

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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Chairman Menendez's Opening Remarks at Syria Hearing

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, made the following remarks at this morning's hearing about the state of affairs in Syria.

The remarks, *as prepared for delivery*, follow:

"Thank you all for being here. We have two panels today.

On our first panel is Robert Ford, Ambassador to Syria; Nancy Lindborg, Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance at USAID; and Thomas Countryman, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation.

On our second panel we have Ambassador Frederick Hof, Senior Fellow at the Rafi Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council and Dr. Leslie Gelb, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Welcome to all of you. I look forward to your perspective on the realities we face in Syria, the state of play, the progress we've made, and where we go from here strategically – especially given the catastrophic humanitarian crisis that is spreading across the region.

Seven million Syrians – a third of the country's population – have fled their homes. More than two million refugees – half of them children – have fled to surrounding countries. The regional impact is enormous. In tiny Lebanon, for example, the presence of 750,000 refugees is equivalent to some 58 million refugees entering the United States. Clearly, with 4,000 refugees fleeing Syria every day, for the sake of the region and the world, we must find a resolution to this devastating humanitarian crisis.

And now we read reports of a breakdown in Syria's health services, with the World Health Organization warning that confirmed cases of polio could be just the tip of the iceberg and a significant setback in the campaign to eradicate polio worldwide. While responsible players in the international community seek to address the humanitarian crisis, there is no end in sight to the suffering.

Despite that fact that most of us today would agree that a negotiated settlement is preferable to military action or the collapse of the Syrian state, the utter lack of consensus on a transitional governance plan for Syria portends continued bloodshed and suffering. While the international community holds meetings about meetings the Assad regime continues its brutal assault on the Syrian people, backed by Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah.

At this point, the consequences of failure to achieve a political settlement are frightening. A failed Syrian state, bordering Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and our ally Israel, that becomes a haven and training ground for violent extremist groups in an already unstable region. I'm concerned about what comes next strategically at the political, diplomatic, and humanitarian levels.

I would like to hear from each of you what our strategy should be going forward, and your assessments of the direction of the conflict – will the next Geneva conference take place in November, how can it take place when the Syrian opposition remains fragmented and resistant, how can it take place without empowering Assad, and what are the consequences if there are no steps taken toward negotiations?

What needs to happen for the Syrian opposition to unite in political purpose and a post-Assad governance plan? Does the U.S.-recognized Syrian opposition speak for Syrians inside Syria? How can we galvanize international support for a negotiated settlement, especially when Assad is backed by committed spoilers in Moscow and Tehran? What is the impact of the concerns raised by our Gulf partners about U.S. commitment to addressing the Syrian crisis? Worst of all, what are the consequences of a failed state in Syria?

The only positive note is the progress we are making on destroying and dismantling Syria's chemical weapons infrastructure and supply. Today the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that it has destroyed the equipment Syria used to make chemical weapons. And so far, inspectors have visited 21 of the 23 chemical weapons sites initially identified by Syrian authorities.

Let me conclude by saying that I want to make my view very clear at the outset: While the U.S. cannot and should not be the key that resolves every dispute in this region, we have a very real strategic stake in the stability of the region and in ensuring that Syria does not become a failed state.

I believe we need to further increase our humanitarian assistance to Syria and insist on humanitarian access; as well increase our support to communities hosting Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan. We must also call on other donor-nations to join us in this time of greatest need: Syria is now a global problem.

Finally, we need an answer as to what can be done to push all sides in this conflict toward a settlement and a future for Syria that does not include Assad. The stakes are high for the people of Syria, the region, and the world and we need to have a comprehensive strategy and an answer to the basic question: What comes next?"

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