

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
“Next Steps in Syria”
Prepared Testimony
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Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Lugar:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Over my years of working in Syria and Lebanon, I followed closely the committee’s hearings on Syria and US attempts to deal effectively with Bashar al-Assad’s regime. I think I speak for all my Syrian friends and their families in thanking the committee for convening this hearing at a key time not only in the Syrian people’s attempt to end over forty years of tyrannical rule, but its taking the big next step of building a better, more democratic Syria. If Washington’s limited policy of diplomatic isolation, sanctions and piecemeal support for the opposition continues as is, however, I fear the next government in Syria will more likely than not be both suspicious and hostile to US interests. The reason is simple: Washington invested too much time in diplomacy at the United Nations instead of directly helping the Syrian people hasten Bashar al-Assad’s demise. The good news is it is not too late to change course. But time is very short.

Situation on the Ground

The death toll in Syria’s seventeen-month uprising is now around 20,000, with 30,000 in detention or missing, putting the conflict on par with that of the Libyan Revolution. An uprising that started out as civil in nature has in response to the Assad regime’s use of live fire, shelling, helicopter gunships and fixed wing aircraft morphed, quite naturally, into an armed insurrection. The Assad regime, armed to the teeth by Russia and Iran, continues to implement what they call the “security solution” to cow the opposition into submission. Much to the regime’s chagrin, it can assert itself militarily but cannot “clear and hold” areas where the opposition operates. Akin to the carnival game “whac-a-mole”, every time Assad attempts to hit the opposition’s head it disappears, only to pop up somewhere else. The opposition is giving the Assad regime precisely opposition it cannot decapitate, which slowly wears down the regime’s forces. But, sadly, not before the regime and its “killing machine” take thousands more Syrians with it. Before Syria achieves its slow motion revolution, it seems set to suffer a slow motion massacre.

Washington’s Response

Washington’s response to this worsening situation has been to isolate Assad, sanction his regime and its members, and pursue UN action that, if achieved, would open the door for a multilateral effort to bring down the Assad regime. It has not worked because Russia continues to veto resolution after resolution on Syria, most recently a Chapter VII resolution to enforce the Action Group for Syria Communique of June 30 – a skeleton transition plan for Syria. Meanwhile, Washington has given its Middle East allies

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar a nod to support the opposition with lethal as well as non-lethal assistance. Meanwhile, some dedicated people in the US government have spent the last few months reaching out to the opposition inside of Syria and mapping their positions. The picture is still far from clear, but the Syrian opposition can perhaps be best described as headless but not leaderless with a generally flat structure. Had we based our strategy last winter on what was happening on the ground in Syria, we would have much better visibility not only in terms of military operations, but these groups' political aspirations as well. The YouTube videos streaming out of Syria tell us how they fight, and their immediate goal of bringing down the Assad regime. But they tell us precious little about their long-term political aspirations – assessments that can only be achieved kinesthetically through working with groups directly on the ground. And by not directly working with the Syrian opposition –armed and unarmed – the United States will know little about how to influence them. In some cases it will be because we do not know them. But if we continue on our current path, it will be because they are angry that the United States stood by and did far less than it could have to accelerate Assad's demise.

Third Forces Afoot

Others forces, some inimical to US interests, are stepping in to fill the void. Anecdotal and media reports indicate that individuals and governments in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as others, are sending much needed lethal support to the opposition. In terms of state policy, all openly support the US short term interest of bringing down the Assad regime. But it is far from clear if they support US long term interests of a democratic and secular Syria that respects minority rights and shuns terrorism, let alone supports Middle East Peace. In addition, "third forces" such as al-Qaeda affiliates, including Jebhat al-Nusra, have established a presence in Syria. There are increased reports over the last few months of increased foreign fighters entering Syria.

The Mass Atrocity Red Line

More and more members of the Syrian opposition, especially the armed or unarmed elements inside the country, realize that it is up to them to take down Assad. While the exiled opposition continues to argue over chairs and positions, albeit while doing some laudable work on preparing for a post-Assad Syria, all aspects of the Syrian opposition continue to advocate direct US intervention in Syria – air strikes, no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors and safe havens. It is unclear which option may occur and when, especially in the face of repeated US and allied announcements about the limits of all military options in Syria, but mass atrocities and/or the use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) would seem the most probable triggers.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Washington has repeatedly demanded that President Bashar al-Assad desist from employing the most brutal tactics against his own people – only to see the Syrian regime use them anyway. With the recent assassination of four senior Assad regime members coming only days after reports that Syria is moving its chemical weapons stockpile, the U.S. government must now draw a line in the sand for Assad. And this time, the Obama team must stick to it, or risk a humanitarian and national security calamity.

Recent news that the Syrian regime is moving its chemical weapons has set off speculation within the U.S government about what Assad may be prepared to do with those weapons as his control over the country deteriorates. It would be comforting to think that Assad knows that using such weapons of mass destruction would be crossing a red line – but unfortunately that would be too optimistic. After all, Assad has ignored every other international ultimatum directed at him since the beginning of the revolt.

The same pattern has held true with attempts to force Assad into a negotiated transition through the U.N. Security Council, where Russia and China recently vetoed for the third time a resolution that would have imposed sanctions against the regime if it did not end its brutal crackdown.

This must end. Washington and its allies must lay down and enforce red lines prohibiting the use of Syria's chemical weapons - one of the Middle East's largest stockpiles. To do so, Washington should lead its allies in the “Core Group” of the Friends of the Syrian People gathering – Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – in issuing a stark warning to Assad that mass atrocities in Syria will be met with an immediate military response.

Assad's most recent moves are part of a well-established pattern that test and push U.S. and NATO red lines. The Assad regime has increasingly deployed artillery and combat aircraft to suppress the Syrian opposition, despite Washington's warning not to do so. A few weeks ago, Syria shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter jet, a provocation for which it received only verbal condemnation by NATO. The Syrian government's history of such reckless moves stretches back years: In 2010, Assad reportedly transferred Scud D missiles and M-600 rockets to the Lebanese militant party Hezbollah, essentially handing strategic weapons to a third party and removing his ability to restrain the self-proclaimed Party of God.

When Bashar was master of Syria, such behavior was seen as an annoyance rather than a threat to U.S. national security interests. Today, all that has changed. The Assad regime is mired in a grinding conflict with the Syrian opposition, in which it is steadily losing control, as demonstrated by the July 18 assassinations of senior regime figures in the heart of Damascus and recent battles there and in Aleppo with the opposition. Furthermore, a number of massacres by Alawite forces in Sunni villages around the cities of Homs and Hama indicate that Alawites and the regime they dominate may be attempting to clear Sunni villages in order to set up a rump Alawite enclave in their historic homeland along the Syrian coast in the event of regime collapse.

The international community therefore faces a dilemma: Should chemical and biological materials be put at the disposal of those running a possible Alawite rump regime, and those directing the shabbiha "armed gangs" roaming the Syrian countryside, there is much greater likelihood of atrocities or genocide. And it's not only the pro-Assad groups the United States must worry about: As the Syrian regime loses its grip on power, the roughly 45 different CW facilities and tons of chemical weapons materials that U.S. officials estimate are scattered throughout the country could fall into the hands of Sunni extremists. As I mentioned, these groups not only do not share America's long-term interests in Syria, but increasingly resent Washington for standing by and doing little while Syrians are slaughtered. This sentiment is unlikely to improve if Washington and its allies simply watch and hope for the best while the Assad regime moves around its chemical weapons stockpile.

The time to act is now, before disaster strikes. By leading an effort to warn the Syrian regime about the dire consequences of using its chemical weapons stockpile, and raising the possibility of a military response in the event that effort fails, Washington will be communicating to Assad that he would be sealing his fate if he crosses this last remaining red line.

End Game

My best estimate is that it will be those on the ground who are now taking the shots against the Assad regime that will be calling the shots after he is gone. While the Obama administration is reticent to intervene militarily in Syria – in some cases for good reason, while in others not – actively assisting the opposition “within Syria” to take power would be a foreign policy “threefer” for Washington: Assad and those directly his killing machine would be gone, the US would have an opportunity to foster a new relationship with the emerging political entity or entities in what is today Syria, and we would eliminate a major ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Levant. Getting there will be hard, but if Washington does not start now the United States runs the risk of playing catch up when it is too late.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Tabler