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**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Assad's Abhorrent Chemical
Weapons Attacks
June 17, 2015
(As Prepared for Delivery)**

This hearing will come to order. This morning we consider Bashar al-Assad's continued use of chemical weapons on his people.

Two years ago, the world was stunned when Assad used sarin in the suburbs of Damascus—killing 1,500 people in one attack. In response, President Obama threatened military action and the Assad regime agreed to a hastily brokered deal to remove and destroy what was to be “*all*” of Syria's substantial stockpile. A year later, President Obama declared success. In February, Secretary Kerry testified that “we got...all the chemical weapons out of Syria.”

Well, that would be news to two of our witnesses today. They've been on the front lines, struggling to save the lives of those targeted by the regime's barrel bombs filled with weaponized chlorine. Dr. Tennari serves in a field hospital in Idlib Province and Mr. Farouq Habib works with the Syrian Civilian Defense—a group of volunteer first responders who dig through the rubble to treat victims.

As the Assad regime loses more territory, the regime has stepped up its chemical attacks on the civilian population in opposition controlled areas. What first appeared to be random and irregular attacks has become a steady, unending series with the aim decimating the middle class in Idlib. Meanwhile, ISIS makes advances.

Over eight weeks this spring, Idlib saw 29 chlorine attacks. Most began just 10 days after the UN Security Council passed a resolution which threatened the use of force against anyone found to have used chlorine as a weapon. In almost all cases, the chlorine was delivered by barrel bomb from a helicopter. Assad has seen the world's complacency, and decided that he can literally get away with mass murder.

Anyone can be a target. The regime will even drop one bomb, wait for the first responders ... then drop *another*. Many chlorine attacks take place at night, when families have taken cover. A heavy gas, chlorine seeps down into makeshift bomb shelters. As we'll hear, this toxic gas has a horrific impact on the human body: foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath, and dying slow agonizing deaths as the chlorine gas turns to hydrochloric acid in the lungs of victims, many *children*.

Unfortunately, the Obama Administration continues its slow response. Last month, the President still spoke of needing further confirmation that it was the Assad regime that is responsible for the chemical attacks. Let's be clear: *only Assad's forces have helicopters*. Yesterday, Ambassador Power told the Committee that those responsible for these attacks must be held accountable. *Yes, but when?*

U.S. policy has to change. Last month, Ranking Member Engel and I offered a successful amendment to the defense policy bill directing the Pentagon to closely examine a no-fly zone over Syria, denying Assad ownership of the skies. Syrians would no longer be forced to choose between staying above ground where they could be killed by the shrapnel Assad packs inside his barrel bombs or going below ground where they are more vulnerable to suffocating from chlorine gas. The daily decision to go to the market, or to school, or to go to sleep at night would no longer be a life or death decision.

Of course, the United States can't do this on its own; it would need strong support and participation from our regional partners. Many of them have been asking and offering their support.

The Administration should also be looking at other more immediate, non-military methods that might save lives. Radar systems for opposition held areas could serve as early warning systems. Air raid sirens could sound the alarm. And sensors could detect chemical weapons and allow first responders to be prepared as they rush to aid victims.

This can't just keep going *on and on*. If nothing is done, the human tragedy in Syria and the region will reach depths the world hasn't seen in generations – taking a human toll, harming our security, and sending a powerful and frightening message that chemical attacks are tolerated.

I now yield to Ranking Member Engel, an early and intense critic of the Assad regime and the Administration's Syria policy. He has long been focused on finding ways to end the civil war in Syria and help the suffering Syrian people.