

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

WASHINGTON, DC

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Chairman Menendez's Opening Statement at SFRC Hearing on Syria

WASHINGTON, DC – U.S. Senator Robert Menendez, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is currently chairing a full committee hearing about United States policy and priorities towards Syria.

[CLICK HERE](#) to watch a live stream of the hearing, or
visit: <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-toward-syria>

Witnesses include Robert Ford, U.S. Ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic, U.S. Department of State; Elizabeth Jones, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State; Daniel Glaser, Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, U.S. Department of Treasury; Dennis Ross, Counselor, Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Senator Menendez's opening remarks as prepared for delivery are below:

Thank you, everyone, for being here today for what I know will be a very informative hearing on the situation in Syria.

Let me first thank our three panelists who will help us unravel the complexities and implications of what has become a dangerous sectarian war that has already taken the lives of more than 70,000 Syrians and displaced at least 4 million more -- according to the U.N.

I hope our witnesses will pay particular attention to the implications of this massive humanitarian tragedy and will shed more light on the options we may have, if any, for a more active, assertive American leadership role.

This does not mean throwing ourselves into the middle of a very complicated and dangerous sectarian civil war. None of us wants to do that.

But it does mean looking at every option for the United States to play a leading role in a coordinated international response that comes with a clearly articulated strategy that our partners in the Middle East and around the world can support.

That said -- Syria is more than just a humanitarian tragedy. Serious U.S. interests are at stake, and they cannot be ignored.

Large chemical-weapons-stock-piles could fall into the wrong hands, or be used by the Assad regime against its own people. Extremist groups could destroy the possibility of a stable post-Assad Syria. The Syrian state could collapse, leaving a safe haven for terrorists sitting on Israel's border... constituting a new threat to the region with broader implications for our own security. The refugee crisis and sectarian violence could worsen and spread instability not only to Jordan and Lebanon, but to Iraq and Turkey.

We are all hoping for a quick end to the Assad regime – which would mean an end to Iran's closest ally in the Middle East. But we cannot allow Assad's end to trigger more instability in an already turbulent region. The basic question I hope we explore today is this: Given the realities on the ground in Syria -- What exactly do we do? What are our options?

First, we are already providing \$385 million in humanitarian support to Syria, but – even in this difficult fiscal climate -- we could dramatically increase that number to help end the suffering of the Syrian people caught in one of the most devastating humanitarian tragedies the region has seen.

Just last week, the UN said that the humanitarian crisis had escalated so dramatically in recent months that the relief effort was now broke. An increase in aid would signal to other donor nations that this is not business as usual – that there's too much at stake to allow a failed Syrian state to cause more suffering and destabilize the region further.

Second, we must cut off the Assad regime's economic lifelines from Moscow and Tehran. Russia and Iran must both know that there will be economic consequences for their continued support of a regime that is committing horrific atrocities against its own people.

Third, we must increase support for the Syrian Opposition Coalition and other groups inside Syria that -- we are confident -- share our fundamental values and interests.

We need to continue to identify these groups. and directly provide them with the non-lethal aid we're already sending. And we need to assist them in setting up governing institutions that are a clear alternative to Assad.

In my view, looking at the situation as it exists, I believe the time has come to consider providing military aid to the opposition.

It should include weapons, but stop short of those weapons that could threaten our own interests if they fall into the wrong hands – like shoulder fired missiles..

We learned that lesson in Afghanistan the first time around. Let's not make the same mistake again.

We also should be providing training to improve the fighting capacity of the friendly opposition forces we identify. It will not only help in the struggle to end the atrocities, it will also help us in establishing working relationships with the future leaders of Syria.

If we take these bold steps – publically and forcefully with the support of our allies -- we will send a strong signal to key Middle Eastern and European partners that they should get behind a joint effort. A signal to countries -- like Iraq -- that it's time to get behind the international community and cut off the supply lines that stretch from Tehran to Damascus -- across Iraq.

And it will send a strong signal to Bashar Al Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies that efforts to keep him in power will be in vain.

In the weeks ahead, I plan to introduce legislation that reflects this strategy and I look forward to discussing the elements of it today in our two panels. Before we hear from them, let me ask Senator Corker for his opening statement.

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