

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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United States Policy towards Syria
Outline of Testimony before
The Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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It is always an honor to appear before this committee. Yours is the most important forum for public discussion of U.S. foreign policy. And no policy can be sustained and prove effective without a full and serious public airing. It was my treat to work for Senator Jacob Javits in the 1960's when he joined this committee.

Please forgive that I offer this paper in the form of an outline. I just learned I would testify this past weekend. And besides, I presume to think that an outline actually might be easier than an inevitably wordy paper for public servants dodging daily tidal waves.

I have spent more than 50 years in the foreign policy world – as a Senate staffer, the Director of Policy Planning in the Pentagon, an Assistant Secretary of State for Politico-Military Affairs, a senior fellow in various think tanks, a correspondent, editor, and columnist for *The New York Times*, and as the President of the Council on Foreign Relations. I have made my full share of mistakes in practice and in print. In most cases, the failures were caused by lack of true knowledge of the countries concerned. Far too often in foreign policy-making, nations in question are viewed by policy makers here in Washington as squares on a chess board and not living places with cultures and histories and mysterious decision-making systems. We often don't know who and what we're dealing with. We learn about our ignorance at the expense of the American people.

Yet another major reason for policy failure is a lack of a coherent, plausible, and workable strategy, i.e. one that honestly examines what we know and don't know about the situation and parties, one that honestly and hard-headedly appraises U.S. interests and the power that our nation can actually apply and where, and finally one that establishes achievable objectives, not goals that result from ideology and politics.

Pardon the long windup, but in policy-making, the windup is almost as important as the pitch.

I. We need an overall Mideast strategy, not just a Syria policy.

Mideast leaders, without exception, say they don't know what the U.S. strategy is towards their country and towards the region. They say it's vague and ever-changing. It's not nearly enough for the U.S. to simply say we want to try negotiations on nuclear capability with Iran, press ahead on Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, and mitigate the suffering in Syria. It's totally confusing to start saying that the centerpiece of U.S. policy is to promote democracy and then simply say that it is beyond us. Mideast leaders don't understand how the U.S. can cozy up to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and then deny succor to the true Egyptian civilian democrats installed by the military. Our best Mideast friends can't figure out why we have reduced democracy promotion to the holding of elections, when

it's quite clear that in countries long dominated by dictators, only the well-organized radicals are best organized to win elections.

If we want true help in Syria – and we need it – we'll need better policies toward Syria's neighbors first. Others will help us in Syria to the degree that what we are proposing to do there makes sense. They will also care about our policies directly towards them.

II. The starting place for making Syria policy is asking ourselves: “who is the biggest threat to U.S. interests there?”

The Obama administration started out with the position that President Assad was the most serious threat to us, and that he and his regime had to go. As nasty a dictator as Assad is – and he's plenty nasty – he isn't the biggest threat to the U.S. He's a threat to anyone who opposes him from within. But his external policies, like those of his father, are ones that his neighbors, including Israel, lived with without great difficulty – with the exception of Assad's efforts to go nuclear in some fashion.

The biggest threat to U.S. interests comes clearly from the Muslim extremists—al Nusra Front, al Qaeda, and other related groups. They represent clear and present dangers to Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and others. Just ask them. With a safe base in Syria, they would promote terrorism against their neighbors. And they would foster religious extremist rule in every one of those countries, and of course, in Syria itself. If you think Assad has enslaved his people, these terrorists and extremists would enslave all, particularly women. And they would make life intolerable for Christians, Shiites, Alawites, and anyone who doesn't believe exactly what they believe.

III. So, how do we build a U.S. strategy against this Muslim extremist threat? The answer is to get all parties to focus on this common interest against the extremists.

The extremists are a formidable fighting force. Fanatics, especially well-heeled ones, usually are. They've been quite successful in gaining and holding territory – and imposing Shariah law.

Assad's Alawites know that the Sunni jihadists, if they come to power, would kill them. They would be killed because they have ruled over Syrian Sunnis and simply because they are viewed as hated Shiites. And the Sunni rebels, the moderates that the U.S. favors, fear them most as well. The moderates know well that once in power, the extremists would treat moderate and secular Sunnis the same as the enemy Shiites.

This profound fear of al Nusra Front, al Qaeda crazies is the potential common bond between the Alawites and the moderate Sunni rebels. Of course, they don't like each other, but they hate the radicals more.

IV. The U.S., then, has to use its policies, arms, and aid to forge this alliance between Alawites and moderate Sunni rebels. Both would focus on fighting the jihadis, not each other. And in that context, the U.S. and its allies would provide and expedite the necessary weapons and money to the moderate rebels.

There would be a kind of temporary truce between the Alawites and the moderate rebels as they tried to weaken and destroy their shared threat. As part of this truce, the U.S. and Russia would seek agreement from Assad to step down in the context of Geneva negotiations and after the subduing of the jihadis.

Then, an interim government of Alawites and moderate rebels would focus on the rapid development of democratic institutions – laws, courts, civil society, free press, and the like. Meantime, they would share power and, if done peaceably, would receive outside aid. After several years, elections would be held on the understanding that the resulting government would promote power-sharing based

on a federal system. Each group, as a practical matter, would prevail in its “own” part of the country, and oil and gas revenues would be shared, etc.

V. The execution would not be as easy as portrayed above. But the principles above—the strategy—could serve as practical guidelines. It’s virtually impossible to visualize any other reasonable end to this bloodshed or any other way to moderate the potential threats of Muslim extremism to our friends and allies in the region.