

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
U.S. Policy Toward Syria
Testimony of Ambassador Dennis Ross
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today on US policy toward Syria. There can be no doubt that the ongoing conflict in Syria confronts us with terrible challenges. A humanitarian catastrophe gets worse by the day, as nearly a quarter of Syria's population may now be displaced internally or externally and the death toll of close to 80,000 continues to rise inexorably. But it is not just our conscience that is affected by this gruesome war. Our interests are also engaged because the conflict is unlikely to remain confined to Syria. Indeed, the more Syria unravels, the more the state comes apart, the more refugees flee to the neighboring states—the more each of Syria's neighbors will be threatened with increased instability.

Even assuming that al Qaeda does not establish itself in what may be the emerging failed state of Syria, the refugee flow already constitutes a growing danger to Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. None of these states can easily absorb the numbers—and in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, the sectarian differences may rekindle civil conflicts we'd hoped had been relegated to the past. Turkey may face less of a problem in this regard and may also be more capable of managing the growing influx of refugees, but it too is facing growing difficulties in absorbing the numbers and managing the camps. Already there have been riots in the camps and we should not assume these are one-time events.

But, of course, it is not just the flow of refugees that endangers Syria's neighbors and the region. The disintegration of the Syrian state at some point means that it will no longer have centralized control of the chemical weapons there. If nothing is done beforehand to gain control of the weapons or destroy them, it is not only Syria's neighbors that will be in grave danger.

The point is that the Syrian conflict challenges our values and our interests. In our tradition of foreign policy, we have often seen two schools of thought: the idealist and realist. The idealists have been driven by moral and humanitarian concerns. They see US interests engaged when our values are threatened. They

justify American intervention, to include the use of force, when there is a high moral purpose; for the idealists, Rwanda represented an unforgiveable blight on our conscience. Idealists would argue that we should have acted militarily to prevent genocide. In their eyes, we were late in intervening in the Balkans and right to do so in Libya.

Realists, on the other hand, argue that we should only intervene when we have tangible, vital interests at stake. They view humanitarian interventions as costly, embodying an emotional binge that inevitably comes back to haunt us—making us even less capable of intervening when our interests are actually engaged. For the realists, we should only intervene when we are directly threatened, or when a strategic ally, the wider flow of oil, or our broader credibility is at risk. The first Gulf War met the test; the Iraq war and Libya did not.

It is rare that idealists and realists find common ground and agree on threats. Ironically, Syria is a place where the idealists and realists should come together. There is a moral imperative to try to find a way to affect what is happening on the ground, but there is also a strong national security imperative at least to contain the conflict in Syria, ensure that its CW do not disappear, and prevent the neighborhood from being destabilized.

When described in this fashion, it all seems so clear. The problem, of course, is that we are emerging from over a decade of war—having spent a great deal in blood and treasure—and Syria is both literally and figuratively a mess. The opposition has never been coherent. Indeed Islamists have now seemingly gained the upper hand within the opposition. The non-Sunni minorities fear what would come after Assad, who for his part has stoked the sectarian conflict in an attempt to preserve his regime.

The zero-sum nature of the conflict, with the Assad regime having killed and displaced so many of his own citizens, makes it hard to create a political process that brings elements of the opposition together with members of the regime who don't have blood on their hands. The continuing Russian protection of the Assad regime also inhibits the likelihood that he will choose to go before the opposition succeeds in getting to him. And, as long as he remains, it is highly unlikely that there will be a political process.

The fact that from an idealist and realist point of view we have a great stake and need to influence what is happening on the ground does not make any of these problems easier to deal with. That said, it is hard to see how we have a choice. President Obama has said that the use of chemical weapons--or the loss of control of the CW—would be a game-changer. Given the direction of the conflict, it is hard to believe that sooner or later we are not going to be faced with such a situation.

So what can and should we do now? We need to focus in the following three areas. First, on what can be done to change the balance of forces not only between the opposition and the regime but, more importantly, within the opposition itself. Second, we need to do more to protect the Syrian population. And third, we need to focus on containing the conflict so that it does not spread outside of Syria and destabilize the neighborhood.

With regard to the first, if you talk to any secular member of the opposition—as I have—they will tell you that when it comes to money and arms, they simply are not getting what the Islamists are getting. Some may argue that the Islamists—like Jabhat al-Nusra—have proven themselves through fighting more than any of the secular forces. That is probably true, but they have also had the means to do so. Reports that the Saudis may be diversifying who they provide arms to now may be true. Similarly, the fact that the British and the French seem inclined to do more is good, but the reality is that if we are to have influence, we will have to provide lethal assistance as well as non-lethal aid. Additionally, it is important for us to try to work with others to improve governance in areas where the opposition groups have gained control. But if we are going to influence the landscape and the outcome, arms must be part of the equation. There is no reason we cannot identify those we are prepared to support and test the commitments they make to us as well as their ability to control and account for the arms we provide. Indeed, the quality and quantity of arms we give can be calibrated to reflect their performance on their commitments. Put simply, it is an illusion to think that we will be able to affect the realities on the ground without providing lethal assistance.

Second, we need to do more to respond to the need of the Syrian public. This has two dimensions: protection on the one hand and meeting their humanitarian needs on the other. While I personally favor a no-fly zone and don't believe that it

runs the risks that some have identified, I would at least do what I call a no-fly zone on the cheap. Both we and our NATO allies now have Patriot batteries on the Turkish-Syrian border and I believe we should declare that any Syrian military aircraft flying within 50 miles of the border will be deemed to have hostile intent, and will be shot down. Would Assad challenge this? He would do so at high risk and at a time when the attrition of his air forces has to be a factor in his calculus. Fifty miles would offer protection from air assaults in Aleppo—and effectively create more protection for areas where opposition forces are in control. It would have the additional benefit of doing something meaningful to protect Syrian civilians and finally signal that we are not prepared to sit aside and do nothing in the face of the indiscriminate use of force against them.

As important as it is to offer protection, it is also clear that more must be done to meet the basic humanitarian needs of the Syrian people displaced by this conflict. The United Nations only belatedly has begun to provide assistance that does not go through the Syrian regime—which necessarily denies aid to those areas outside of its control. Today, the regime controls less than 40% of the country. To the credit of the Administration, it has been working through NGOs outside of the regime's control, but we must find ways to unilaterally and through our international partners expand significantly the assistance that is going to the Syrian people. The sad truth is that most displaced Syrians within the country are not receiving anything close to what is needed—conveying again what appears to be the indifference of the international community to the war that is being waged against Syria's civilian population.

The third requirement of our policy now is to hedge against the disintegration of Syria. I often say that the Las Vegas rules don't apply to Syria; what takes place in Syria won't stay there. Without making the fragmentation of the country a self-fulfilling prophecy, we need a containment strategy. Much of the opposition is highly localized. We need to think about how buffers can be built up at least in southern Syria, along part of the Syrian/Iraqi border and in the north. Investing in local governance—as part of a coherent design with the British, French, Saudis, Emirates, Jordanians, Turks and others—may be a way to hedge against the unknowns of the future and build the stake of those in Syria to stay put and shape their own future. I don't suggest that devising a containment strategy will be easy, but we have an interest in doing so and many of our allies, particularly those in the

Gulf, do as well. And, the Saudis and Emiratis certainly understand this may be a necessary buffer for to ensure their protection as events unfold.

With all the difficulties and unknowns that presently exist in Syria, one thing is clear: while there are surely costs in acting, the costs of inaction at this point are growing by the day. We may soon face a reality where what the President has declared as a game-changer takes place. Positioning ourselves to try to shape the landscape, and not simply react to changes in it, makes sense from the standpoint of our interests. But it also makes sense from the standpoint of our values—and the sooner the better.