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

February marked two years since Syrian protesters took peacefully to the street, like others throughout the region, to seek basic rights and protections from their government. What started out as a peaceful demand for dignity and freedom has become one of the most devastating conflicts of the 21st century.

More than 70,000 Syrians have been killed since the beginning of the conflict and the number is rising as the fighting in Damascus and southern Syria intensifies. This March was the deadliest month of the conflict, with over 6,000 Syrians killed.

In addition to the devastating human toll, we face an expanding extremist threat, and a few days ago Al-Qaeda announced the extension of its “Islamic State” in Syria. Iran’s role in perpetuating the bloodshed inside Syria is well known. Through its ongoing provision of personnel, guidance, and material and financial assistance, Iran is helping the Assad regime continue its repression and systematic violence against the Syrian people. Iran is joined in this effort by Hizballah, which also provides strong operational support to Asad.

Neighboring countries are paying the price as the spillover of violence and refugees from Syria threatens the stability of Lebanon, the capacity of Jordan, the progress of Iraq, and the security of Israel.

But with each passing day, the regime’s grip on power weakens. Territory slips from its grasp, and, in a growing number of towns and villages, a new Syria is being born. The regime of Bashar al-Asad must and will go. The sooner he steps aside, the better for all Syrians.

The United States, along with our partners, is working in several ways to hasten this process and lay the groundwork for a peaceful, democratic future for Syria.

First, we are working to change Asad’s calculations. With our allies and partners, we are pressuring the regime to end its war on the Syrian people and come to the negotiating table by range of diplomatic tools including one of the most severe set of economic sanctions. The regime’s finances have never been so weak; and it has never been so isolated in the world community.

At the same time – and more critically – we are helping the opposition prepare for a Syria without Asad by laying the foundation for a democratic transition that protects the rights of all Syrian people regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or gender. The opposition has articulated a common vision and transition plan for Syria that offers an alternative to the Asad regime’s tyranny. We support this vision.

Our assistance to the Syrian opposition, at the national and local levels, from local councils in liberated areas to civil society, is enabling these groups to plan for the future while providing essential services and extending the rule of law inside liberated areas of Syria now. Ambassador Ford will provide details about our transition assistance.

THE HUMAN COST

We undertake our work even as Syrian civilians face an unprecedented level of ruthlessness from the Asad regime. Every day the regime targets residential neighborhoods with heavy weapons, cluster bombs, and short-range ballistic missiles, including Scuds. The regime is sending its thugs to torture their fellow citizens, destroy hospitals and schools, and indiscriminately kill civilians, all in appalling violation of international law. As the fighting in Damascus intensifies the death toll will rise.

Millions have been forced to flee their homes to seek safety within the country or beyond its borders. According to the U.N., three to four million people are now internally displaced and more than 1.3 million people are refugees. These numbers could double or even triple by the end of 2013 – that would amount to nearly one third of Syria’s population.

We are starting to see troubling signs that the increase in refugees is destabilizing the region. Jordan’s Za’atri refugee camp is now Jordan’s fifth largest city, hosting over 100,000 Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees in Lebanon now are around 10 percent of that country’s population, threatening Lebanon’s fragile ethno-sectarian balance. UNRWA reports that over 40,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have sought refuge in Lebanon, straining resources in already-packed Palestinian camp communities and further heightening tensions. Turkey now hosts over 250,000 Syrian refugees. Tens of thousands of refugees have also fled into Iraq.

To help address this growing humanitarian crisis, we are providing nearly \$385 million in assistance to those in need, across all 14 governorates in Syria and across neighboring countries. This money is being spent on emergency medical care and supplies, blankets, food, clean water, and shelter. We are sending flour to 50 bakeries in Aleppo and sponsoring food and sanitation projects for the desperate families in Atmeh refugee camp. But this is not enough to meet the overwhelming need.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and the Government of Kuwait hosted a donor conference on January 30, at which donor nations pledged over \$1.5 billion to help Syrians in need. But the UN appeals for assistance remain only partially funded. Secretary Kerry and I are both personally pressing countries now to make good on their pledges.

THE ROAD AHEAD

In addition to addressing humanitarian needs, we are preparing for a Syria without Asad by helping the opposition lay the foundation for a democratic transition that protects the rights of all Syrians and that fosters, rather than threatens, stability in the Middle East.

That is why we and our partners are helping build the Syrian political opposition, including by recognizing the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Comprised of diverse representatives from inside and outside Syria, the Coalition is committed to a democratic, inclusive Syria free from the influence of violent extremists. Supporting such entities is the best way to ensure that the Syrian state that emerges after the Asad regime is inclusive and representative.

In the months since its formation, the Coalition has made significant progress in deepening its technical expertise, such as by developing the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), which identifies Syrian communities most in need and ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches them. The Coalition is also expanding its capacity to coordinate transition planning, including transitional justice plans to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

But now the Coalition is at a turning point. President Khatib has indicated that he is likely to resign at the end of his term in May. Ghassan Hitto, the Coalition-elected Prime Minister, who has been an effective partner in assistance coordination, is still shaping his role. The Coalition needs international support if it is to move these transitions successfully and build the kind of lasting credibility it needs with the Syrian people so that it can more effectively compete with extremists.

ENDING THE VIOLENCE

We believe that the best way to end the Syrian crisis is through a negotiated political solution. The regime and its supporters will fight to the last person standing. To get to a sustainable peace, Syrians need a political solution that assures all citizens of their rights.

The opposition and members of the regime without blood on their hands must come together to negotiate a deal like the framework laid out in the Geneva communiqué. This framework – agreed last June by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Turkey, and Arab League states – calls for a transitional governing body formed on the basis of mutual consent of the opposition and the Syrian regime to be given full executive powers and guide the country to elections.

This means that Asad, who has long lost his legitimacy and whom the opposition will never accept, will not play any role in that transitional governing body. If he is unwilling to decide that he should transfer executive authority, we will continue to find ways to pressure him to think differently about what lies in the future.

While this administration continues to take a hard look at every available, practical, and responsible means to end the suffering of the Syrian people, we do not believe at this time that it is in the United States' or the Syrian people's best interest to provide lethal support to the Syrian opposition. The judgments we make must pass the test of making the situation better for the Syrian people and must also take into account the long-term human, financial, and political costs for us, Syria, and the region. We continue to believe that a political solution to the crisis is the best way to save the Syrian people further suffering and to avert further destruction of the country, for which the regime bears overwhelming responsibility.

As President Obama told the Syrian people in a recent message, “More Syrians are standing up for their dignity. The Asad regime will come to an end. The Syrian people will have their chance to forge their own future. And they will continue to find a partner in the United States of America.”

We look forward to working with Congress throughout this process as we seek to protect the interests of the United States in the region and support the needs of the Syrian people in their struggle to create a free, stable, and democratic Syria.

Thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am happy to take your questions.