

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Hearing on “A Crisis Mismanaged: Obama’s Failed Syria Policy”
June 5, 2013

It’s been over two years since the popular uprisings sparked up across Syria against al-Assad and his murderous regime. Amidst the backdrop of the Arab Spring, thousands of Syrians demonstrated against Assad calling for the despotic ruler to step down, to release political prisoners, and institute democratic reforms. These protesters were met swiftly with the harsh hand of Assad as he unleashed his police who doled out brutal beatings upon the demonstrators, resulting in many deaths.

Now as we enter our third year of this conflict, the Assad regime has been responsible for the murder of over 80,000 Syrians, and over 1.5 million people have fled seeking refuge in other countries. This Administration had an opportunity to support the demonstrators from the beginning who took to the streets demanding that Assad step down. Yet, just like it failed to voice a full throated support for the demonstrators in Iran after the 2009 elections, it was deafeningly silent and failed to advance the cause for democratic reform.

Instead of supporting the popular uprisings from the onset and immediately calling for Assad to step down, President Obama waited five months to publically call for his removal. The delayed response also allowed for extremist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates to move in and co-opt the movement, setting up the bloody conflict that we see every day.

There are tens of thousands dead, millions who have been displaced, and the conflict continues to spiral out of control. It has placed an incredible burden on our allies in the region, like Jordan which takes in thousands of Syrian refugees daily and rightfully fears what might come next should the fighting spillover into its own area.

But I understand that there are no perfect solutions to this crisis. Each option before us has its risks, but I firmly believe that what we need is a political solution in Syria – we cannot shoot our way out of this mess.

We need to work with our allies in the region who fear the repercussions of a protracted conflict in Syria, and we need to address the serious issue of Moscow continuing to arm the regime. An influx of Russian arms into Syria has escalated this battle and has helped prop up Assad.

If Moscow does not cease arming the regime, the United States should reevaluate our relationship with Russia. Together with my colleague Brad Sherman, I introduced H.R. 893 – the Iran, North Korea and Syria Nonproliferation Accountability Act – that would address this issue head on.

I have always, and will continue to believe we should not arm the rebels. There is just no way of guaranteeing that they will remain loyal to the U.S. and would be willing to promote democratic principles and respect human rights post-Assad. The opposition is too fractured and too convoluted to be able to ensure that the arms don't eventually end up in the wrong hands that may one day turn these weapons against us or our allies like Israel.

What we should be focusing on is breaking the Iran-Hezbollah-Assad link, because if Assad falls today, I fear what will happen tomorrow. Syria is the lynchpin that holds Iran's strategic influence into the greater Middle East. Should Assad fall, Iran and Hezbollah might quickly move to fill the power vacuum;

And should Iran and Hezbollah get a hold of Syria's chemical weapons, not only would this cause greater tensions in the region and seriously endanger our friend and ally, Israel, but it could spark an even greater conflict.

The President had repeatedly warned that the utilization or the moving around of chemical weapons in Syria would change his calculus, and is a red line that should not be passed. Reports suggest that chemical weapons have been used on a hand full of occasions, yet the United States has balked at calling it so.

In doing so it sent a message - not just to Assad and the opposition, but to other countries such as Iran, Egypt and North Korea, who seek to test our will - that we will not indeed hold our line in the sand.