

Statement for the Record
Ambassador Anne W. Patterson
Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Corker and Members of the Committee, for inviting me today to discuss the crisis in Syria. I am well aware that many members of this Committee are not satisfied with our progress to date. Neither are we. Let me say that the Administration appreciates your concern and the support this committee has shown for efforts to address this challenge.

The Committee heard from Deputy Secretary Burns three weeks ago on the challenge of sectarian and extremist violence related to the conflict. Today I will supplement Deputy Secretary Burns' remarks by describing the coordinated strategy that we are developing. I am pleased to be accompanied today by my colleague, Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation Tom Countryman, who will address the international community's progress in the removal and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons.

The Crisis

The popular demands for economic and political reform sweeping the Middle East began three years ago in Syria as peaceful protests. Syria's large youthful population sought an end to oppression and new opportunities. The Asad regime's response to these demands has torn the nation apart, fueling extremism and inflaming regional tensions.

More than 146,000 people have been killed since the unrest and violence began. The number of conflict-affected civilians seeking refuge in neighboring countries has increased to more than 2.5 million people while, inside Syria, an additional 6.5 million people are displaced and at least 9.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The U.N. Security Council has condemned the denial of humanitarian access to civilians in need and has urged immediate steps to facilitate relief operations throughout the country, yet the regime has continued to obstruct humanitarian access. Again last week, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported on the continuing human rights violations being committed by the regime, as well as human rights abuses by the al-Qaeda linked groups and their offshoots that have taken root in the ungoverned spaces that Asad's actions and atrocities have created.

Opposition to the Asad regime in Syria is broad and deep. Most Syrians who side with the opposition are moderates. In large areas of the country they have thrown off regime control, yet the situation on the ground is constantly in flux. In some areas, regime forces – with Hizballah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard support – have regained control of territory they had lost earlier in the conflict. Syrian troops are well armed with Iranian and Russian weapons, and also resort to barrel bombs or starvation to terrorize civilians. But peace will not come to Syria from a military victory. The only sustainable solution to the Syria crisis is a negotiated political settlement.

The United States is a leader of the ‘London 11’ contact group that has worked to move forward the Syrian transition, end the violence, and achieve a political solution. Although the U.N.-sponsored Geneva II negotiations have stalled due to regime intransigence aided by the tacit support of Russia, the process served to unify components of the Syrian opposition and to enable it to articulate its vision for a transitional government.

The continuing civil war has proved a magnet for foreign violent extremists – some with substantial combat experience – who are drawn to the ungoverned regions left by the deterioration of the Asad regime. Our colleagues at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence have estimated that there are nearly 23,000 violent extremist fighters in Syria, including more than 7,000 foreign fighters. They represent a minority of the total rebel ranks inside Syria, which are estimated to be between 75,000 – 110,000 fighters. The violent extremist fighters belong to several groups but most notably al-Qaeda’s official affiliate in Syria, Nusra Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), formerly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, whose new name indicates its growing ambitions. ISIL is responsible for most of the violence that has been taking place in Iraq’s Anbar province aimed at destabilizing Iraq. These groups offer weapons and money to Syrian men who oppose the regime, yet who might not otherwise be drawn to violent extremist causes but for the money and avenue for action against the regime they provide.

Bashar al-Asad bears responsibility for this metastasizing problem. His regime has released terrorists from its jails, allowed violent extremist bases to emerge, and invited other foreign terrorist organizations including Lebanese Hizballah, as well as Iranian-trained militia fighters from Iraq and Pakistan, to join the fight on its side.

Mr. Chairman, we are reviewing our policy and identifying priorities for coordinated action.

Countering Violent Extremist Activity

In Pakistan, we clearly saw the dangers that arise when terrorists are able to set up safe havens – and how difficult and costly in lives and money it becomes to dislodge or destroy them. For that reason, a top priority in the Syria crisis is preventing the establishment of a permanent terrorist safe-haven. In coordination with allies and partners, we are now better organizing ourselves to address the growing challenge of violent extremist fighters in Syria and the flow of these fighters into and out of the country. With our partners, we will apply tools, tactics, and best practices to mitigate potential threats and build upon existing lines of cooperation.

We are working with members of the opposition, Syria's neighbors and other regional states to cut off their sources of funding and recruits. Saudi Arabia has criminalized participation in foreign conflicts by its citizens and is prosecuting individuals who have done so. Our allies in the Gulf increasingly, and correctly, see the flood of violent extremists from their countries as a threat to themselves. We have new initiatives to work with our allies to identify violent extremists who have travelled to the region.

We are also working to strengthen the moderate Syrian opposition, both inside and outside of Syria, because they are now facing a two-front war against both the Asad regime and the violent extremists.

Preventing Collapse and Nonlethal Support

In parts of Syria where the regime has been ousted, we want to prevent the wholesale collapse of Syria's institutions and public services and keep regime hardliners and violent extremists from asserting control. As the fighting has continued, the regime has increasingly targeted civilian populations by denying basic services and cutting them off from food, fuel and medical care. But some provincial and local councils and civil society organizations continue struggling, against great odds, to maintain local government and continue critical services. We need to help them.

Mr. Chairman, members of this committee have been rightly concerned about the pace and effectiveness of support for the civilian opposition. Without a direct U.S. government presence inside the country – as well as control of many border entry points by al-Qaeda-linked groups or their offshoots – it has been difficult to increase our assistance to the Syrian opposition. Our strategy had been to use \$260 million in non-lethal assistance to link the Syrian Coalition (SOC) to councils and NGOs inside the country, helping to unify and strengthen the opposition.

However, based on our experience on the ground over the past year, we have been refocusing our activity. Over the past few months the State Department and USAID have stepped up efforts to channel resources directly to local and provincial governments and civil society groups, as well as the SOC.

Our focus is increasingly on ways to help communities maintain basic security, keep the lights on, provide water, food and basic medical care – staving off the advances of extremist groups who seek to exploit peoples’ desperation. It allows these localities to maintain the basic public institutions that will be so critical in rebuilding a post-Asad Syria.

In towns and cities under opposition control, we are beginning to provide cash grants to pay local law enforcement and teachers. We continue to train local councils and civil society organizations in administration and local governance. And we are providing equipment and supplies to help them, including heavy equipment such as generators, cranes, trucks, and ambulances. In one major city, for example, we have helped reopen 17 schools serving 9,300 students. In another major city, we funded the refurbishment of 60 police stations and are providing non-lethal equipment and basic stipends to 1,300 policemen, who are struggling to maintain order. Paying stipends not only helps keep these people on the job, but it also helps deprive the extremist groups of the chance to fill the vacuum themselves.

Make no mistake: this is extremely difficult work and nobody is saying that this assistance will turn the tide against what remains an extremely serious and deteriorating situation. As we learned in Iraq – even with 160,000 American troops, ten years of effort, tens of thousands of schools refurbished, and hundreds of millions of dollars spent – it takes generations to restore stability in societies wrecked by decades of dictatorship and civil wars. We are determined, however, to stand with those struggling to rebuild and stabilize their local communities even in the most horrific circumstances imaginable. These brave individuals will be the future leaders of Syria; they deserve our support, and they will continue to receive it through the types of assistance I just described.

As part of this \$260 million in non-lethal overall assistance, moreover, we are providing \$80 million in support to the Supreme Military Command (SMC). Providing this support to groups engaged in a highly fluid battle zone has been challenging. In December, an SMC warehouse in Syria containing U.S. supplies was overrun by a faction of extremist fighters. We suspended SMC assistance until they could reestablish secure supply routes and storage facilities. By

February, when the SMC regained control of its facility and accounted for its contents, we began sending supplies again – this time directly to trusted commanders.

In providing non-lethal assistance to the SMC, needs are identified by commanders and have included food rations, medical kits, and vehicles – as well as communications and other personal gear. These supplies not only fill gaps identified by opposition troops fighting both the regime and violent extremists, but they are tangible evidence of our support for the moderate opposition.

Although a leadership debate has opened up within the SMC – as the Syrian opposition discusses how to fight the regime more effectively – the dispute has not affected our ability to deliver non-lethal assistance to the moderate armed opposition through trusted commanders.

None of the non-lethal assistance we are providing will be determinative in defeating regime forces, nor will it, on its own, force Asad to change his calculus about trying to hold on to power. However, our assistance does provide needed equipment while sending a signal both to those inside and outside Syria of our strong support for the moderate opposition; help maintain basic administrative institutions; help prevent the formation of vacuums in services and security that extremists aggressively exploit; and create relationships with moderates who can, when this conflict is over, form the basis of a transitional government.

Eliminating the Threat of Chemical Weapons

The Asad regime used chemical weapons against its citizens, and its continued possession of chemical weapons material represents a sustained danger to Syria's population and all of its neighbors, including Israel. Last year, the international community, led by the United States and Russia, united to defend a long-standing international norm against the use of chemical weapons. Under a Joint Mission organized by the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the international community is supporting the safe elimination of Syria's chemical weapons program. U.S. assistance includes outfitting a vessel to neutralize Syria's highest priority chemical precursors and agents.

We are making progress, but there is tough work ahead. To date, the Joint Mission has verified the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons-production equipment, the machines that mix the components, and the removal of nearly half of Syria's declared stockpile. All of the sulfur mustard agent and some of the precursors for

sarin, the highest priority declared chemicals, have now been removed. It is our goal to complete the removal of declared chemicals as soon as possible in April and the verified destruction of these chemical weapons and materials by June 30.

Protecting our Friends and Allies

We are committed to helping contain the conflict by bolstering the security and stability of Syria's neighbors. Violence from the ongoing conflict has already spilled into Lebanon and Turkey, our NATO ally. Recently, Israel retaliated against Syrian army targets for an attack on an Israeli patrol on the Golan Heights. On Sunday, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Syrian plane that had encroached along the border. ISIL has used its position in Syria to pour extremist fighters and weapons into Iraq. Lebanon and Jordan are bearing an enormous burden as they work to secure their borders and meet the needs of more than 1.6 million refugees from Syria. We appreciate the support we have received from Congress as we work directly and with our international partners to support Syria's neighbors:

- We back the Lebanese government's efforts to contain the Syrian conflict and strongly condemn Hizballah's intervention on behalf of the Asad regime. The U.S. has provided additional support to the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces to help them secure Lebanon's borders and address internal security threats. We are helping the Lebanese government care for nearly one million refugees from Syria and strengthen the communities that are hosting them. We have provided more than \$340 million in humanitarian assistance to support the needs of these refugees and to reduce the burden on Lebanese communities. In addition, our ongoing bilateral assistance is helping to address deteriorating economic conditions and gaps in the delivery of important services, particularly in communities impacted by the crisis.
- Many of you met with Jordan's King Abdullah when he was here recently and can appreciate the contributions that Jordan is making to address this crisis. The United States is already working closely with the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) to address threats emanating from Syria, including providing enhanced border security and counterterrorism capabilities. DOD funds also help to assist the JAF with providing humanitarian assistance to newly arriving Syrian refugees. Longstanding development programs help relieve the strains on water infrastructure, schools, and health facilities in Jordanian communities that support large numbers of Syrian refugees. We have provided \$300 million in additional budget support over the last two years and will support a \$1 billion loan guarantee for Jordan as well as the renewal of our bilateral assistance

Memorandum of Understanding for an additional five years, as announced by the President last month.

- In regards to Turkey, we are most importantly working with Ankara on a variety of counter-terrorism issues to address the growing threat that Syria-based terrorists pose to Turkey and the challenge posed by foreign fighters. Additionally, Turkey hosts far more than the 641,000 officially registered refugees from Syria, in addition to significant parts of the Syrian opposition leadership. We are working to mitigate the Syrian conflict's spillover on Turkey's security and sovereignty, including through the deployment of two U.S. Patriot batteries in southern Turkey, which join four batteries from other NATO allies. U.S. contributions to the international humanitarian response help provide critical support to refugees hosted in Turkish camps and communities. In support of the U.N., Turkey is playing an important role in facilitating cross-border humanitarian assistance in northern Syria.
- Iraq hosts more than 225,000 refugees from Syria, mostly in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Since 2012, the United States has provided more than \$90 million in humanitarian aid to international organizations and NGOs for Syrian refugees in Iraq. We are also working with the U.N. and the Iraqi government to ensure that the estimated 350,000 Iraqis displaced by the Anbar conflict are getting needed assistance and will be able to vote in Iraq's upcoming elections, which ISIL seeks to disrupt. At the same time, we are in close contact with Iraq's political leaders and security commanders to develop and execute a holistic campaign to isolate ISIL from the population, including through intensified information sharing and security assistance.
- In Egypt, which hosts over 135,000 Syrian refugees, political instability and polarization has contributed to a difficult environment and increasing humanitarian needs for refugees. Recognizing the burden that refugee communities can pose on host countries, we are continuing to support humanitarian partners in Egypt and to engage the government to ensure that refugees receive needed support.
- Israel has not been spared the effects of the conflict. Our governments coordinate closely to monitor violent extremist threats in Syria, and we support Israel's right to defend itself from spillover violence. We applaud Israeli efforts to provide medical care to wounded Syrians seeking help. We are also concerned that Syria's instability will continue to threaten the Golan.

Urgent Humanitarian Action

We are coordinating closely with the international community to alleviate the suffering caused by this crisis. The Government of Kuwait co-hosted a donor conference with the U.N. Secretary-General in January, which resulted in \$2.6 billion in new pledges. The United States is the largest single donor to the Syria humanitarian response, providing more than \$1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance. Our assistance supports U.N. and other international organizations as well as numerous NGOs assisting conflict-affected civilians inside the country and throughout the region. We are specifically directing some of our funds to alleviate the growing strain on host communities, infrastructure and public services in neighboring countries. Inside Syria, our assistance provides food, basic healthcare, water and sanitation services and desperately needed relief supplies.

The Asad regime continues to deliberately block humanitarian access in Syria, citing the uncertain security situation. Last week, the first U.N. convoy reached the residents of Qamishli in northern Syria via the Turkish border crossing at Nusaybin. Although some supplies will finally reach these people in desperate need, one day of U.N. aid convoys crossing one border point is not enough. These convoys prove that the Syrian army can allow humanitarian access when it chooses to do so. The Asad regime must approve all U.N. requests for access to areas in need immediately as called for by the U.N. Security Council.

Negotiations Transitioning to a Representative Government

Transitioning to a representative government that is responsive to the needs of the Syrian people is the only way to reduce the violence and alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. While the international community, including Russia, maintains that the conflict must end via a negotiated political agreement in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, the regime has squandered every opportunity for a peaceful settlement. At the Geneva II talks, the regime's negotiator insulted the opposition, U.N. Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi and the international community while contributing nothing of substance to the discussion.

The United States and Russia share a common interest in a successful negotiation that fully implements the Geneva Communiqué and prevents the spread of instability and violent extremism beyond Syria's borders. To date, this common interest has motivated Russia to continue its support to the OPCW mission. However, Russia has done nothing to move its Syrian allies forward in the Geneva II negotiations. Moreover, we have seen an increase in both the quantity and the quality of weapons Russia has provided to the Syrian regime in recent months. The stability that Russia seeks in Syria will not be achieved by providing planes,

tanks, bombs, and guns for use against the Syrian people. We continue to review all options for changing President Putin's calculus away from Russia's support for the Asad regime.

Ambassador Brahimi told the Security Council on March 13, that he recommends against a third round of talks unless the regime commits to discuss substantively all elements of the Geneva Communiqué. In the meantime, the United States and its partners will continue to expand our support to the Syrian opposition and ratchet up pressure on the regime.

On another matter, I know that the safety of Syria's minority communities is a key concern for members of this committee, as it is for us. We are troubled by the plight of all civilians in Syria, including Christians and other religious minorities. Protecting the security and religious rights of these communities, as well as the rights of women, is an important element of our policy and will be essential to any future political settlement. We have sought and received assurances from the Syrian opposition leadership and moderate rebel leaders that they will protect the rights of women and minorities, and engage them in plans for building Syria's future.

Next Steps

Mr. Chairman, we are actively engaged in trying to bring the Syria crisis to an end.

- We are working with allies and partners to combat the growing threat of violent extremists;
- We are working to prevent a catastrophic collapse of Syrian cities in opposition controlled areas;
- We are providing nonlethal support to the armed opposition;
- We are working with the international community to end the threat of Syria's chemical weapons;
- We are taking steps to protect and support our regional friends and allies;
- We are contributing generously to the humanitarian response both inside Syria and among its neighbors; and
- We are providing support to the Syrian opposition both directly and through the London 11.

Even as we pursue all the steps I have outlined today, we continue to examine what more we can do to defend U.S. interests in Syria and to achieve a political settlement. We appreciate the support of your Committee – most recently in your

March 14 letter – and will continue to work together with the Congress as we move forward.

The Syrian people reject violent extremism. They want to return home and rebuild their country – and we will help them. Thank you.