

**Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign
Relations**

“SYRIA: U.S. POLICY OPTIONS”

A Statement by

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee,

It is an honor to talk with you today about Syria. In a year of tremendous change in the Arab world, Syria is among the places where change would be most welcome and where its ripples may have some of the most profound effects. As I see it, events in Syria are linked to those happening in the rest of the Arab world, although sometimes in surprising ways.

The Syrian people drew lessons from the political events in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, which they watched live on television. Yet, while they drew lessons from those events, few recognize the lessons that the Syrian government drew from those same events. I would like to enumerate five of those lessons here.

- 1) **Concessions do not bring security.** After watching President Zine al-Abdine bin Ali forced from power after six weeks, and President Hosni Mubarak in only 18 days, Bashar al-Assad likely concluded that those leaders gave in too soon, and the public saw their willingness to negotiate as a sign of weakness. Assad surely noticed that Moammar Gadhafi held out for months, and would likely still be in power were it not for six months of NATO air assault.
- 2) **Militaries still matter.** In Egypt and Tunisia, the military decided the president's time was done. In Bahrain, the military helped decide that the King would stay. Bashar al-Assad has assiduously maintained control over the military since he first came to power in 2000, and he has been careful to cultivate his assets there – leaving elite brigades under the control of family members, and ensuring that members of his own Alawite minority are in control of the senior officer and enlisted ranks.
- 3) **Allies matter, and P5 allies matter most.** Moammar Gadhafi mistakenly thought that his concessions to Western powers in 2003 and after would help secure his rule, and he never sought close ties with either China or Russia. When the UN Security Council voted a year ago to authorize the use of force in Libya, China and Russia abstained. Syria has made no grand gesture to the West in the hopes of winning protection, and it has actively sought to cultivate support from both Russia and China. While neither country fully supports Assad, each has been a bulwark against collective international action that would remove him from power.
- 4) **Minority rule is a resource.** We often see minorities as a source of cleavages in a society, but the anxieties of minority groups can make them cleave to ruling governments. The twelve percent or so of Syrians who are Alawite, the ten percent or so who are Christian, and the smaller Kurdish, Druze and Armenian populations, are all a source of strength to Assad, for

they fear dominance by the Sunni Arab majority. In many cases, they will fight to the death for the ruling government, because they fear ruin if it is deposed.

- 5) **The nature of the opposition matters.** The easier it is for the public to imagine a better alternative to the status quo, the more attractive that alternative will be. A confused and chaotic opposition that encompasses radical voices and includes supporters of violence is an asset to the ruling government, especially when it comes to maintaining the loyalty of urban elites who have the most to lose. While the Assad government has only indirect influence over the opposition, its interest is decidedly in encouraging splits in the opposition and goading the opposition to abandon the pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

What Bashar al-Assad is thinking is unknowable, but to the outside observer, it appears that he believes he can withstand the current challenge, much as his father stood down an Islamist opposition in Hama in 1982. Reports continue to surface that Assad is obsessed with comparisons to his father's leadership, with siblings and even his mother unfavorably comparing his resolve and his ruthlessness to that of his father.

While most regional observers also believe the younger Assad compares unfavorably to his father, he appears to have several advantages that make him less susceptible to overthrow than some of the other regional leaders who have lost their posts in the last year. He has indeed managed to learn from the mistakes of others, and he seems committed not to make them. He has been able to maintain loyalty within his inner circle, in part through sectarian ties. He is also blessed with an opposition that, by many measures, is one of the weaker ones in the region. Even after a year of organizing, many who have worked with the oppositions in Libya and Syria believe that the Libyan opposition was much more organized than its Syrian counterpart. The Libyan opposition also had the benefit of controlling territory from the earliest days of the uprising, and it enjoyed the prospect of tens of billions of dollars in oil revenues to distribute annually. The Syrian opposition has none of those advantages.

In my judgment, however, Assad has made fundamental miscalculations, particularly with regard to the outside world, that make his long-term survival unlikely.

- 1) **Alienating Turkey.** This is his biggest mistake, especially since Turkey had been assiduously courting him as part of its "zero problems with neighbors" strategy. After a long period of Turkish-led courtship, Turkey turned against Assad last August after what the Turks saw to be an insulting meeting between Assad and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Turkey's instinct in regional affairs in the last decade has been heavily oriented toward mediation and conflict resolution, but it has

decided to pivot against the Syrian regime and, in their words, on the side of the Syrian people.¹ Turkey now hosts much of the Syrian political opposition as well as the Free Syrian Army. Turkey is large and powerful enough that it can provide both a buffer for Syrian refugees and a base for anti-regime operations. Little remarked, but equally important, Syria cannot use an alienated Turkey as a bulwark against global isolation. Were Turkey in its traditional role, it would be harder for the United States and its allies to squeeze Syria; with Turkey in a more hostile position, it is harder for Syria to escape the squeeze.

- 2) **Alienating Saudi Arabia and Qatar.** For much of the last decade, these two countries have often sought to protect Assad, or at least to buy him off. After Syria's forced withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Qatar and Saudi Arabia put money into Syria in order to secure peace and out of a conviction that, if cornered, Bashar would be ferocious. That conviction has yielded to a determination that he should—and must—go, in part driven by the GCC's sense of accomplishment for having helped drive the loathed Moammar Gadhafi from power. Some view GCC hostility as an outgrowth of the Gulf leaderships' efforts to weaken their perennial nemesis, Iran, through weakening Iran's Syrian proxy. The dispute has more personal roots as well. Bashar seems to hold special disdain for the hereditary rulers of the Gulf, seeing them as wealthy Bedouin with neither education nor culture, and blessed only with deep pockets. They see him as the callow heir to his father, with neither the wisdom nor the resolve to guide his country successfully. Neither side sees the other as a worthy peer.
- 3) **Failing to create durable alliances with Russia and China.** Neither country seeks Assad's demise, and each is alarmed at the prospect of a popular revolution giving rise to a potentially pro-Western state in the Eastern Mediterranean. Still, neither country appears to share a vital interest in Bashar's survival, each is confident a successor regime can meet all of its needs, and each is cautious of ending up on the wrong side of another popular revolution.
- 4) **Failing to create a diversified economy.** Syria has been a client state for decades, first of the Soviet Union, and then of a combination of Iran, Iraq and the GCC states. After relying heavily on support from the outside, that support is no longer coming. By summer, international sanctions will be biting hard. The Iranians are unlikely to be a savior, as they will have

¹ Foreign Minister Davutoglu told a CSIS audience February 10, 2012, "We have problem, yes, with Syrian administration, but [not] with the Syrian people. And in the future, after a process, I am sure we will be having excellent relations with the new Syria, established by the people of Syria, with the free choice of Syria. In order to avoid the existing crisis, we cannot sacrifice for our future relations with Syria."

their own priorities and preoccupations. Syria relies heavily but not completely on imported fuel, and that fuel will become harder to obtain. Syria is, in many ways, both economically isolated and economically dependent, and that will create significant problems going forward.

- 5) **Becoming less preferable to many than the unknown.** Assad's behavior has become so noxious that a faceless leader is preferable to virtually all of Syria's neighbors, as well as to many Syrians. While all of Syria's neighbors seek to avert chaos in the country, none has a particular urge for democratic governance there, either. The conservative GCC states would be concerned by the precedent of a popular revolution, and Israel would be concerned by the prospect of another Islamist state on its borders. Many Lebanese seek stability of any kind, while Iraq maintains a grudge against Bashar for what he did facilitating the passage of Sunni extremists into Iraq (although they certainly do not want those extremists to run post-Assad Syria, either). In many ways, a military coup, whether led by Alawi or Sunni officers, meets all of their needs. It is unclear how such a coup could arise – which is not to say one would not.

The timeline of change in Syria remains a mystery. If there is a long war of attrition between the government and opposition, it could well drag on for years, as most wars of attrition do. It is worth remembering that sanctions isolated Saddam Hussein for more than a decade but were unable to remove him from power. Saddam had more assets than Assad does, but he also had more enemies. They were not enough to do him in.

Some argue that social media is a game changer here, making long-term and large-scale repression impossible. I am less sure. Certainly, social media makes it easier for the outside world to see what is happening in Syria. Yet, social media also makes it possible for the Syrian government to track networks and understand how the opposition works. I also do not know how long the world will continue to care about Syria if it seems like events there have fallen into a stalemate. Syrians are not heavily wired, and the government controls all of the mobile phone networks. Secure communications on a broad level is difficult. U.S. law has made the export of encryption technology to Syria illegal for many years, although some encryption is freely available on the Internet. I have no idea how many Syrians have been able to obtain such technology through smuggling and circumventing government censorship; I am not sure anyone has a much better idea.

Over the next year, Syria may tilt sharply toward civil war. With a ruthless government, a range of outside powers willing to support proxies, the possibility of staging attacks from neighboring countries, and a widespread perception that the alternative to victory is death, antagonists are likely to dig in. Levels of violence could escalate from what we have seen so far and approach what we saw in Iraq in 2006-2007, with a similar sectarian flavor. For those who seek change in Syria, it is worth noting that the more militarized this conflict becomes, the more the

advantage accrues to the government. Militarization not only puts the conflict into an area where the government is likely to enjoy a permanent advantage in firepower. It also legitimizes brutal attacks on civilian populations that radicalize segments and authenticates a narrative of a patriotic government fighting against foreign-financed brigands. The Syrian government is at its weakest when other Syrians question its legitimacy, evidenced most clearly by massive peaceful protests. I draw one chief lesson from Tunisia and Egypt, two states with legendary internal intelligence services that had reputations for both effectiveness and brutality: police can be effective against hundreds, but they cannot be effective against hundreds of thousands. The quick scaling of protest movements swiftly undermined the legitimacy of these governments. It is worth pointing out, however, that the immediate transition was not to a civilian government, but instead to some remnant of the former regime that acted in order to preserve its own institutional legitimacy.

I cannot give you a three-point plan on how to fix Syria this month, or even how to avoid disaster in the next year. We need to be realistic about how much we do not know in Syria and how much we cannot begin to predict. Even so, a number of policy conclusions that flow from the foregoing:

- 1) **Plan for a long engagement.** Tunisia and Egypt created an expectation that change could be fundamental and swift. Bashar has learned those lessons. Even though I think political change is quite likely, the odds of it happening this month, next month, or even in the next several months, remain low.
- 2) **Do not expect the opposition to sweep into power.** I do not think it is likely that the opposition will constitute a viable alternative government in the near or even intermediate term. It remains too divided, too feckless, and too torn by jealousy. Over time, successful donor coordination—for both humanitarian relief and more lethal assistance—can help forge chains of command and create incentives for greater cooperation. I do not think a putative government in exile is any more likely to come into power in Syria than was the case in Iraq.
- 3) **Understand that militarization helps Assad.** The more the protest movement looks like an armed insurrection, the more it will play into the hands of a relatively well-armed and well-trained Syrian army. Armies have proven relatively ineffective dealing with massive protests of hundreds of thousands of people that deny legitimacy to the ruler and ultimately threaten the legitimacy of the army if it confronts the people. Sustaining a focus on legitimacy rather than armed confrontation will save lives and harm Bashar much more than a guerrilla war would.
- 4) **Remember that diplomacy remains vital.** In particular, keeping Russia and China open to the possibility of a change in government in Syria is essential. Full coordination with Saudi Arabia and Turkey and other friendly states will make both their efforts and our own much more effective. Maintaining order

as refugee flows into neighboring countries increase will also require extensive diplomatic efforts on all aspects of donor coordination. The chief strength of the Annan Plan, in my view, is not in its effect on Syria. Instead, it is in its effect on the countries outside of Syria, providing unity and a sign of resolve.

- 5) **Be ready for non-linear change.** With no territory to control, and no country seemingly willing to cede a buffer zone, it is hard to imagine a Vietnam- or Afghan-like insurgency that eventually takes over the country. I am also extremely pessimistic that Bashar al-Assad will make any meaningful concessions under any circumstances. While Assad has talked a language of compromise, his instinct, revealed in a personal conversation with me as well as in other venues, is that compromise is a sign of weakness, and resistance is a sign of strength. Because he is consumed with his own sense of weakness, he would see compromise as threatening his power (as it ended the rule of Ben Ali and Mubarak). In my judgment, the most likely outcome remains some sort of military coup, which in the estimation of the neighbors provides the best assurance of a relatively positive outcome with the least risk. Surrounded by neighbors who have both the means, the resources and the interest to make such a coup take place, I suspect he will succumb to their actions.

Last week, I chaired a panel with two former national security advisers, Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski. They were extremely cautious about Syria, arguing that we lack both the instruments and the understanding to effect positive change there. While I have a healthy dose of humility about our ability to shape outcomes in Syria, I am a little less pessimistic than they are about our ability to play a positive role. There is one thing they both agreed on, and on which I agree fully: we cannot do this alone. We share strategic objectives with both Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and perhaps surprisingly, there is much we agree on with both Russia and China. If we seek to fine-tune a solution to the problems of Syria, we will not only lose Russia and China with certainty, but we are unlikely to be able to sustain Turkish and Saudi support. If we seek to avoid some of the worst outcomes in Syria, we are more likely to have their support, and the support of others, too. It is not hard to imagine how continued turmoil in Syria could reverberate broadly throughout the Middle East and even into the Caucasus. There is a wide variety of contingencies that many are quite eager to avoid.

The Syrian people have suffered and continue to suffer, but we cannot be their liberators. We will best serve their interests, as well as our own, if we work broadly with others to limit the most damaging outcomes that lay before us.