

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Hearing on “Crisis in Syria: The U.S. Response”
March 20, 2013

(As Prepared for Delivery)

This hearing will come to order. We meet today to review the Syrian crisis.

We are now two years into the Syrian uprising. And for two *bloody* years, U.S. policy has been *adrift*. Initially, the Obama Administration saw Assad as “a reformer.” Once the revolt started, it backed feckless U.N. diplomacy, and then bet on Moscow to play a constructive role. Predictably, none of this has worked. Yet even today, Secretary Kerry talks of Assad “coming to the table.”

This is the Assad who is bombing, torturing and murdering Syrians. The ancient city of Homs is now in ruins. Seventy thousand Syrians are dead. A million refugees have spilled into neighboring countries, destabilizing U.S. partners. And there are troubling reports that Assad may be moving to unleash chemical weapons.

The U.S. has been generous in supporting suffering Syrians, but perhaps naively so. Much of our humanitarian aid has been funneled through the U.N. and other international organizations that are largely restricted to areas *controlled by the Syrian regime*. That’s absurd.

Only *recently* has the U.S. begun to push food aid directly to the Syrian opposition. That shift should accelerate, dramatically. And I really wonder about providing any humanitarian aid that relies on the Syrian government.

Syria is a humanitarian nightmare. But also a strategic challenge – and *opportunity*. With Assad gone, Iran would lose a key ally, one critical to its terrorist operations, including against Israel. That’s why Iran and Hezbollah are massively stepping up their support of the Assad regime – providing a lifeline of weapons. Much of this weaponry flows through Iraq. That can’t continue without consequences.

Unfortunately, jihadist groups are gaining strength and popularity. They’ve been able to convince too many Syrians that they are on their side. Al-Nusra and aligned radical groups fighting to remove Assad are also preparing for the day after his fall. In part of Syria, extremists are translating their battle success into authority over society as a whole – influencing, courts, schools and mosques. These extremists are making inroads, at the expense of more moderate elements.

To avoid such a hostile future Syria - armed with chemical weapons - we need to help better organize and empower the Syrian opposition: those Syrians who began the revolt by chanting, “peaceful, peaceful.” We have let them down, and let down our strategic interests.

Some believe that it is time to provide arms to vetted opposition groups. Others worry about a potentially lengthy and deepening engagement, and note that many weapons are already flowing into Syria. But the British and French have come to realize, the biggest winner in the arms embargo has been Assad. Everything should be considered, but the U.S. could have the greatest impact through training, intelligence and logistics.

It has been said that the U.S. has no good options in Syria. That is probably true. Stay away, as we mainly have, and bad things are guaranteed to happen. Get more involved, as some are calling for, and good things *might* happen. All of it is incredibly unpredictable. The best we can do, is know what we can, realize what we can't, and make decisions as we must.

I'll now turn to Congressman Ted Deutch, who fills-in for Ranking Member Engel. Big shoes to fill today – especially given Mr. Engel's efforts on Syria over the years – which has helped move the Administration to more actively consider the range of U.S. options in recent weeks.