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“Syria – Options and Implications for Lebanon and the Region”

Thank you, Mr Chairman and other distinguished Members of the Committee, for inviting me here today. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the current status of our relationship with Syria and outline the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. I would like to begin by emphasizing that despite our serious concerns with the Syrian government’s actions, the United State continues to stand with the people of Syria as they struggle under an oppressive dictatorship. The Syrian people deserve a government that respects human rights and does not use fear and intimidation for political gains. Our frustrations and concerns are directed solely towards the Syrian regime. This is a government that strives to undermine Lebanon’s sovereignty and security through pro-Syrian proxies and partners; a government that continues to harbor and support terrorists and terrorist organizations; a government that has allowed terrorists and criminals to cross its borders; a regime that turns a deaf ear to its people’s demands for freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and the freedom to elect a representative and responsive government. It is with this regime and its actions that the United States takes issue.

Some argue that we have not done enough to engage the Syrian regime and that diplomatic isolation has resulted in fewer opportunities to raise our concerns or explain our desired outcomes. In reality, our concerns are well known and well documented. The Syrian Government knows very well what the United States and the international community expect. While appropriate levels of interaction should continue, it is time for the Syrian Government to show it is willing to be a responsible member in the community of nations. As Secretary Rice said following her meeting with Syrian FM Mu’allem at the May 2007 conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, the Syrians claim stability in Iraq is in their interest, but “actions speak louder than words and we will have to see how this develops.” We do continue to engage the Syrian regime on humanitarian issues. The U.S. is concerned with the plight of the estimated 1.4 million Iraqi refugees currently living in Syria. We recognize that Syria plays a humanitarian role in this regard and has largely kept its borders open to Iraqis fleeing violence and allowed Iraqis

access to critical social services such as health care and education. We recognize that the refugees place a large burden on Syria's public services and institutions. PRM A/S Sauerbrey visited Damascus in March 2007 to discuss humanitarian and refugee issues. Ambassador James Foley, the Secretary's Senior Coordinator for Iraqi refugees, just returned from a trip to Damascus where he reiterated our commitment to providing assistance to Iraqis living in Syria through the United Nations and our international partners, as well as our commitment to the United States resettlement program. Thanks to A/S Sauerbrey's and Ambassador Foley's efforts, we have an agreed framework with the Syrian Government and the UNHCR for carrying out U.S. refugee admissions processing in Syria. Currently, 4,000 Iraqi and other individuals referred to us by UNHCR are being prepared for resettlement interviews with the Department of Homeland Security.

There are many points of tension that account for our current relationship with the Syrian Government, and among the most important issues is the flow of foreign fighters through Syria and into Iraq. Syria shares a long, porous border with Iraq. It is through this border that a disproportionate number of Iraq's "foreign fighters" have entered the country with the goal of killing innocent Iraqi civilians, Iraqi security forces, and U.S. and Coalition troops. In recent months, Coalition Forces and their Iraqi partners have made strides against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and the Syrian regime has taken some steps to enhance its internal security posture. The Border Monitoring Technical Experts group has provided a forum for the U.S. and other countries to address this issue directly with the Syrians. However, the continued entry of those who seek to carry-out horrific attacks poses a threat to recent gains. Syria is not powerless in this situation; there are a number of additional steps the Syrian government can take. Were the regime in Damascus serious about helping Iraq and stopping the flow of al-Qaeda suicide bombers into Iraq, it would be more apparent. Decisive action against jihadi organizers and safe house networks represents one important step in this campaign. Beyond that the Syrians could institute a visa requirement for travelers from certain countries or regions to build additional barriers to the entry of terrorists and criminals into Syria. Syrian authorities can also work with their Iraqi counterparts to implement measures agreed upon during PM Maliki's August visit to Damascus. These include joint border patrols, exchange of liaison officers, and improved communications between the Syrian and Iraqi Interior Ministries. Syria also continues to provide safe haven to former Saddam Hussein regime loyalists and Baathist insurgent financiers, whose vocal and financial support to the insurgency in Iraq promotes extremism and undermines national reconciliation in that country. In the end, the Syrians share responsibility in following through on previous

statements and promises and demonstrating a sincere belief that stability in Iraq is in Syria's interest.

Like all countries, Syria has a responsibility to promote peace and security, especially amongst its neighbors. In Lebanon, however, Syria continues to pursue a policy of interference and an unabashed pursuit of its own agenda. Through intimidation and violence Syria shows its blatant disregard for the sovereignty of Lebanon and the security of the Lebanese people. By refusing to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon or delineate its shared border, Syria demonstrates that its words of respect for Lebanon's sovereignty are empty rhetoric. Although overt Syrian security forces formally withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Syria and its Lebanese proxies and partners continue to interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs. For example, in November 2006, Hizballah and its pro-Syrian allies engineered the resignation of six cabinet members, including all five Shia Ministers, and charged that the government of Prime Minister Siniora was thereby illegitimate and unconstitutional. Even worse, since Hariri's assassination six additional pro-sovereignty leaders have been murdered. Most recently, Lebanese Parliamentarian Antoine Ghanem – a staunch advocate for Lebanese sovereignty – was assassinated by a car bomb on September 19.

Lebanon's constitution requires Parliament to elect a new President by November 24. We are very concerned that in the next few weeks Syria or its supporters will attempt to manipulate the outcome through violence, intimidation or an obstinate refusal to participate in the electoral process. These concerns are not unfounded. Hizballah and its opposition partners have threatened to derail elections by boycotting required electoral sessions. Such a step would lead to a political vacuum and potential chaos in Lebanon. We are making it clear that interference or intimidation in the electoral process is unacceptable to the United States and to the international community. If Syria hopes to have a more normal relationship with the United States or play an influential and responsible role in the region, it will heed these warnings.

The Syrian regime, Hizballah and pro-Syrian opposition elements in Lebanon have worked to deny justice to the Lebanese victims of political violence. The United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1757 on May 30, 2007. This brought the Agreement establishing the Special Tribunal into force. The Special Tribunal was designed to bring to justice those responsible for Hariri's assassination and the related murders of those who defended Lebanon's independence and democracy. Pro-Syrian ministers in Lebanon's cabinet resigned in an effort to prevent an

Agreement between Lebanon and the United Nations to establish the Tribunal. Parliament speaker Nabih Berri refused to open Parliament's doors, depriving the legislative majority of its right to approve the Tribunal.

Syria continues to obstruct efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace and remains designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism due to its continued support of Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist organizations. These groups, including HAMAS, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command continue to base their external leadership in Syria. Despite repeated demands from the international community Syria refuses to expel these groups or their leaders from the safe-haven Damascus provides. Moreover, evidence suggests Syria provides weapons and support to Hizballah, and facilitates Hizballah's efforts to smuggle weapons into Lebanon. Given uncertainties as to Syria's desires to pursue non-conventional weapons and the status of the government's current arsenal, we are concerned that Syria allows internationally designated terrorist organizations unfettered access to its borders. Additionally, the stakes are that much higher should Syria strengthen its ties with countries such as Iran who have already demonstrated nuclear ambitions.

We continue to have serious concerns about the respect for human rights that the Syrian Government denies its own people. We strongly support the Syrian people's desires for democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Throughout the last few months the government's already poor human rights record continued to worsen. The regime has increased restrictions on citizen's privacy rights and stepped-up already significant restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association. The Syrian regime continues to harass and imprison human rights activists and civil society representatives and their families, as well as deny its people the right to travel abroad freely. After sentencing civil rights activist Kemal Lebواني to 12-years in jail, prison officials continue to subject him to physical and psychological mistreatment. The Syrian Government has refused medical treatment for prisoners of conscience such as Anwar al Bunni and Michel Kilo. The Syrian regime continues to refuse Mr. Riad Seif, a former Member of Parliament and former prisoner of conscience and other dissidents the right to travel outside Syria. Seif desperately needs medical treatment for cancer that he cannot receive in Syria, but the Syrian Government continues to violate international humanitarian norms by refusing his request to leave the country for medical treatment. In response, the U.S. has made public statements and urged other countries to press the Syrian Government to adopt more humanitarian policies.

The Syrian regime also refuses to have an open, transparent and fully participatory political environment. Syria's parliamentary elections on April 22 and 23 of this year were undermined by government manipulation. In May, Asad ran unopposed in a crudely choreographed Presidential referendum. Although opposition groups estimated voter turnout at significantly less than 50 percent, government statistics declared Asad had won 98 percent of the vote, with voter turnout officially reported at 96 percent. The Syrian people deserve democratically elected representatives who are willing to fight corruption, respect their human rights, provide job opportunities and inspire political participation by the next generation of Syrian leaders.

We are committed to assisting Iraq's most vulnerable citizens by working with the United Nations and our international partners. In fact, the United States increased humanitarian assistance for displaced Iraqis from \$43 million in 2006 to almost \$200 million in 2007, \$81 million of which went to international organizations for appeals that included programs inside Syria. A further \$3.7 of the \$81 million went to the International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent in 2007 supporting health and other programs implemented by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Jordanian Red Crescent Societies benefiting Iraqi refugees. In addition, the State Department awarded \$8 million in grants in FY07 to six non-governmental organization partners for projects in Syria focusing on the health, education, and emergency assistance needs of Iraqi refugees. These projects also provide basic assistance such as food and non-food items to the most vulnerable of the refugees. We plan to continue contributing generously to humanitarian assistance programs in 2008. In the aftermath of Ambassador Foley's visit, which I mentioned previously, the U.S., Syria and UNHCR agreed on a framework for processing Iraqi refugee resettlement cases in Damascus. Syria has committed to issue visas to DHS adjudicators, who, in the coming weeks, will be interviewing hundreds of Iraqis referred by UNHCR to the US Refugee Resettlement Program.

It is clear there are a number of factors behind our strained relationship with Syria. I would like to now address the approaches we are taking to resolve our most serious concerns. First, Syria's actions threaten not just the Syrian people but the entire region. We are not the only ones alarmed by the Syrian Government's behavior. We are working closely with our partners in Europe and in the Middle East to coordinate efforts so as to maximize effectiveness, especially in the run-up to Lebanon's elections. As an example of this coordination, Secretary Rice led a meeting on the margins of last week's Expanded Neighbors Conference in Istanbul with the Foreign Ministers of France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, as well as the Secretary General of the Arab League to

discuss the upcoming elections in Lebanon. We expect to consult more closely with our partners in the region on this subject in the coming weeks.

We have already taken a series of punitive measures and will take more. The President has exercised authorities from the Syria Accountability Act to prohibit almost all U.S. exports to Syria, except for food and medicine, and has banned Syrian commercial flights to and from the United States. Due to Syria's continued designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism there is a complete ban on U.S. arms-related exports and sales to Syria; strict controls on the export of dual-use items; and prohibitions on U.S. economic assistance.

On August 1 of this year the President signed Executive Order 13441 to allow the property of persons undermining the sovereignty of Lebanon or its democratic processes and institutions to be blocked. It complements previous Executive Orders, such as 13338, which financially isolates individuals and entities contributing to the Government of Syria's problematic behavior. President Bush signed E.O. 13338 on May 11, 2004 in response to the Syrian Government's continued support of international terrorism, sustained occupation of Lebanon, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and undermining of U.S. and international efforts in Iraq. These orders freeze any assets the affected individuals may have in the United States and prohibit U.S. persons from engaging in transactions with these individuals. Treasury recently designated four Syrian and pro-Syrian Lebanese individuals pursuant to these Executive Orders. If necessary, the United States has the ability to further isolate the Syrian Government both diplomatically and financially.

In addition to corrective measures and coordinated, multi-lateral engagement, we are continuing to engage the Syrian Government where appropriate on issues of mutual concern, specifically the issue of Iraqi refugees. The Syrian regime is well aware of the steps it must take in order to have a better relationship with the United States. It has not taken those steps. Its failure to do so is not for a lack of U.S. engagement.

As previously mentioned, Secretary Rice met with Syrian FM Mu'alleem in May and again last week in Istanbul, PRM A/S Sauerbrey traveled to Damascus to discuss refugee issues in March 2007, and Ambassador Foley has just returned from a trip to Damascus where he discussed Iraqi refugees with Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. Even though we recalled our Ambassador in 2005 following Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's assassination, there has continued to be limited engagement by senior level U.S. Government officials with their Syrian

counterparts. Then Secretary of State Powell visited Damascus in May 2003. My predecessor, Ambassador Burns, met with Syrian President Al-Asad in September 2004; Secretary Powell met with then- FM Shara'a at the UNGA in late September 2004 and again in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2004; and former Deputy Secretary Armitage visited Damascus in January 2005. In each of these efforts, the Syrians promised to take action against the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, end their interference in Lebanon, expel Palestinian terrorist leaders from Damascus, and to end Syrian state sponsorship of terrorism. Unfortunately, the Syrian regime has yet to demonstrate the necessary willingness to reorient its behavior back toward international norms. Despite the absence of an Ambassador, we continue to have a diplomatic presence in Syria providing a mechanism for communication with the Syrian Government. An improved relationship with Syria can only come about when it behaves as a responsible member of the international community. We are under no illusions. The issues between Syria, the United States and the rest of the international community are complex and will take time and effort to resolve.

Thank you for your time. I would be pleased to address your questions.