

Statement Concerning the Use of Force Against Syria

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The Cold War is over, and the world is a more dangerous place. And there is no place more dangerous than the Middle East. Yet in spite of this, we have had no meaningful national conversation to help us understand this part of the world, and its impact on us here at home. So it can't be surprising as a nation, that we are now uncertain and divided about what to do in Syria.

When I took a delegation of Congressmen to the Middle East shortly after we invaded Iraq in 2003, we ended our trip, meeting with the relatively new Syrian President. At our meeting President Assad asked us, "What are you hoping to achieve in Iraq? And why do you think doing what you are doing will give you the results you want?"

Ironically, we could ask these same questions about our present focus on his country. "What are we hoping to achieve in Syria? And why do we think doing what we are planning on doing will give us the results we want?"

When it comes to foreign policy, and the Middle East in particular, it appears we live in a strategy free world. You are being asked to allow the President of the United States to use force, a tactic, when we have no clear sense what the strategy and mission is behind the tactic.

The Syrian Government crossed a red line in the use of chemical weapons for which the world community needs to respond, not just the United States.

The debate centers on whether or not to support the President's request to use force to punish the Assad government, and provide a disincentive to other countries to use chemical weapons. We are also being told the President and the United States will lose face if we fail to take decisive military action.

The conclusion by the President and his administration, and leaders on both sides of the aisle, that the United States needs to take decisive military action, with or without support from other countries, would be a serious mistake with long term consequences.

What should be our primary concern?... that chemical weapons were used by the Syrian army?... or, that Syria has chemical weapons that could fall in the hands of radical elements sympathetic to Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations?

A military strike will do nothing to address that issue, and would exacerbate it by accelerating the transfer of chemical weapons to people who would do us harm.

The overriding question must be, who has control of these chemical weapons? And how do we make sure they do not fall into the hands of radical terrorist organizations that could do harm to the United States and other countries?

Rather than focus on destroying elements of the Syrian government forces, and choosing sides in a truly brutal civil war, our focus should be on how do we get these chemical weapons out of Syria, and into the hands of the United States and/or Russia that have the capability to neutralize these weapons, and have successfully cooperated with each other to do that very thing over nearly two decades.

I traveled with Senators Nunn, Lugar, Bob Graham, Domenici, Mikulski and Bingham, Representative Spratt, and our present Deputy Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, throughout vast parts of Russia in May of 2002, and saw first-hand this impressive cooperation. The Cooperative Threat Reduction, known as the Nunn Lugar program, has reduced the threat of nuclear, biological and chemical because the United States and Russia recognized the need to do this, and did it.

We need to engage the world community, particular Russia, to persuade Assad to give up his chemical weapons with the same motivation inspired by Nunn and Lugar, and the same laser intensity of our 41st President George H. W. Bush, when he assembled the coalition to confront Saddam Hussein after Saddam's occupation of Kuwait.

I believe President Obama can rise to the occasion, seize this opportunity, avoid the use of military force, and help restore our nation's leadership.