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2 **“Next Steps in Syria”**

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7 **by**
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14 Mr. Chairman,
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16 Thank you for the opportunity to address your esteemed committee on a matter of critical
17 urgency and importance to U.S. interests in the Middle East. The situation in Syria today
18 is a source of immense human suffering with a death toll of over 100 Syrian citizens a
19 day, and a cumulative death toll that exceeds twenty thousand people. Now a major
20 refugee crisis is brewing: hundreds of thousands are fleeing fighting in Syria’s main cities
21 of Damascus and Aleppo and are crossing Syria’s borders with Jordan, Turkey and
22 Lebanon. Images of Syrian artillery and warplanes attacking the suburbs of ancient
23 Aleppo, reports of sectarian massacres, open discussion of circumstances in which
24 Syria’s arsenal of chemical weapons might be used, and indications of jihadist elements
25 joining the battle, all point to a heightening conflict in which the death toll is bound to
26 rise, perhaps dramatically. If Syria is indeed “spinning out of control,” as Defense
27 Secretary Panetta recently declared, then what he have witnessed in the past sixteen
28 months of revolt might just be the harbinger of a far greater human disaster to come.
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30 This is especially alarming because Syria is not like any of the other Arab countries that
31 have undergone revolution since January 2011. The regime represents an Alawite
32 minority community that numbers some 1.5 million people and enjoys the support of a
33 Christian community of an additional 2.2 million people. That represents roughly twenty
34 percent of the population. The Alawites fear that if the regime falls, they will be
35 slaughtered – that there is no place for them in a post-Assad, Sunni-dominated Syria.
36 Sixteen months of killing has not yet generated any major defections from these minority

37 communities – only Sunni officers, diplomats and business elites are now breaking with
38 the regime. With their backs to the wall, the Alawite regime considers its choice as
39 binary – either kill or be killed. And it has a well-armed fighting force of perhaps
40 300,000, a paramilitary force – the feared “shabiha” (ghosts) – of several more thousand,
41 and the backing of Iran and Hezbollah to carry on a fight to the death.

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43 Although the regime and its core supporters have the will and means to fight on, it is
44 nevertheless impossible to imagine that they will prevail against a Sunni majority that has
45 every right to be enraged by Assad’s killing spree and that is gaining strength as it
46 garners fighting experience and outside military support from the Sunni states of Turkey,
47 Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Already the regime has ceded control over much of the country
48 and its borders; the Syrian Kurds are busy establishing an autonomous zone in the east;
49 the economy is in free fall; and its international isolation is growing.

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51 Since the dynamics of this situation suggest that things will get a lot worse before they
52 get any better, and the human suffering will only increase, perhaps dramatically, what is
53 the United States to do?

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55 It is worthwhile in these circumstances to begin with a definition of U.S. core interests in
56 Syria, which is geo-strategically located in the center of the Arab-Israeli heartland –
57 bordering Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Israel – and which has served as the conduit
58 for Iran’s efforts to advance it’s bid for dominance in this sensitive region. Henry
59 Kissinger famously remarked that there could be no Arab-Israeli war without Egypt and
60 no Arab-Israeli peace without Syria. For that reason, successive U.S. administrations
61 have sought to bring Syria into the peace camp with Israel in order to shore up two core,
62 strategic interests: stability in a volatile but vital region; and security for Israel. In that
63 context, cutting the Syrian conduit that Iran uses to promote instability on Israel’s borders
64 through its Hezbollah and Hamas proxies is also a strategic imperative. Similarly,
65 preventing Syria from proliferating or using weapons of mass destruction serves our
66 strategic interests. The promotion of Lebanese independence from Syria and the
67 deterrence of Syrian destabilization of Jordan are also important American interests

68 though of less strategic weight. Finally, the United States has an interest in advancing the
69 human rights of the Syrian people, consistent with its pursuit of freedom and dignity for
70 the people of the Arab world.

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72 In other Arab states where the people have revolted against their authoritarian rulers, the
73 United States has had to balance promotion of its values against the pursuit of its
74 interests. In Libya, for example, the United States had a quite limited strategic interest
75 but chose to support military intervention because of the desire to prevent the almost
76 certain massacre of the citizens of Benghazi. In Bahrain, by contrast, the United States
77 chose to put its strategic interest in stability in neighboring Saudi Arabia ahead of its
78 support for the rights of Bahrain's citizens, one third of whom were in the streets
79 demanding fundamental reforms.

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81 In Syria, however, there is no such tension between American strategic interests and
82 American concern for the human rights of the Syrian people. Both would be well-served
83 by the prompt removal of the Assad regime, especially because its continuation in power
84 will not only cause immense suffering to the Syrian people, but also because the longer it
85 stays the higher the likelihood of a descent into chaos that could cause severe damage to
86 our other interests in Syria and the wider region (the stability of Syria's neighbors,
87 avoidance of conflict with Israel, prevention of the use or proliferation of Syria's
88 chemical weapons, avoidance of the spread of a sectarian Sunni/Shia conflict etc.).

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90 Thus, how soon the regime falls, and how it passes from power have become vitally
91 important questions for U.S. policy. But the Obama Administration finds itself
92 hamstrung in this situation. It has good reason to be reluctant to intervene militarily: the
93 American people are weary after ten years of war in the greater Middle East; the
94 international community is, at least for the time being, divided; the Syrian army still
95 wields considerable capabilities – including chemical weapons – that could drive up the
96 cost of intervention; and the opposition is divided and unable so far to present a coherent
97 alternative that the U.S. could actively help take power. All of these factors can and
98 probably will change over time: the American people will become increasingly angry

99 with the wholesale slaughter of innocents; Russia and China will find it increasingly
100 untenable to block UN Security Council action; the Syrian army will likely crack under
101 the strain of prolonged conflict with its own citizens; and the opposition is already
102 beginning to coalesce around a more coherent platform for transitioning to a post-Assad
103 Syria.

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105 However, the longer it takes for these developments to unfold, the harder it will be to
106 effect an orderly transition to a post-Assad Syria. The Alawites could repair to a “rump
107 state” in the mountains around Tartus and Latakia, resulting in a prolonged sectarian civil
108 war that could generate ethnic cleansing, large numbers of displaced persons and
109 refugees, and a possible overflow to Lebanon (where Shia Hezbollah dominates over
110 restive Sunni and Christian communities), Iraq (where a Shia government in Baghdad is
111 now confronting an Al Qaeda resurgence), and potentially Bahrain (where a Sunni king
112 rules over a Shia majority in revolt and where Iran might well play “payback” for the
113 loss of its Syrian ally).

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115 Time is therefore of the essence, and action needs to be taken notwithstanding the many
116 constraints. I believe a combination of the following steps is now necessary:

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- 118 1. *Work with the Russians on a Political Process:* Because Russian backing for the
119 regime is increasingly untenable, and because we need UN Security Council cover for
120 so many of the other steps, it is essential to persuade the Russians that their interests
121 can be better protected by working with us rather than against us. Secretary of State
122 Clinton has been working this issue hard but as the Russians begin to see the light, it
123 will be important for the President to engage Putin on a more regular and intense
124 basis to help remove his distrust of our motives and convince him that we have a
125 common interest in preventing the rise of Islamic extremism near his borders by
126 working on an orderly transition together. That orderly transition begins with Assad
127 standing aside in order for a U.S. and Russian-sponsored political dialogue to be
128 launched. At the moment the Russians insist that the dialogue be with Assad, which

129 is a non-starter for the opposition. We have to find a way to convince them that
130 helping to remove Assad is the only way to produce the dialogue that they want.

131 2. *Guarantee the Christians and Alawites:* As long as these communities fear for their
132 very survival they will stick with the regime. They need to receive credible
133 guarantees that their lives and interests will be preserved in a post-Assad, Sunni-
134 dominated Syria. These guarantees will likely need to be backed by a UN-sponsored
135 protective force since they will have no faith in commitments extended by the
136 opposition. Planning should get underway now for such a blue helmet force that will
137 need to be ready to intervene either when Assad steps aside or when he is overthrown.
138 But there can be no such force without Russian cooperation (hence step #1).

139 3. *Work on the Alawite Generals:* If credible guarantees can be provided to their
140 community, these generals may be more willing to consider splitting with Assad and
141 his henchmen. Their units are already under considerable strain; their inner sanctum
142 has already been penetrated; some of them must see the writing on the wall. If an
143 orderly transition is to be sustained, the army will need to play a stabilizing role
144 which requires generals with their intact units defecting to the opposition. The
145 Russians can play a useful role here if they are in harness with us; other means can be
146 used to contact them. At a certain point it might also makes sense for Israeli and
147 Turkish units to conduct large-scale exercises on their respective borders with Syria
148 (they each have recently reinforced their troops there). IDF positions on the Golan
149 Heights are 40 kilometers from Damascus; Turkey has a lengthy border with Syria.
150 Military exercises on their own sides of the border could concentrate the minds of the
151 Syrian generals on the potential for a three-front war if they don't move against Assad
152 and his inner circle.

153 4. *Coordinate with the Arabs, Turks, and Israelis:* Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken
154 the lead in concerting Arab League opposition to the Assad regime and in arming the
155 opposition. We need to work closely with them to ensure that their arms are going to
156 the elements in the opposition that have an interest in an orderly post-Assad future for
157 all Syria's citizens. In particular, the Saudis and Qataris need to be cautioned against
158 lighting a sectarian fire that could easily spread to Bahrain and cause immense
159 instability in the Gulf.

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161 Turkey has a key role to play in promoting an orderly transition. Prime Minister
162 Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu have spoken about the creation of
163 humanitarian corridors across the Turkish border in Syria. With the potential for a
164 large-scale refugee inflow, the Turks may soon be ready to move. However, that will
165 require a UN cover and NATO support. We should be planning for both those
166 contingencies now.

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168 We should be consulting closely with the Israelis, given their knowledge of the Syrian
169 army and their intense interest in ensuring that Syria's chemical weapons are not
170 transferred to Hezbollah or fall into the hands of jihadist elements. There may be low
171 profile ways in which they can help the opposition too.

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173 5. *Concert the Opposition:* One of the most problematic challenges to the achievement
174 of an orderly transition – beyond persuading Assad to step down – is to get the
175 opposition to generate a coherent and credible leadership that commands the loyalty
176 of a majority of the many factions that have now assumed a role in the Syrian
177 revolution. Progress on this effort has been frustratingly slow. Hopefully the greater
178 focus now on the internal opposition will yield a more detailed and accurate mapping
179 of all these groups that will then make an effort to unify them more possible.

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181 None of these steps are easy and there is no sure fire recipe for producing an orderly
182 transition to a post-Assad Syria. Nevertheless, there is so much at stake for our strategic
183 interests and so much to gain from preventing a descent into chaos that we must do our
184 best by acting quickly and resolutely.