

Testimony to the House Foreign Relations Committee on Syria
Wednesday, September 4, 2013

As prepared for delivery.

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel – an early Congressional leader on Syria – and members of the Committee:

As we convene for this debate, the world is watching not just to see what we decide. It is watching to see how we make this decision – whether in this dangerous world we can still make our government speak with one voice. They want to know if America will rise to this moment and make a difference.

The question of whether to authorize our nation to take military action is simply one of the most important responsibilities of this committee and the Congress. I appreciate that the Committee has returned quickly to address it. You are appropriately focusing with great care and great precision – the only way to approach the potential use of military power.

I. ASSAD’S ATTACK AND THE EVIDENCE

First and foremost, it is important to explain to the American people why we are here. We are here because against multiple warnings from the President of the United States, from the Congress and from our friends and allies, and even from Russia and Iran, the Assad regime – and only, undeniably, the Assad regime – unleashed an outrageous chemical attack against its own citizens. We are here because a dictator and his family’s enterprise, in their lust to hold onto power, were willing to infect the air of Damascus with a poison that killed innocent mothers, fathers and hundreds of their children, their lives all snuffed out by gas during the early morning hours of August 21.

Some, here and there, amazingly, have questioned the evidence of this assault on conscience. I repeat here again today: only the most willful desire to avoid reality can assert that this did not occur as described or that the regime did not do it. It did happen – and the Assad regime did do it.

I remember Iraq. Secretary Hagel remembers Iraq. We were here on Capitol Hill for that vote. And so we are especially sensitive to never again asking any Member of Congress to take a vote on faulty intelligence. That

is why our intelligence community has scrubbed and re-scrubbed the evidence. We have declassified unprecedented amounts of information.

By now, you have heard a great deal from me and others in the Administration about the clear and comprehensive evidence we've collected in the days following the attack on August 21, so I won't go through it again right now. Of course, I am happy to discuss it further and answer any questions you may have. But I can tell you beyond any reasonable doubt that our evidence proves the Assad regime prepared this attack, and that they attacked exclusively opposition-controlled or contested territory.

Our evidence proves that they used Sarin gas that morning. And it proves that the Assad regime used some of the world's most heinous weapons to kill more than 1400 innocent people, including at least 426 children.

I'm sure many of you have seen the images yourselves – men and women, the elderly and children, sprawled on the hospital floor with no wounds, no blood – but all dead. Those scenes of human chaos and desperation were not contrived. They were real.

We have the evidence. We know what happened. For all the lawyers, or former prosecutors, or even anyone who has ever served on a jury – we know these things beyond the reasonable doubt that is the standard with which we send people to jail for life.

II. DEFENDING AN INTERNATIONAL NORM

So we are here because of what happened two weeks ago. But we are also here because of what happened nearly a century ago, in the darkest moments of World War I and after the horror of gas warfare, when the vast majority of the world came together to declare, in no uncertain terms, that chemical weapons crossed a line of conscience and must be banned. Over the years that followed, more than 180 countries – including Iran, Iraq, and Russia – agreed and joined the Chemical Weapons Convention. Even countries with whom we agree on little else, agree with us on that conviction.

Some have tried to suggest the debate we are having today is about President Obama's red line. They're wrong. This debate is about the world's red line – about humanity's red line – a line that anyone with a conscience should draw.

This debate is also about Congress's own red line. You – the United States Congress – agreed to the Chemical Weapons Convention. You – the United States Congress – passed the Syria Accountability Act, which says Syria's chemical weapons "threaten the security of the Middle East and the national security interests of the United States." You – the Congress – have spoken out about grave consequences if Assad in particular used chemical weapons. And both Speaker Boehner and Leader Pelosi have stated in recent days that the actions of the Assad regime are unacceptable, and that the United States has a responsibility to respond.

And as we debate, the world watches. As you decide, the world wonders – not whether Assad's regime executed the worst chemical-weapons attack of the 21st century – that fact is beyond question. The world wonders whether the United States of America will consent, through silence, to standing aside while this kind of brutality is allowed to happen without consequence.

In the nearly 100 years since the first global commitment against chemical weapons, only two tyrants dared to cross the world's brightest red line. Bashar al-Assad has become the third. History holds nothing but infamy for these criminals – and history reserves little sympathy for their enablers. That is the gravity of this moment. That is the importance of Congress's decision.

III. BROADER STRATEGIC INTEREST

Syria is important to America and our security for many reasons.

First, we cannot overlook the danger chemical weapons pose to a volatile country and volatile region. Since President Obama's policy is that Assad must go, it is not insignificant that to deprive or degrade Assad's chemical weapons deprives him of a lethal weapon in the ongoing civil war.

In addition, we have important strategic national security interests – not just in preventing the proliferation of chemical weapons – but to avoid the creation of a safe haven or base of operations for extremists to use these weapons against us or our friends.

Forcing Assad to change his calculation about his ability to act with impunity can contribute to his realization that he cannot gas or shoot his way out of his predicament.

Syria is important because quite simply, the risk of not acting is greater than the risk of acting. If we don't take a stand here today, we are more likely to face far greater risks to our security and a far greater likelihood of conflict in the future.

Why? Because as confidently as we know what happened in Damascus on August 21, we know that Assad will read our silence as a signal that he can use his weapons with impunity.

And in creating impunity, we will be creating opportunity – the opportunity for other dictators and terrorists to pursue their own weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.

Iran is hoping we look the other way – our inaction would surely give them a permission slip for nuclear proliferation. Hizbollah is hoping isolationism wins here. North Korea is hoping ambivalence carries the day. They are all listening for our silence.

If we do not answer Assad today, we will erode the standard that has protected our troops for a century. We will invite more dangerous tests down the road.

Our allies and partners are counting on us. The people of Israel, Jordan and Turkey each look next door and are counting on us. They anxiously await our assurance that our word is true. They await the assurance that if the children lined up in unbloodied burial shrouds were their own, that we would keep the world's promise.

So the authorization President Obama seeks is in our national security interest.

We must send to Syria and to the world – to dictators and terrorists, to allies and civilians alike – the unmistakable message that when we say “never again,” we don't mean “sometimes” or “somewhere.” Never means never.

IV. THIS IS ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY

This is a vote for accountability. Norms and laws that keep the civilized world civil mean nothing if they are not enforced.

As Justice Jackson said in his opening argument at Nuremberg, “The ultimate step in avoiding periodic wars, which are inevitable in a system of international lawlessness, is to make statesmen responsible to the law.”

If the world’s worst despots see they can flout with impunity prohibitions against the world’s worst weapons, then these prohibitions are just pieces of paper.

That is what we mean by accountability. This is why we cannot be silent.

V. THIS IS NOT A DECLARATION OF WAR

Let me be clear: We are not asking America to go to war. I say that sitting next to two men, Secretary Hagel and Chairman Dempsey, who know what war is. There are others here today who know what war is. They know the difference between going to war and what the President is requesting now.

We all agree there will be no American boots on the ground. The President has made crystal clear: we have no intention of assuming responsibility for Syria’s civil war.

He is asking only for the power to make certain that the United States means what we say. He is asking for authorization to degrade and deter Bashar al-Assad’s capacity to use chemical weapons.

VI. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Some will, undoubtedly and understandably, ask about the unintended consequences of action. Some fear a retaliation that leads to a larger conflict. Let me put it bluntly: If Assad is arrogant enough and foolish enough to retaliate to the consequences of his own criminal activity, the United States and our allies have ample ways to make him regret that decision without going to war. Even Assad’s supporters, Russia and Iran, say publicly that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable.

Some will also question the extent of our responsibility. To them I say, when someone kills hundreds of children with a weapon the world has banned, we are all responsible. That is true because of treaties like the Geneva Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention – but it is also true because we share a common humanity and a common decency.

VII. CONCLUSION

This is not the time for armchair isolationism. This is not the time to be spectators to a slaughter. Neither our country nor our conscience can afford the cost of silence.

We have spoken up against unspeakable horror. Now we must stand up and act. We must protect our security, protect our values, and lead the world with conviction that is clear. Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.

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