

Ambassador Robert Ford
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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.

I am especially delighted to be here. I just returned from the region and am looking forward to talking about our work there as well as about the progress being made by the Syrian opposition.

With each passing day, the regime is shrinking, as its grip on power and territory weakens. But the opposition's progress on the ground comes at a terrible cost. Syria has become one of the most devastating conflicts of the new century. More than 70,000 Syrians have been killed since the beginning of the conflict and millions forced to flee their homes.

The United States is responding. We are providing humanitarian relief across Syria and the region; working to end Assad and his regime; imposing sanctions that starve the regime of funds; helping the opposition prepare for a democratic transition that protects the rights of all the Syrian people; and working towards a negotiated political solution to end this conflict with a sustainable peace. We are undertaking all of these efforts in tandem with our partners across the globe and in the region.

THE SYRIAN VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Saving the Syrian state from humanitarian disaster, extremist influences, or state fragmentation, will not be easy, but it is critical to protect our interests and those of our partners in the region.

Many among Syria's minority communities, including Alawis, Druze, Christians, fear what the future holds. The Sunni majority is divided, fractious, and anxious to assert the rights so-long denied them by the Assad regime. Iran's role in the conflict is especially pernicious, as it helps the Assad regime build sectarian militias and attracts Hizballah and Iraqi militias to Syria.

For Syria to survive and endure it must find a path that cuts out such foreign interference and instead provides for a tolerant society that supports regional stability and ensures the dignity of the Syrian people. To effectively make the transition beyond the Assad regime, the opposition will need a vision for a pluralistic Syria that abides by the rule of law, subordinates the military to civilian authority, and guarantees the rights of all of its citizens while preserving continuity of the state and its institutions.

Syrians must plan for this for themselves. And they are starting to do so. Moaz al-Khatib, the president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, is an imam from Umayyad Mosque, the largest mosque in Damascus. In a very public speech broadcast throughout the Arab world in December, President Khatib rejected extremist ideologies and urged all Syrians, including Alawis, to join the opposition and build a new Syria.

General Salim Idriss, Chief of Staff of the Syrian Opposition's Supreme Military Council, and his regional commander, Colonel Akidi, have appealed to Alawis, who are the backbone of Asad's remaining support: Join us. Don't fight us. We're not fighting you. Join us.

President Khatib also wrote an open letter to the Syrian Christian community in February laying out a vision of respect for the dignity of all Syrians. He rejected the idea of a special tax on Christians, as advocated by some Syrian extremists harkening back to the medieval Caliphate.

This is the tolerance and coexistence that Syria needs – and what the vast majority of Syrians want.

OUR TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

The Syrians have to do this for themselves – the international community cannot do it for them. What we can do is pave the way for this process. That is a large part of what the United States is doing now.

This transition assistance is both supporting the transition away from Asad and helping to ensure that it promotes human freedom and tolerance.

The Asad regime has created 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 December 2012, the United States, along with our international partners, has recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition 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.

We are providing \$117 million in non-lethal, transition 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.

For instance, the United States has supplied Syrian activists with thousands of pieces of communications gear. One group of lawyers used this equipment to form the Free Lawyers' Union, which has now taken responsibility for legal affairs within the Local Council for the Governorate of Daraa.

We boosted private radio station signals, extending the reach of broadcast on FM stations, and funded media outlets. 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 also trained over 1,500 local leaders and activists – including women and minorities – from over 100 different provincial councils. One recent graduate played a critical role in the Aleppo local council elections last month. He reached out to 240 delegates across Aleppo’s liberated areas and broadcast the election – bringing credibility, transparency, and accountability to the process. These trainees are improving the ability of local committees and councils from Damascus to Deir al-Zour in the east to Idlib in the northwest to better provide for the needs of all members of their communities.

We are not doing this work alone. From Norway to Australia, the U.K. to Korea, we are working across the globe with our partners to coordinate our efforts.

A TURNING POINT

But as Ambassador Jones mentioned, with President Khatib indicating his likely resignation at the end of his term in May, the Coalition is at a crucial leadership juncture. Ghassan Hitto, the Coalition-elected Prime Minister, has been a strong partner in coordinating assistance, but is still establishing himself in his new role. International support for the Coalition is crucial in order to bolster its capacity to provide support to the Syrian people and provide a more stable, appealing alternative to extremism.

That is why we are focusing our latest assistance, on fortifying the work of the Coalition in Syria and cementing its ties with local Syrian groups. For instance, we will target assistance to the Coalition to reinforce local councils that meet the needs of their citizens in areas no longer controlled by the regime.

USAID will provide through the Coalition and local councils short-term assistance for urgent needs, such as fuel, heaters, and nutritional and educational supplies for children. USAID will also provide the Coalition with technical experts to help it manage essential services and light infrastructure. These experts will help with technical assessments and track multi-donor rehabilitation efforts.

We hear regular reports about the lack of security in newly liberated areas, and thus we have adjusted our programs to enable us to support civilian security through training and non-lethal equipment to reduce the likelihood that extremists will exploit security vacuums in liberated areas.

Supreme Military Council (SMC) Chief of Staff General Idriss and those under his command have demonstrated a commitment to a tolerant and inclusive vision of Syria. In the coming weeks we will begin providing them and Coalition food and medical kits for distribution to those in need to signal our support for the moderate and responsible elements of the armed opposition.

Finally, 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

Syria need not face years of civil war, but Syrians will have to stand up to promote the respect of the dignity, and rights for each and every one of their fellow citizens. It won't be easy. The Asad regime favored one community over the majority for decades, and that legacy now leaves many in the country nervous about the future. Syrians must develop and promote a vision of what freedom means in a new Syria, and they must develop and promote an understanding of how regional stability will help them rebuild their shattered country.

And they can. We are working to give them that chance by helping them prepare for an inclusive, democratic transition. We continue to believe that the best solution to the Syrian crisis is a negotiated political transition. The Geneva Communiqué calls for a transitional governing body with full executive powers and formed on the basis of mutual consent.

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.