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House Armed Services Committee
The Security Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic
Implications for U.S. National Security and U.S. Policy Options
July 17, 2013

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee, I am honored to have been invited to share with you some thoughts about the situation in Syria and U.S. policy options for dealing with this problem from hell. Having served for slightly more than a year (until September 2012) as special advisor to the Secretary of State for transition in Syria, I can attest to the fact that there are no easy or glib answers in this matter; there are no silver bullets in our government's holster. To choose a policy direction in the case of Syria is, by definition, to choose between profoundly unattractive and risky options, of which inaction itself is one.

The reason this is so has to do with the nature of the problem. In mid-March 2011 a group of teenagers in the economically depressed Syrian city of Deraa decided it would be fun and in keeping with Arab Spring activities elsewhere in the region to spray paint anti-Assad regime slogans on the walls of buildings. Regime security forces rounded them up, beat them, separated some from their fingernails, and denied their parents' access to them. Peaceful protests broke out spontaneously. The regime responded with deadly violence. By so doing - by demonstrating its contempt for an aggrieved citizenry already contending with a lack of economic opportunity - the regime dropped a match on the dry tinder of economic hopelessness in Syria's secondary cities and their suburbs.

The Assad regime knew it would be swept from Syria if it permitted peaceful protest to flourish. President Bashar Al Assad had a choice: deal with the protests politically, arresting criminals in his security services and generously compensating their victims; or respond with deadly force. He chose the latter. This choice caused the protests to spread, and as they did the regime persisted with its program of lethal force, mass incarcerations, and torture. Quite deliberately it channeled something it could not handle - peaceful protest - into something it thought it could handle: armed resistance.

By succeeding in snuffing out peaceful protest in favor of armed resistance, the Assad regime put Syria on the fast-track to destruction. Most of the protestors were Arab Sunni Muslims, an ethnic-sectarian group accounting for roughly two-thirds of Syrians. The regime itself was dominated by Alawites, who account for about twelve percent of the population. As resistance spread the regime found it would have to rely disproportionately on military units, armed intelligence operatives, and criminal bands that were overwhelmingly Alawite in composition and therefore relatively reliable. This largely Alawite-Sunni Muslim confrontation attracted to Syria a range of foreign Sunni jihadists, including some from Iraq who had enjoyed longstanding relationships with the Assad regime's intelligence services. The entry of foreign jihadists was and is a gift that keeps on giving to the Assad regime, which uses their presence to attract and justify the support of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, and to try to persuade Syrian minorities and others that the alternative to corrupt, family rule in Syria is a reign of terror under the auspices of Islamist barbarians.

By opting for violence, therefore, the regime inescapably opted for a largely sectarian battle. By so doing it attracted foreign Sunni jihadists: enemies of the regime on the surface, but a lifeline in fact.

Today, Syrians looking for a third way between rule by a criminal family and rule by primitives must face a very unpleasant fact: the very presence of foreign jihadists in Syria is enabling the regime gradually to take control of the narrative; to assert, with near-perfect cynicism, that it and it alone is the alternative to savages who remove and eat vital organs from living human beings; and to assert, with perfect mendacity, that there is nothing Syrian about the Syrian revolution. The jihadist presence in Syria, augmented by a narrative that falls on the receptive ears of Americans who understandably fear foreign entanglements and those who correctly see Al Qaeda as America's deadly enemy, is making us hesitate to support those seeking a civilized third way, making us doubt our ability to do anything useful in the Syrian context, and therefore making relative inaction a comfortable default position for many. To the extent the Assad regime, on life-support courtesy of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, can persuade the West to adopt an attitude falling somewhere between moral equivalence and "a plague on all houses," it can anticipate staying alive long after many observers pronounced it all-but-dead.

We can stipulate, therefore, that the way this conflict has evolved now makes it very hard for American officials to define a way forward featuring solid footing. Perhaps the best starting point is to define what we want. What are our national security interests in Syria? What is it we want to achieve? How should we go about trying to get what we want?

President Obama has suggested that it is the effects of regime-inspired chaos on Syria's neighbors that engages "the serious interests" of the U.S. in the Syrian crisis. Among these neighbors is a NATO ally (Turkey), a close security partner (Jordan), a country whose independence and well-being we have always tried to support (Lebanon), and a country in which many American service people recently gave their lives (Iraq). All of these countries - some more than others - are being swamped by refugees and associated resource and security problems by the Assad regime's practice of hammering rebel-held populated areas with artillery, aircraft, and missiles. It is a terror campaign that makes no pretense of seeking military targets. The regime's objective is that of a terrorist: persuade civilians, through the application of random deadly violence, to make decisions at the expense of one's enemy. Beyond the four countries being directly victimized by regime terror, Israel's interests are engaged by the spillover of violence into the Golan Heights and the threat to Jordan's security. Even Egypt, in the midst of its own political turmoil, is providing a refuge to tens of thousands of Syrians who have fled their country's chaos.

Others have defined U.S. Syria-related interests in terms of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, the desirability of defeating a range of adversaries on Syrian soil, securing weapons of mass destruction to prevent their dissemination, neutralizing Al Qaeda elements, and so forth. Some of these defined interests could produce objectives that might easily lead to American ownership of the Syrian revolution. Others - those having to do with WMD and Al Qaeda - might logically lead one to back a regime that has manipulated both to its advantage. Standing with allies and friends would seem to be a prudent basis for deciding objectives and strategy.

Using the allies and friends aspect of the Syrian crisis as the national interest foundation, what is it we would want to achieve? What would be our objectives?

Three objectives come to mind: enhanced security and stability of regional allies and friends in the face of Syria's chaos and the Assad regime's tactics of mass terror; political transition in Syria away from the regime, including the removal from Syria of all Iran-related military elements (including Hezbollah) and Al Qaeda affiliates; and the replacement of the Assad regime with an inclusive national unity government, one committed internally to recovery, reconciliation, accountability, reform, and rule of law; one committed externally to regional peace and stability. Across the range of these objectives would be the constant updating of contingency plans related to WMD.

If these are our objectives, how would we go about achieving them? What are the key elements of the strategy we would pursue? Clearly we would want it all to add up, ideally, to the achievement of all three objectives.

The central problem affecting allies and friends is the regime's mass terror campaign against vulnerable populations. Ending it should be our top priority, and diplomacy is always the first weapon of choice. The UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria recently (June 4, 2013) reported that the regime's tactics "constitute crimes against humanity, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights law." If we are not already doing so on an insistent, sustained basis, we should be urging Moscow to rein in its client. We should make it clear to Russia that if the terror campaign subverting our allies and friends does not stop we will reserve the right to take steps we deem appropriate to secure our interests.

To the extent we consider military options at all in connection with Syria, it should be in the context of helping allies and friends secure themselves from the regime's murderous tactics. We would not, under any circumstances, want American boots on the ground in Syria. We would not wish to consider unmanned or manned aerial systems entering Syrian airspace unless and until we are persuaded that the peaceful diplomatic campaign has run its course unsuccessfully. Even then we would still have the option of watching the terror campaign proceed unabated while pouring more resources - humanitarian, economic, and security - into Syria's neighbors so they could better cope. We should keep in mind that no-fly zones would not address the biggest of the killers: artillery. We could not proceed with any kind of strike options without the full cooperation of Turkey, Jordan, and other key partners. Although UN authorization would not be possible, US unilateralism is something to be avoided.

As we pull out the stops diplomatically to stop the terror campaign, we should try to stabilize the situation on the ground by seeing to it that vetted rebel units in Syria get what they need in terms of military equipment, weaponry, and training, working through the opposition's Supreme Military Council. The regime has a well-established record of conducting massacres in places it can reach on the ground. Most weaponry for the mainstream opposition will not come from U.S. stocks. Yet the U.S. should be in charge of the process of determining who gets what. Will all weapons shipments, without fail, get to their intended recipients? No: no more in Syria than they did during World War II when air-dropped

into occupied France. The jihadists and the regime are already armed to the teeth. The Syrian nationalists are the ones who need the help. Their ability to defend territory and reverse the current momentum will have a direct and positive impact on refugee flows.

As we try our best to help the mainstream armed opposition stabilize the ground situation, we should - with the help of the Friends of the Syrian People - prepare the Syrian opposition to establish, on Syrian territory and as soon as possible, a governmental alternative to the regime. Such a government would require recognition, resources, and help with self-defense. Yet a government featuring people and a program designed to appeal to those grudgingly supporting the regime as a default position would present the long-awaited, essential, decent alternative to the Assad regime. Such a government would also unblock massive amounts of humanitarian assistance frozen outside of Syria awaiting the permission of the regime to move into rebel-controlled areas. If the Geneva process were to go anywhere, this government could serve as the interlocutor with the current government in Damascus, producing a post-Assad national unity government. Mobilizing the international community to promote a respectable and effective alternative to Assad and the nucleus of post-Assad governance should be a major US diplomatic priority, notwithstanding all of the difficulties presented by an often fractious Syrian opposition.

As we work with the opposition to prepare to govern inside Syria, we should keep the door open to a Geneva peace conference and help the opposition configure a coherent, representative, and legitimate negotiating team. In order to secure the cooperation of the Syrian opposition, however, we must keep in mind the purpose of Geneva, as stated in the agreement reached on June 30, 2012: to create, on the basis of mutual consent, a transitional governing body exercising full executive power. The purpose of Geneva is to move into a transitional governing arrangement, one preserving state and governmental institutions to the maximum extent possible consistent with human rights standards. If Assad or any of his coterie are to play a role in Syria's transitional governance, it would only be with the consent of the Syrian opposition. Although it is very unlikely to transpire, a near-term negotiated end to this nightmare can preserve Syria and secure its neighbors.

As we pursue a multifaceted diplomatic campaign, all elements of which are designed to secure Syria's neighbors, transition the regime, and replace it with something decent, we should also be working with partners to design a post-Assad multinational stabilization force to work with a new Syrian government to help protect vulnerable populations and neutralize undesirable stay-behind elements. Ideally such a force would be under UN auspices or authorization. U.S. combat service support and even combat air support might be vital. Yet no American boots should be on the ground in Syria. Helping post-Assad Syria stabilize itself will, of course, enable millions of Syrian refugees to return home from the neighboring countries. In this connection, the creation of an international interim reconstruction fund for Syria will also be important.

The objectives and strategy outlined here are heavy on the diplomatic side, but do not rule out military intervention entirely. If objectives and strategy are key components of foreign policy, they are life and death items when it comes to military operations. If American diplomacy cannot stop the terror campaign imperiling U.S. allies and friends, the president will need options to consider. He may well

decide to focus on supporting the neighbors through increased assistance. To the extent he looks at military options he will want, in the context of objectives, to define the mission as narrowly as possible: to destroy or significantly degrade the ability of the Assad regime to terrorize civilian populations with artillery, military aircraft, and missiles. He will be interested in methodologies that minimize US and collateral casualties, knowing full well that there are no such things as surgical strikes. He will want to assess carefully the likely reactions of key players: the regime, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. He will want buy-in from at least two of the neighbors (Turkey and Jordan) he is trying to help. And he will want to avoid the proverbial slippery slope. Syria's revolution, after all, is not America's to win or lose. Once the mission is accomplished and the mass terror campaign either ended or reduced significantly, the direct military role of the US would be ended. If Iran (for example) elects to intervene massively in Syria, sending its army across Iraq, obviously new calculations in the White House, the Pentagon, and elsewhere will be set in motion.

There should be no illusion, in any event, that military intervention will necessarily be the long-sought silver bullet. And unintended consequences will be ubiquitous, regardless of what one does or fails to do. Yet those who try to shut down the debate by demanding "tell me how it will end" should apply the same demand to alternatives, especially that of passively watching developments unfold. In an era of diminishing defense resources brought about by sequestration and at a time when a tiny percentage of Americans bears the burden of defending this country, we should not be searching for ways to apply military force in various parts of the globe. If we elect to act with kinetic lethality in Syria the objective should be tied tightly to the situations our allies and friends find themselves in as a result of the Assad regime's survival tactics. Indeed, if the regime survives, the results will be bad for its neighbors and catastrophic for Syria. The question is not, however, one of the U.S. taking ownership of Syria's future. That future belongs to Syrians. Our main task is to decide what we want and how to go about getting it, keeping in mind that supporting allies and friends is where American national interests are surely engaged in the case of Syria.