syria accept monitors as part of its plan to end the violence. The United States strongly supports European-led efforts to introduce a resolution in the UN General Assembly's Third Committee that would insist on the same.

Bashar al-Assad is desperate to convince himself and others that Syria is fine. In the relative calm of central Damascus, he may actually believe it. But when the money runs out, he and his inner circle will be forced to face the desperate reality of their situation and ideally will head for the exits voluntarily.

What we have to say to President Assad can be summed up very briefly: step aside and allow your people to begin the peaceful, orderly transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Bashar al-Assad has proven that he is incapable of reform. Our advice is to President Assad is that he leave now. He may want to study the recent examples of other Arab autocrats who have been confronted by populations that have overcome the barrier of fear to demand their universal rights. If Assad truly has Syria's

interests at heart, he will leave now. We will relentlessly pursue our two-track strategy of supporting the opposition and diplomatically and financially strangling the regime until that outcome is achieved.