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TESTIMONY

The Case for Expanding Assistance to the Syrian Opposition

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Testimony presented before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 1, 2012

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***The Case for Expanding Assistance to the Syrian Opposition*²**

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States Senate

August 1, 2012

Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Lugar and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. I come to this discussion about policy toward Syria not as a country or even regional expert, but as someone with experience of other civil wars, international military interventions, stability operations and post conflict reconstruction efforts.

In debates over earlier missions, I observed that those most familiar with the conflicted societies in question often tend to be the most pessimistic about the prospects for pacifying and reforming them. By contrast, those who come from a background in stabilization and reconstruction tend to believe that peace can be restored and some measure of political and economic reform achieved, but only with a significant commitment of time and effort.

A third category of individual, those with little knowledge of the society in question or the process of stabilization and reconstruction, sometimes believe that the desired results can be achieved quickly, easily and cheaply. This group was much more in evidence before our invasion of Iraq than it is today. Indeed, the pendulum may have swung too far in the opposite direction, encouraging an equally erroneous belief that military interventions can never produce positive results at acceptable costs.

In considering any possible military intervention in or over Syria, there are several questions to be addressed. First, should the United States support and perhaps even participate in such an operation? If the answer is yes, then second, what form should such an operation take and what role should the United States play? Third, what should be the international and American role in the post conflict reconstruction phase?

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Three criteria will dominate any decision to intervene militarily: the humanitarian, the practical and the strategic. Has the violence reached a level that both justifies and provides broad international support for intervention? Is there a reasonable prospect that such an intervention could succeed in ending the fighting on acceptable terms? Are the strategic interests of states –in particular those powerful enough to effectively intervene-- sufficiently engaged to lead them to do so? Unless the answer to all these questions is yes, external military intervention to stop the fighting is unlikely.

The first of these criteria can be readily established as regards Syria. A repressive regime with a history of extreme abuse is making war on its own people, shelling and bombing its major cities. This behavior has been widely, indeed almost universally condemned, but in reaction to repeated demands to halt attacks on its civilian population, the regime has only escalated the level of violence. Clearly the Syrian government is not fulfilling its responsibility to protect its population, and the international community now has just cause to step in to do so.

But sufficient justification does not automatically translate into practical feasibility or sufficient motivation. Peace enforcement operations in Syria would be quite demanding. Syria has a reasonably well equipped and so far largely loyal army, relatively modern air defenses and a large arsenal of chemical weapons. It has at least one ally, Iran, and some support from Russia. On the other hand, the Assad regime's core domestic support comes from a minority of the population; the rebels are increasingly numerous and effective, if still not yet politically unified; the rebellion draws its support from the most numerous segment of the population, that is to say the Sunni community; the rebels enjoy an effective sanctuary in neighboring Turkey; and whereas the regime is largely isolated internationally, the insurgents are already drawing moral and material support from a wide range of countries including the United States.

Most observers, including it seems U.S. government analysts, believe the Syrian regime's days to be numbered, the open issues being how much damage it will do before falling and how much chaos will ensue thereafter. In Libya, the United States and its partners intervened in support of what was --at the time-- the losing side and helped it reverse the tide. In Syria by contrast, the issue would seem to be whether to intervene on what appears to be the winning side in order to help it more quickly terminate the conflict.

Even if direct international military engagement could accelerate an acceptable conclusion to the conflict, it would not be cost or risk free. This is where the strategic interest of external parties comes into play. Largely because of Syria's alignment with Iran, the conservative Sunni regimes of the region have a strong interest in Assad's fall. The newly democratizing Arab nations have a

similar interest, one that both secular and Islamist parties can share, since both democrats and Islamists can expect to increase their influence in a post-Assad Syria.

The United States and its European allies also have a strong interest in Assad's fall, again largely due to that regime's alignment with Iran. Syria provides the main bridge by which Iran is able to support Hezbollah and Hamas, influence Lebanon, outflank its Sunni Gulf adversaries and threaten Israel. Absent that bridge, it will be much more difficult for Iran to support for extremist groups in the Levant without which Iran would retain little practical means of damaging Israel.

The case for international and specifically American support for the Syrian uprising thus seems worth serious consideration, both as regards justification, feasibility and strategic interest. The next question is what such an intervention might look like and how it might be structured.

The rebels are already getting arms, equipment, training and sanctuary from abroad, although so far the American role has reportedly been limited to non-lethal equipment and advice. A further step might be overt international military involvement, which could take the form of some aerial engagement, perhaps to impose a "no-fly" zone over some or all of Syria. The enforcement of such a zone would almost certainly require substantial American participation, particularly in the early stages when Syrian air defenses would need to be taken out. Doing so would present a tougher challenge than faced during the air campaigns over Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan or Iraq, in none of which the United States lost a single pilot, but the task is hardly beyond the capacity of the United States and its partners, so long as regional states provide basing and overflight rights.

There is the danger that external military involvement in the Syrian civil war will only encourage others to increase their backing of the regime, thereby extending and even widening the conflict. In order to avoid such an outcome, there are several preconditions that, in my judgment, would need to be met before the United States would want to consider backing and participating in any such effort. First, the Syrian opposition would need to ask for such help. So far they have not and they may never do so. But they might be quietly encouraged to consider the possibility seriously. Secondly, most Arab League governments would need to endorse such a call, as they did with respect to Libya. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in particular, would need to take the lead, much as Britain and France did with respect to Libya, on canvassing for broader international support and participating in the military coalition. Most NATO allies would need to support and several of the most important would need to participate in such an effort. A UN Security Council mandate for military action, such as was had in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Libya, would also be highly desirable, but, as was demonstrated in Kosovo, not absolutely necessary to secure broad international approbation.

Russia and China can be expected to oppose any such intervention, even if it had clear Syrian rebel and overwhelming regional support. Russia might even increase its material assistance to the Syrian regime, although it seems unlikely that Moscow would risk Russian forces in confrontation with a very broad international coalition. Indeed, faced with the prospect of such a coalition and the thereby increased likelihood of a rebel victory, Moscow might even decide to step out of the way rather than be humiliated and lose any remaining influence it might have in post-war Syria.

I do not think that the United States should get out in front of the Syrian opposition, the Arab League, the major regional powers and its European allies in publicly championing such action. But I do believe that the still escalating violence in Syria will generate more serious consideration of an external intervention in each of those quarters. I believe the United States should not resist such a flow but instead begin quietly trying to channel it, as the Obama administration ultimately did with respect to Libya. In the meantime, the administration should be considering how to step up other forms of support for the resistance.

This brings me to my third question: what about post-war stabilization and reconstruction? Here, I suspect that the major question in American minds is whether we are in danger of being sucked into another manpower intensive stabilization operation that then turns into a counterinsurgency campaign. I think not, for the following reasons.

First, as a general rule, civil wars that end in negotiated settlements are normally more in need third party oversight if peace is to stick. Both parties remain armed and mutually suspicious and neither will implement those elements of the peace accord that might weaken its capacity for self-defense. Only a substantial third force can provide sufficient confidence to both parties to the agreement to carry out its provisions. By contrast, those civil wars that end in clear-cut victories rather than negotiated settlements or drawn out stalemates tend to be less prone to resumption, and the societies in question tend to be less dependent on external forces for their security in the immediate post-war environment.

Syria's civil war seems unlikely to end in a negotiated agreement between Assad and the opposition. Provided the rebels get sufficient external support, the war also seems unlikely to result in an indefinite stalemate. A more likely result will be something more akin to Libya, in that the rebels will eventually win decisively, and the former regime will collapse and be unable to constitute a threat to its successor.

On the other hand, Syria more resembles Iraq (and former Yugoslavia) than Libya, in that it is divided religiously and ethnically and not just tribally. As the persecuted Shia majority in Iraq, once liberated, turned on its Sunni oppressors, and as the persecuted Muslim majority in Kosovo, once liberated, turned on its Serbian Orthodox oppressors, so in Syria, revengeful Sunni extremists seem quite likely to turn on the Alawite minority.

Al Qaeda is already positioning itself to engage in such sectarian violence. As my RAND colleague Seth Jones has pointed out, al Qaeda makes up a small part of the resistance movement, but its strength appears to be rising. Since last December, al Qaeda has conducted roughly two-dozen attacks, primarily against Syrian security service targets. Virtually all have been suicide attacks and car bombings, and have resulted in more than 200 deaths and 1,000 injuries. According to estimates from one intelligence service in the region, al Qaeda has at least doubled its ranks to some 200 operatives composed of Iraq jihad veterans, small numbers of foreign fighters, and local extremist recruits.

What explains al Qaeda's rise? One factor is the draw of a new jihad—smack in the middle of the Arab world. While roughly three quarters of Syria's Muslims are Sunni, the government is ruled by a minority Alawite sect that is an offshoot of the Shia version of Islam, albeit one most Shia also regard as heretical. For Sunni extremist groups like al Qaeda, a Shia government in Sunni territory is unacceptable.

Since 2003, Syria has been the primary transit hub for foreign fighters headed to Iraq. Now the tables have turned on Syria. Al Qaeda in Iraq has apparently sent small arms and light weapons—including rifles, light machine guns, and rocket propelled grenades—to its Syrian contingent. Al Qaeda in Iraq has also sent explosive experts to augment its Syrian contingent's bomb-making capabilities and deployed fighters to boost its ranks.

Jones reports that with this assistance Al Qaeda leaders in Syria have begun to establish an organized political and military structure. They have appointed a management council, set up a headquarters, and created regional networks with military and religious leaders to run operations, manage cross-border facilitation, and procure weapons and other supplies.

We are thus faced with the prospect of an expanding Al Qaeda presence in Syria, one allied effectively with a rising Sunni dominated resistance movement, a presence that once consolidated can eventually pose a threat to all of Syria's neighbors, including Israel, and to the United States.

In order to avoid Iraq-like sectarian violence in Syria, it will be important to work during the civil war to unify the opposition, marginalize Al Qaeda and other extremist elements, encourage defections from the regime—particularly from its Alawite core, and encourage inclusion of representatives of that community within the opposition leadership. I expect that the Obama administration is already advising the Syrian opposition along these lines. But American influence and ability to advance such goals will tend to be in direct proportion to the help the United States provides the opposition in their fight to overthrow the regime. Promises of postwar aid will mean much less in forging a relationship with the eventual rulers of Syria than decisive assistance now. The new Syrian leadership will be formed in the crucible of war, and in all likelihood will prove resistant to the admixture of elements that did not participate in the fight, or to influence from governments that did not support them in it. It would, for instance, be a great mistake to allow that leadership to conclude that Al Qaeda had done more to help them prevail than had the United States.

I was pleased to learn that the State Department, through the U.S. Institute of Peace, is assisting Syrian émigrés and more recent refugees to plan for the post-war reconstruction. This is certainly a useful exercise. Yet planning divorced from resources and power, as these efforts necessarily are, will likely have only limited impact on actual events. What is more important for the U.S. government to do at this stage than drafting plans is forging relationships with those likely to next govern Syria. These relationships should be developed at many levels, diplomatic, covert, military, economic and political, to include democracy building work by our Republican and Democratic Institutes, contacts with individual members of Congress, as well as with all the relevant arms of our Executive Branch.

As we get to know the Syrian opposition better, we will discover, I have no doubt, that not all are democrats, that many are ill disposed toward the United States, and that most if not all are ill disposed toward Israel. We will also discover, I expect, that most are even more ill disposed toward Iran, and therefore not inclined to help Tehran extend its influence into the Levant.

My expectation is that Syria's civil war will result in the regime's collapse, not a negotiated settlement, that the victors will not want foreign troops on the ground, and that there will therefore be no serious consideration of a large-scale foreign manned stabilization force. One can envisage circumstances where very limited external military assistance might be needed, for instance to secure chemical weapons sites, but a far better outcome will be for the regime's armed forces to remain largely intact, albeit under new command, and thus still responsible for the security (and eventual disposal) of these weapons. Contrary to Iraq, where the American military dropped leaflets informing Iraqi troops that they would be killed if they remained in uniform and under

arms, the Syrian opposition should be encouraged to assure rank and file Syrian soldiers that they will be safe, and indeed paid and protected as soon as they cease fighting. It appears that the Obama administration is so advising the Syrian opposition.

Having myself helped organize international military operations in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, I would be the last to minimize the complexities, dangers and costs associated with any such effort in Syria. It is for this reason that I do not believe the United States should become the standard bearer for such an intervention. I do believe, however, that the United States should up its assistance to the rebels; quietly let those on the front lines, particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia, know that it will back initiatives they may wish to take toward more direct military engagement; and provided the earlier mentioned conditions can be met, America should provide those military assets needed for success that only the United States possesses in adequate number.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to taking your questions.