

Testimony of Ambassador Robert S. Ford

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing: Syria

October 31, 2013

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to present an overview of our policy to promote political transition in Syria.

This hearing is timely, due to recent developments. As I have also just returned from travel for meetings in Europe and the region, I can share with you the results of the Department's efforts to press the parties toward negotiations as well as working with our partners to bolster international support.

As we finalize and put into action a plan to end Syria's chemical weapons program and stockpile, which my colleague Assistant Secretary Countryman will address, we have doubled-down on our diplomatic efforts to bring the parties together to negotiate an end to the conflict. A negotiated political transition that rids Syria of Asad and his ruling clique, while preserving civil order, is the best means to stem the bloodshed as well as counter the growth of extremist groups taking advantage of the situation in Syria.

PREPARING FOR GENEVA

During my recent meetings with a host of opposition figures, all agreed that negotiations presented the best means to end the conflict. However, they also agreed that achieving a political transition that results in Asad's departure will not be easy. They fundamentally do not trust the Asad regime and are concerned that external parties will cut a deal at the opposition's expense.

These comments come from Syrian oppositionists who were thrown in prison, tortured by intelligence officials, and faced regular harassment and intimidation by both Bashar and his father Hafez al-Asad. These are people who do not give up but are justifiably hesitant to sit down at a negotiating table across from representatives of a regime that has killed over tens of thousands of its own people, using chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, sniper bullets, aircraft, and heavy artillery.

Syria's opposition knows the Asad regime well; we cannot dismiss their views. During the October 22 meeting of the London 11 and in our communiqué from the meeting we have sought to bolster the opposition's confidence in approaching negotiations and assure them that, as the London 11 communique stipulates, "when a [transitional governing body] is established, Asad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria."

In the London 11 meeting, we also agreed that negotiations must not be open-ended and must result in implementation of the Geneva Communiqué principle of a transitional governing body exercising full executive powers, including over security and military forces in the country.

The London 11 agreed that the Syrian opposition will be represented by a single delegation headed by the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) that will include other opposition representatives outside the coalition. This delegation must be representative if it is to assure Syria's many minority communities that Syria's future will be inclusive.

Since December 2012, the United States, along with our international partners, has recognized the SOC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Comprised of diverse representatives inside and outside Syria, the Coalition is committed to a democratic, inclusive Syria free from the influence of violent extremists.

The SOC has begun planning and preparation for negotiations. Although the SOC's leadership, including President Ahmed Issa al-Jarba support negotiating with the Syrian Government, they are deferring a decision to the General Assembly. While the outcome of a General Assembly vote, expected early in November, remains uncertain, the process of discussion within the General Assembly is useful in building a consensus and attaining a unified position.

SOC deliberations are not something for the U.S. to manage. It is an effort led by Syrians for Syrians that will define their desired outcomes. The SOC delegation will need genuine internal support to withstand Syrian regime negotiating tactics during the tough days ahead.

We have committed to building a process for the Syrian people to resolve the crisis themselves. The international community cannot do it for them. However, the international community and the U.S. in particular can support the Syrian opposition as they take the risky step forward in meeting with the other side.

U.S. ASSISTANCE

The conflict in Syria has fostered an environment that fuels the growth of extremism, and al-Qa'ida-linked groups are working to exploit the situation for their own benefit. There is a real competition now between extremists and moderates in Syria and we need to weigh in on behalf of those who promote freedom and tolerance.

Since the start of the conflict, we have provided over \$255 million in non-lethal assistance to the Coalition and a range of local councils and grassroots groups inside Syria to build a network of ethnically and religiously diverse civilian activists from the top down as well as the bottom up. These funds are strengthening local councils, civil society groups, unarmed political activists, and free media to improve governance, accountability, and service delivery at the sub-national and national level.

Our Liberated Areas Initiative is providing \$10 million worth of generators, cranes, trucks, ambulances, and water bladders to areas under opposition control. During Ramadan, the U.S. provided 51,000 food baskets to a number of target areas in liberated areas mainly in northern Syria. Specifically, we have also provided 10 ambulances, 37 generators, 220 water storage units and five fire trucks for local councils.

We boosted nine independent radio station signals, extending the reach of broadcast on FM stations, and funded three independent television stations. Those media platforms were used to address sectarian violence and issue public service messages on best practices in the event of chemical weapons exposure.

The United States has also trained over 15 local councils and civil society organizations to improve their responsiveness to community needs and their capacity to improve governance in the communities they support. About 61 local councils, 16 professional organizations, 42 media centers, and 106 civil society organizations have been represented at training funded by the US Government for a total of nearly 3000 activists trained.

Fierce fighting in Syria continues. Now with the regime dismantling its chemical weapons, it has returned to barbaric siege tactics on civilian areas that refuse to surrender.

In neighborhoods just minutes from Asad's gilded palace, children are dying while his forces are reportedly limiting access so severely that we are hearing the first reports of acute malnutrition as food aid and other assistance is blocked.

In the neighborhood of Muadhmiyyah, where the regime was so desperate to regain the upper hand that it used chemical weapons on August 21, it has allowed only a few thousand civilians to leave to provide cover for its attempts to choke off any supplies to the area for the remaining civilians.

The Syrian Government has ignored the demands by the UN Security Council, international humanitarian organizations, prominent religious leaders, and even its supporter, Russia, to allow the flow of humanitarian aid to these affected communities.

The best way for the regime to demonstrate it cares about the people of Syria and is ready to commit to work toward a resolution of this conflict is for it to allow assistance to flow to its own people.

SUPPORT TO THE ARMED OPPOSITION

There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. Neither the regime nor the opposition has the wherewithal to militarily defeat the other. However, our support to the armed opposition is essential to our ability to maintain influence and to strengthen the position of moderates.

Our support assists Idriss and the SMC in their fight with extremist groups, who have targeted the moderate opposition. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, an outgrowth of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, has increasingly chosen to fight the moderate opposition. By empowering the moderates, we help them contest against extremists and terrorists.

Our non-lethal support of the moderate armed opposition is important in keeping pressure on the regime. We greatly appreciate Congress's support, as we seek to provide the Supreme Military Council (SMC), led by General Salim Idriss, with \$80 million worth of critical force enablers like vehicles, food, medical kits, and basic communications equipment.

To mitigate the risk that our assistance might end up in the hands of extremists, we will continue to rely on the effective, formal processes that have been established across various agencies in the government to vet the recipients of U.S. assistance.

CONCLUSION

The regime bears the responsibility for pursuing conflict rather than reform. The current situation was not inevitable. It sprang from a ruling clique that was willing to sacrifice its people to hold onto power. Asad has lost all legitimacy and must go. The regime and its backers have a choice – hold to the current approach and become a failing state beholden to foreign backers or take the higher road and shape the future of the country through negotiations.

Syrians are approaching the first opportunity to end over two years of civil war by starting negotiations. They do so in an atmosphere of distrust and apprehension. However, negotiations present the best chance for Syrians to define for themselves a vision of what freedom means in a new Syria. A future Syria must be inclusive all of its citizens in order to heal the wounds this civil war has inflicted.

A new, peaceful future for Syria is possible. It can be done. Negotiations will be a first step. We must, however, be realistic. Negotiations are unlikely to end quickly or be definitive on all points, including a constitution and new elections.

We support an inclusive, democratic transition. We continue to believe that is the best solution to the Syrian crisis. We also know that the opposition and the regime will need support to get to an agreement.

We look forward to working with Congress throughout this process. Thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am happy to take your questions.