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Options for U.S. Policy in Syria

Testimony by

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar, thank you for inviting me to appear today before the committee to discuss policy options for the United States in Syria.

The tentative cease-fire established a week ago is already breaking down, with human rights groups suggesting that about twenty Syrians have died each day since last Thursday. Syrian forces continue their shelling and refuse to withdraw from urban areas, and international monitors are facing stiff challenges to beginning their work on the ground. And yet the cease-fire was only ever one, initial component of UN and Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan's six-point plan. The ultimate goal was to begin a political process that would include the opposition and would lead to meaningful change. Thus, the facts so far do not bode well for a diplomatic strategy.

If Annan sought to end the violence and begin a political dialogue, we have so far seen only shaky progress towards the former, and no move toward the latter at all. The relative reduction in violence this past week did open a small window for the United Nations. The insertion of international monitors, if they can work with autonomy and freedom of movement, could help to keep violence down and encourage renewed peaceful protests. But the world must not allow Syria to waste time wrangling over every preliminary element of implementing a cease-fire. Without a rapid start to a political process that will lead to meaningful change, there is no way forward for diplomacy alone to reduce human suffering and promote lasting stability for Syria and the region.

Still, the path of coercive diplomacy remains the only alternative to an escalation in violence on the ground that would have dire humanitarian consequences, and would present the danger of spiraling instability in Syria's already-volatile neighborhood. It remains, therefore, the preferred path to achieve the goal shared by the United States and many other governments, the same goal clearly and consistently articulated by the Syrian people over more than a year – the removal of Bashar al Assad from power.

Today, then, international diplomacy must focus relentlessly on bringing about a political transition and the establishment of a Syrian government accountable to its people. Any diplomatic effort must be backed by equally relentless pressure, focused on key pillars supporting the Assad regime: the military, the commercial elite in Aleppo and elsewhere, and the Alawi community. Sanctions, efforts at human rights accountability, and support to the Syrian

opposition are all useful forms of pressure, but more can and must be done. In the end, more coercive options must be planned and prepared for – not only in case diplomacy fails, but in order to give it the best chance of success.

The role of Russia remains crucial, and the time has come for a clear decision. The Russian government, which finally and belatedly threw its weight behind the Annan Plan, faces a challenge to its international credibility if it cannot use its leverage effectively to compel Assad to maintain the ceasefire, to allow international monitors to operate freely, and to fulfill the other elements of the Plan, including most importantly allowing a political dialogue to begin. It should be obvious to Russia by now that Assad faces a permanent challenge to his unaltered rule – that Syrian military forces cannot decisively crush either the armed insurgency or the peaceful protest movement. Continued brutality at this scale is thus both futile and, as the economy buckles and the military tires, increasingly unsustainable.

It is difficult, but not impossible, to envision Russian policy makers under these circumstances seeking a way to preserve their relations with Syria, but not with Assad himself. The United States and others should focus their engagement with Russia, not on specific words or actions in New York, but on a realistic assessment that will lead Russia at last to acquiesce in efforts to move toward a Syria without Assad. This shift would dramatically increase pressure on the Syrian regime, and itself might help induce key Syrian actors to seek a way out, and make political change possible. The Russians should not waste any more time or any more Syrian lives in making their choice.

On sanctions, the United States has successfully worked with allies and partners in the region and globally to apply unprecedented pressure on the Syrian regime and on figures within it who are directly responsible for human rights violations. These sanctions are slowly eroding the regime's ability to fund and sustain its repression and insulate its supporters from harm. The new Sanctions Working Group that met this week in Paris is a good way for governments to share information needed to maximize the application and impact of their sanctions. Given time, this pressure may help to erode the unity of Assad's supporters in the military and commercial elite of the country, and could facilitate a transition that takes Assad out of office.

Accountability measures are also important, because they increase the incentives for regime supporters to disassociate themselves from the vicious brutality now being practiced on Syrian citizens, and from those who order it and carry it out. The new accountability initiative launched by the Friends of the Syrian People can offer further positive impact, in that its efforts to train and equip citizens for human rights monitoring also improve their ability to communicate and organize, helping those within Syria to strengthen their efficacy and their ability to engage as part of the opposition and shape their country's future. But although many assume human rights documentation is directed toward enabling a referral of violators to the International Criminal Court, this step may not be consistent with political efforts to loosen Assad's grip on power. In the current phase, it does not make sense to restrict the options for a negotiated transition by demanding that Assad be tried for his crimes, no matter how heinous they undoubtedly are.

It's also important to recognize that certain actions, which might potentially be seen as increasing pressure on Assad, could in fact be counterproductive. **An international arms embargo, for example, might be seen as a logical next step in enforcing and maintaining a cease-fire. However, an arms embargo would not reduce violence** -- at best it would simply freeze the deep imbalance in armed capability currently evident on the ground, leaving the Syrian government with a massive advantage and denying Syria's scattered insurgents the basic tools they need to slow down the regime's onslaught against civilians and sustain pressure on the Syrian military. Moreover, an embargo is unlikely to work -- even if Russia could be convinced to support such a measure at the UN Security Council, the Iranians would be highly unlikely to comply, making the move fruitless as a way of constraining the regime's repressive capacity.

With Iran resolutely supplying the regime, and with Gulf states already providing cash for salaries to the Free Syrian Army's soldiers and talking about lethal aid, the militarization of the Syrian uprising is proceeding apace. But while an armed opposition might be able to fight an effective insurgent campaign, it's not at all clear that they would be able to bring down the regime. At worst, uncontrolled militarization will turn the Syrian uprising into a wider conflict that could draw in jihadis and other extremists from across the Muslim World, offer up tempting ungoverned spaces to terrorists and organized criminals, and produce refugees and other ripple effects that could destabilize Iraq, Lebanon, and possibly other neighbors.

But this possibility must not deter clear thinking: **the United States cannot halt or reverse the militarization of the Syrian uprising, and should not try. What the United States can usefully do is manage this militarization by working with other governments, especially Syria's neighbors in the region, to try to shape the activities of armed elements on the ground in a manner that will most effectively increase pressure on the regime** -- to drain the Syrian military's ability and will to fight, to help induce a political transition, and thereby to bring an end to the violence as quickly as possible. Without a strong lead driven by the strategic logic of weakening the regime's pillars, disparate actors both inside and outside the region could provide lethal support in ways that would exacerbate spillover effects and increase the damage militarization will cause to the goal of restoring order in a post-Assad Syria. To do this, the United States should drive the international planning and engagement necessary to identify key armed leaders and elements, improve coordination and communication, build effective fighting units, and shape an effective insurgent strategy. At the same time, Syria's immediate neighbors will need extra support in border security, refugee relief, and other areas to ensure that the effects of militarization in Syria do not destabilize them as well. Working to manage the uprising's militarization, focus its impact on the Assad regime, and contain its impact on the neighborhood, is essential to ameliorate the instability that Assad unleashed by choosing to declare war on his own people.

In this context, it's absolutely crucial that the United States and other governments continue to scale up their support for the political development of the Syrian opposition. The opposition activists most urgently need to improve their internal cohesion and their ability to effectively and authoritatively represent the Syrian people in any political process -- without this, it is hard to see how a political transition can lead to a better or more stable future for Syria. The factionalism and mutual mistrust evident amongst the Syrian opposition activists are

unsurprising outgrowths of the severe repression and political stagnation of the Syrian context. This legacy can be overcome, but not by fiat, not through exhortations, and not overnight.

To become a more effective and unified force, the Syrian opposition activists need to focus on three key goals: inclusion, a shared vision for the future, and consistent communication with Syrians both inside and outside the country. Some in the opposition may wonder what the utility is of planning for a post-Assad Syria, when Syrians are under assault today. In fact, developing and marketing a vision for post-Assad Syria that demonstrates organization and a commitment to inclusion and democratic accountability is perhaps the key means through which the activists can overcome their existing differences, mobilize wider support, and represent something beyond factions and personalities. The international community, including the United States, must invest strongly in helping opposition activists – inside and outside Syria – communicate and plan jointly for the future.

The current moment poses challenging questions for the United States, and for all those governments who are working for consensus in New York and through the Friends of the Syrian People contact group. Assad has already demonstrated his willingness to use as much violence as he deems necessary to preserve himself in power. However, the regime that a few months ago appeared to be at a tipping point may hold on, weakened but still viable. If the international pressure slackens, or if the opposition fails to present an effective alternative, key Assad constituencies will stop thinking about the possibility of abandoning him as a path to self-preservation. A weakened Assad would be even more dependent on Iran, and the Syrian people would suffer not only from his continued rule but from sustained isolation and economic hardship along with the insecurity wrought by an ongoing insurgency.

If, as is increasingly likely, Annan’s plan fails to produce a path to political change, and if increased pressure from steps like sanctions, militarization, and a more effective opposition do not coerce the Syrian regime’s internal supporters into removing Assad and opening up to the opposition, then two outcomes are possible: either protracted civil conflict, with all the attendant dangers both for the neighborhood and for Syria’s future; or a weakened Assad who continues to rule, but with fewer constraints on his behavior, including his support for Iran or Hizballah and his hostility to his neighbors. If, as I believe, neither of these outcomes are palatable to the United States, then we must take heed now of what more must be done to prevent these outcomes from coming to pass.

Some would argue that pursuing the above set of recommendations begins a “slippery slope” to direct intervention. I would argue instead that anticipating the failure of diplomacy and preparing for more coercive options is not only realistic, it is also necessary to create the pressure that will give diplomacy its best chance of success. It’s quite clear that Assad only acts under extreme pressure, and that demanding his removal is an existential challenge. Dithering over diplomatic measures, while ruling out more coercive options, is the quickest path to irrelevance for U.S. policy. Furthermore, early consultation, planning and preparation for more robust steps would enable the United States to maximize the extent to which others might participate in or even take the lead in those actions. This, too, would strengthen our diplomatic muscle, and increase the likelihood of a swifter, less costly, more satisfactory resolution to the Syrian crisis.