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Ranking Member Eliot Engel Opening Statement at Hearing, “Securing U.S. Interests Abroad: The FY 2014 Foreign Affairs Budget”

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Rep. Eliot L. Engel, the top Democratic on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, delivered the below remarks as prepared for delivery at today’s committee hearing, “Securing U.S. Interests Abroad: The FY 2014 Foreign Affairs Budget.”

The statement follows:

“Secretary Kerry, I’d like to welcome you to the Foreign Affairs Committee today – the first time you are joining us in your new capacity.

At the outset, I’d like to express my condolences on two recent tragedies. First, the death in Afghanistan of Anne Smedinghoff, a young Foreign Service Officer, who was by all accounts a rising star; and second, the bombings at the Boston Marathon, in your home state of Massachusetts.

Mr. Secretary, you are here at a time when the United States faces an increasing number of difficult and complex challenges around the world.

--Syria remains engulfed in a horrific civil war that has left more than 70,000 dead.

--Iran continues its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.

--And North Korea seems determined to generate a crisis that could have serious implications for our national security.

The primary purpose of today’s hearing is to assess how the President’s fiscal year 2014 international affairs budget responds to the threats and opportunities we face as a nation.

We spend just over one percent of our national budget on diplomacy and development -- which are key components of America’s national security strategy. Diplomats and aid workers strengthen alliances and prevent wars, while telling America’s story – and they do it on the cheap.

While I would have preferred to see higher funding levels for our diplomats, I will support the broad outlines of the 2014 international affairs budget request, which cuts overall spending by about 4 percent, based in large part on our reduced presence in Afghanistan and Iraq.

However, the effects of sequestration – which I strongly opposed from the beginning -- are leaving many State Department functions dangerously short of funds.

The budget request includes critical funding to enhance security for our brave diplomats and development workers. We should act as soon as possible to implement the recommendations of the Accountability Review Board for Benghazi and fund the State Department's security proposal.

I'm also pleased that the budget request continues to provide robust funding for PEPFAR and the Global Fund, maintaining US leadership in global health.

In addition, the 2014 budget increases vital humanitarian assistance to help the Syrian people, but I believe we must do more to tip the balance in favor of the Syrian opposition.

I recently introduced the bipartisan Free Syria Act, which provides a comprehensive strategy to end the conflict in Syria. This includes the arming of carefully vetted members of the Syrian opposition committed to a peaceful, democratic Syria.

Mr. Secretary, I look forward to working with you to bring the Assad regime to an end and address the humanitarian crisis he created.

I believe that Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability is perhaps the foremost threat facing the United States today. Over the past four years, President Obama has unified the international community against this threat and signed into law the strongest-ever sanctions against the regime in Tehran.

Iran has been forced to the negotiating table, but they refuse to negotiate seriously. Meanwhile, their centrifuges are spinning, more efficiently than ever.

I urge the Administration to continue to increase the pressure on Iran, and to keep all options on the table until Iran abandons its nuclear weapons program once and for all.

I also want to congratulate President Obama on his tremendously successful trip to Israel and for fully funding aid to Israel in the budget request. I had the pleasure of traveling with the President to Israel, where he worked to strengthen the eternal bond between Israel and the United States, and was received enthusiastically by the Israeli people.

Mr. Secretary, Israel has repeatedly emphasized that it seeks unconditional, direct negotiations with the Palestinians, and I applaud the Administration for urging the Palestinians to accept that offer. Regrettably, the Palestinians keep raising one condition after another, casting doubt on their commitment to ending the conflict with Israel.

I also want to work closely with you to build upon the terrific work of Secretary Clinton in supporting the Republic of Kosovo. Likewise, I would like to praise the excellent efforts of EU foreign policy chief, Lady Catherine Ashton, for leading the talks between Belgrade and Prishtina. It is my understanding that Lady Ashton has again convened the parties, who are meeting as we speak.

In previous talks, Kosova negotiated in good faith with Serbia in the EU-facilitated Dialogue, but Serbia walked away from the table. It is critical for Serbia and Kosova that an agreement on normalization be reached. In the end, the people of Kosova simply want to be treated fairly. Just like their Balkan neighbors, their future requires a clear path into NATO and the EU, and the five EU holdouts should finally recognize Europe's newest country.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and I look forward to Secretary Kerry's testimony."