

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE
MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH ASIA
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Burton, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today to discuss United States policy towards Syria. As you know, our agenda in the Middle East includes some of the most challenging and urgent policy issues facing the United States today: countering terrorism, stabilizing Iraq, preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, facilitating Middle East peace, stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and expanding respect for human rights and democracy. The United States remains a strong supporter of Lebanese sovereignty and independence. Syria figures prominently in each of these issues – often as part of the problem, and potentially as part of the solution. The circumstances and challenges we face in the region require us to use all of the tools of statecraft at our disposal.

Just over a year ago, I traveled to Syria for the first round of high-level talks between our countries in several years. That trip reflected the Obama Administration’s decision to pursue a policy of principled engagement with the Syrian government. Not surprisingly, on my visit I found significant differences in our respective approaches. On subsequent trips I have found that the gaps between us on many issues of serious concern remain wide. At the same time, I identified a few areas of mutual interest, big and small, that are integral to achieving U.S. objectives in the region, and where I hope we will begin to see progress.

Over the past year, we have continued our dialogue through nine high-level diplomatic meetings in Syria and the United States, including last February’s meeting between Under Secretary of State Bill Burns and Syrian President Assad. After several years without these direct communications, a significant amount of time has been spent clarifying our respective positions and probing for opportunities to make progress in areas of mutual interest. For our part, we have used these meetings to directly address those unacceptable Syrian policies that threaten our national interests.

Direct bilateral engagement is only one component of our larger diplomatic strategy to address areas of concern with respect to Syria. For example, while we discuss the ongoing investigation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into Syria's nuclear activities with the Syrian government, we are also actively working with other states to ensure the IAEA has the tools, resources, and information necessary to serve as an effective and credible investigative body. As we push bilaterally for positive Syrian action towards respecting Lebanese sovereignty, we are also working with UN Security Council partners to implement the resolutions addressing the flow of weapons across the border. And we have found that our bilateral engagement with Syria has strengthened our credibility with other states, both in the region and in the broader international community, whose support is essential for generating and maintaining political will in multilateral institutions like the IAEA.

Syria's Continuing Policies

Those Syrian policies that work counter to U.S. interests have led previous American administrations and the Congress to impose a range of sanctions programs against Syria, from designating Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1979 to imposing Executive Orders 13338 and 13441. President Obama renewed these penalties against Syrian individuals and entities in May and August of last year.

For years, Syria has been among the chief patrons of Hizballah, a terrorist organization and one of the most dangerous sources of instability in the region. Whereas the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad seemed to view Hizballah as a point of leverage he could use with Israel, President Bashar al-Assad's unprecedented political and military support for the organization speaks to a different and even more troubling relationship. The Syrian Army's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon and Hizballah's 2006 conflict with Israel deepened the strategic interdependence between the Syrian state and Hizballah. Hizballah's actions in Lebanon and abroad contravene Security Council Resolution 1701, are inconsistent with Lebanon's democratic processes, stoke sectarian tensions, and threaten to spark renewed conflict in the region. Time and again, we have seen that Hizballah's weapons and Syria's support for its role as an independent armed force in Lebanon are a threat, both to Israel, and to Lebanon itself, as well as a major obstacle to achieving peace in the region.

Syria is also involved more directly in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, specifically, by providing political support for the leaderships of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian terrorist groups that oppose our objectives for a comprehensive Middle East peace. These groups have offices in Damascus and have operated there for decades with significant latitude. Furthermore, Syria encourages Hamas not to accept the Egyptian-brokered plan for Palestinian reconciliation, particularly terms that include the recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, and acceptance of previous peace agreements, which could help the Palestinians to achieve statehood through good-faith negotiations with Israel.

Officials of the former Iraqi Ba'ath Party reside in Syria, including several who are wanted by Interpol. These elements of the former Iraqi regime based in Syria have worked to destabilize the constitutional and duly-elected Iraqi government.

Syria's international obligations include those under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty not to pursue nuclear weapons and to provide the IAEA the cooperation and transparency necessary to confirm Syrian compliance. Syria still refuses, however, to allow the IAEA access to all the sites and equipment the Agency has deemed necessary to determine the full scope and nature of Syria's nuclear activities. The onus remains on Syria to cooperate fully with the IAEA, and to satisfy the international community that it is indeed living up to its obligations.

The Syrian government has, without justification, imprisoned 12 political opposition leaders for the past three years. More recently, the regime began arresting human rights attorneys who were representing prisoners of conscience -- including a 78 year-old attorney named Haitham Maleh in October 2009. The White House issued a statement at that time condemning the arrest, and we remain concerned about the Syrian government's suppression of public debate and expressions of dissent. We are also disturbed by the treatment of the Kurdish minority in Syria, who perform obligatory service in the Syrian military, but are denied Syrian citizenship. Teaching, or even speaking, the Kurdish language is prohibited by Syrian law.

While the United States is working with our international partners to mitigate Iran's destabilizing influence in the region, Syria stands out for its facilitation of many of Iran's troubling policies. Syria's relationship with Iran seems primarily based on perceived political interests, rather than cultural ties or complementary economies. But as with most partnerships, there are clear policy differences. With respect to Israel, the Syrians have a clear interest in negotiating a peace agreement

for the return of the Golan Heights, whereas Iran opposes any form of peace with Israel. Syria has a secular government, whereas Iran has a theocratic one. U.S. policy therefore does not operate from an assumption that these two countries are a permanent bloc. The goal of U.S. policy is to press both governments to adopt policies that advance regional stability and security. One way to do that is to demonstrate to Syria why it is clearly in Syria's national interest – as well as ours – for Syria to have better relations with its neighbors and the West and to end its support for terrorism and other actions that undermine peace and prosperity.

Syria currently has a chemical weapons program and a domestic missile production program, and it is a principal source and conduit for weapons flowing to Hizballah. Just this week, we reiterated to the Syrians our grave concern and alarm over the reports that Syria may have provided SCUD missiles to Hizballah. Such an action could create a dangerous escalation in regional tensions. In the latest United Nations report on the implementation of Resolution 1559, the Secretary General noted the growing alarm that these allegations raise, and appealed to all parties to halt all efforts to build paramilitary capabilities outside the authority of the Lebanese state. The Secretary General also expressed the concern that such actions have the potential to destabilize Lebanon and could lead to another conflict.

U.S. Strategic Interests

We are under no illusions as to the difficulty or seriousness of the challenges posed by Syrian policies, as well as the difficulties in dealing with the Syrian government. U.S. national interests dictate that we must seek to change those troubling policies. In Iraq, we must help to protect the progress toward stability and success that has come at such a high cost to both our countries. Facilitating a durable and comprehensive Middle East peace is clearly in our national interest and the interest of the peoples of the region; similarly, our interests and those of Middle East citizens demand that we work to expand democracy and respect for human rights. We must support the democratically-elected government of Lebanon and strengthen its institutions. And we must maintain the credibility and effectiveness of the IAEA. Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a global priority. Given these various interests, we must try to shift Syria's role in the region in a positive direction.

Different Circumstances Require Different Policies

Since 2005, the United States has had no ambassador in Damascus and limited contact with decision-makers in the Syrian government. Given political events in Lebanon in 2005 and early 2006, the international community could clearly see the role Syria played in Lebanon, and called just as clearly for the promotion of Lebanese sovereignty and the retrenchment of Syrian interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs. The U.S. approach, seeking to increase Syria's international isolation was a product of these circumstances. International disapprobation, supported strongly by the United States, combined with heavy popular pressure within Lebanon itself, registered with the Syrians and contributed to Syria's withdrawal of its forces from Lebanon in 2005.

Since that time, however, European states, such as France, and other nations, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to name a few examples, have moved to engage extensively with the Syrian government. Pursuing its own national interests, the previous government of Israel conducted several rounds of indirect peace negotiations with Syria under Turkish mediation that only ended in late 2008. We recognize that given Syrian policies and behavior, some would argue that our approach should be to isolate Syria further. Isolation, like engagement, is only a tool and one we should use when it will produce the results we want. If we were today to attempt to isolate Syria, refusing to deal with it through diplomacy, we would find such an approach actually inhibiting, not enhancing, our ability to pursue our interests.

We saw this change demonstrated in May 2008, for example, when Syrian-backed Hezbollah took to the streets to use violence to impose its will on the Lebanese government. The U.S. position was and remains clear – the United States supports the Lebanese people in their goal of a fully sovereign, independent, and democratic state. At the time, however, we had few means at our disposal to reinforce that policy and engage in frank discussions with Syria about our concerns over its continued support to Hezbollah and its destabilizing actions inside Lebanon. Our former approach, seeking to isolate Syria in the international community, inhibited our ability to forge international consensus and speak with one voice. France and others were actively pursuing their own dialogues with Syria at the highest levels, leaving the United States on the periphery of these exchanges. As such, generating international consensus and pressure on Syria with the goal of supporting a sovereign and stable Lebanon for the Lebanese -- found so readily in 2005 -- was difficult to obtain.

Having an ambassador in place who is able to advance some of our most pressing foreign policy objectives is certainly not a reward to Syria. Returning an ambassador to Damascus enables a level of sustained diplomatic contact, as we have in other capitals in Arab states and around the world. As Ambassador Ford, President Obama's nominee to serve as ambassador to Syria, stated last month, "unfiltered straight talk with the Syrian government" will be his mission priority.

Given the web of intersecting and overlapping international interests in the region today, we need the tools of diplomatic engagement at our disposal in dealing with Syria. Those tools often require significant time and energy in order to pay dividends, and in Syria's case that is particularly likely.

Prospects for Engagement

Ultimately, only significant changes in Syrian policies will lead to a fully normal, productive, and positive relationship with the United States. High-level contacts enable us to press our requests and the expectations of the international community on a range of issues. But we have seen evidence that sustained and principled engagement with Syria *can* lead to progress in areas where we can define mutual interests. Diplomatic engagement, in fact, helps us to discover and enlarge areas where our interests overlap.

Our conversations with Syria about Iraq, for example, have led to increased cooperation. Over the past year, for example, the flow of foreign fighters transiting Syria into Iraq has diminished considerably. Nevertheless, the Syrians must still do more on this front. Syria also continues to host and provide access to health and education for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, although the government places restrictions on humanitarian organizations that limit their ability to assist the refugees. We support some of the organizations which have experienced restrictions, and have made clear to the Syrian government that these organizations play an important role in meeting the needs of the refugees. We believe we share an interest with Syria in a secure and stable Iraq, and that diplomatic engagement may enable us to make additional progress together toward that goal.

For 16 years, Syrian leaders have stated that a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that includes the full sovereignty of Syria over the Golan Heights is in Syria's interest. Israel and Syria have pursued a number of rounds of peace negotiations to explore potential for resolving their differences. We believe

we have a role to play in helping to explore the prospects for successful negotiations, and the conditions that can foster peaceful relations among Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and other neighboring states and this has been a large part of U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace Senator Mitchell's efforts in the region.

Our engagement with Syria is aimed at achieving big changes, particularly in Syria's relationship with Hizballah and Syria's role in helping resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as improving the Syrian government's respect for the rights of its own citizens. Today, the prospects for successful engagement with Syria face some serious challenges. First, Syria's relationship with Hizballah and the Palestinian terrorist groups is unlikely to change absent a Middle East peace agreement. Consequently, Syria has remained designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism – which limits us from using most of the diplomatic inducements normally at our disposal, such as development assistance, military training and technology.

Given these challenges and realities, we are employing a carefully calibrated, incremental approach. As stated above, the Syrian government has made some progress in suppressing networks of foreign fighters bound for Iraq, and we will continue to encourage the Syrian government to do more in this area. We are also engaged in discussions with the Syrians about other concrete actions Syria could take that would support U.S. goals of promoting peace and security in the region. Particularly, we would like to continue work with the Syrians to increase the protections and safety for our Embassy and American personnel in Syria. At this stage, it is too early to tell whether our efforts will bear fruit, but it is critical, in our view, that these efforts be given a chance to succeed. We will continue pressing the Syrian government on its problematic policies.

We must be realistic about how fast diplomatic engagement can effect change - indeed, whether diplomatic engagement will be able to generate far-reaching changes in Syrian policy is yet to be seen. In response to Syria's continuing policies, we will continue our efforts with international partners to constrain Syria's ability to obtain the technology necessary to pursue WMD and missile programs, to raise the economic and political costs of pursuing destabilizing policies, and to persuade Syria's leaders of the substantial economic and political benefits of pursuing the path towards regional stability.

Conclusion

We are determined to sharpen the choice for Syria. As President Obama said last December in Oslo, “I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach – condemnation without discussion – can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.” The United States will continue to strive to bring Israeli-Arab peace closer to hand, and we will continue to contribute to the strength of sovereign Lebanese government institutions, so that Syria can discern a clear choice – one path leading toward participation in a Middle East of greater openness, prosperity, and peace, and another leading to continued stagnation and instability.

In Cairo, last June, President Obama pledged that the United States would confront squarely tensions with the Muslim world. He put forward a vision for U.S. foreign policy based on the principles of mutual respect, mutual interest, and mutual responsibility; of a shared commitment to universal values; and a broader engagement with governments and with citizens. These principles not only reflect American values, they also reflect the reality America faces in the 21st Century, in regional and global challenges are dealt with most effectively through international cooperation. Pursuing the potential for cooperation with Syria serves our interests – clarifying Syrian leaders’ strategic view, creating the space for diplomatic resolution of Syria’s unacceptable policies, or, failing that, demonstrating to the people of Syria and to our partners in the region that Syria’s problems are not due to the United States or any outside power.

When President Obama directed that Syria's leaders be engaged directly by American officials, he was under no illusion that face-to-face dialogue would instantly overturn Syrian policies with which we disagree. Indeed, the most disagreeable and dangerous of these policies is not likely to be reversed unless and until Syria and Israel resolve the differences that separate them - a process we are trying hard to facilitate.

To those who would point to periodic visits of senior American officials to Damascus, citing continued Syrian support for Hizballah and Hamas, and declare engagement a “failure,” I would say the following: the United States and Syria have been substantially at odds over a broad range of issues for some six decades. The decision of our President to draw on a full inventory of diplomatic tools at his disposal does not anticipate instant success but the initiation of a sustained effort to succeed where we have failed to succeed in the past.

We need, I think, to proceed with patience and persistence. If confirmed by the

Senate, the administration intends to post Ambassador Ford to Damascus, enabling him to proceed with his work as the President's personal representative. As we try to minimize the prospects of war and maximize the chances for peace in a region where our national security is defended by American men and women in uniform, we have no choice but to use all the tools of statecraft at our disposal. We simply must make sure that leaders in Syria and elsewhere understand fully and accurately the position of the U.S. before they act - this is not something to be left to rumor, to second- or third-hand knowledge, or to others. This is our job. To do less amounts to negligence; to unilateral diplomatic disarmament. This is not the option we will pursue.