Mr. Speaker, there are moments in the lives of nations when

the existing order is suddenly revealed

as bereft of legitimacy and no longer

viable. The wave of unrest spreading across the Arab world, touched off by

the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit

vendor tired of petty humiliation by corrupt governments, has exposed the

rot of decades of caprice, corruption,

and incompetence. That this one man’s

desperate act could lead to the downfall of the governments of Tunisia,

Egypt, and perhaps Yemen is testament to the pent up frustration of mil-

lions of people who were denied the

basic rights and economic opportunity

that we take for granted here in the West.

But it is in Syria, where the future of

the Arab Spring seemingly hangs in

the balance and where the security

services have acted with the least restraint and maximum violence. Like

marauding armies of old, select units

of military and security services troops

have been moving from city to city in

a quest to quash the ever-spreading

demonstrations that have become a feature of life in Syria.

Deraa, a town of some 75,000 lying

near the border with Jordan, has

emerged as one of the centers of the

Syrian uprising against the 40 years of

rule by the Assad family. Army and security forces have repeatedly assaulted

the town and surrounding villages,

killing hundreds of civilians and arresting anyone suspected of taking

part in demonstrations against the regime. On April 29 in the village of Jiza,

the Syrian secret police rounded up

anybody it thought was involved with

the protests, including Hamza Ali al- Khateeb, who had gone to watch the

demonstration with other members of his family.

For a month, Hamza’s family waited

for him to return, worried but hopeful

that he would be released unharmed. It

was not to be. On May 30, Hamza’s mutilated body was returned to them. He

had been tortured, subjected to repeated electric shocks, and whipped

with cables. His eyes were swollen and

black, and there were identical bullet

wounds where he had been apparently

shot through both arms, the bullets lodging in his belly. On Hamza’s chest

was a deep, dark burn mark. His neck

was broken, and parts of his body were

cut off. Hamza Ali al-Khateeb was 13

years old. Video of the boy’s shattered

body has been seen by millions on television and the Internet.

Hamza, like the Tunisian fruit vendor who set himself alight, has become

a symbol to his countrymen and the

world of the depravity and illegitimacy

of a regime that would torture its own children to death.

Our ability to bring additional economic pressure on Syria is limited. Its

economy is already under immense

strain. It is small, weak, and isolated.

Political pressure, in the form of a U.N.

security resolution condemning the violence and crackdown, has been

blocked by Russia and China. And

there is dread over what will happen

when Assad falls, given the internal divisions between Sunni and Shia,

Muslim and Alawi, Christian and Druze.

The confessional and sectarian splits

are as pronounced as in Lebanon, the

potential for large scale violence as great as Iraq.

The dangers are real, but the promise

of what began in Tunisia and is now

materializing in Egypt and elsewhere is

also real. People of courage can determine their own destiny, and it need not

be one of hereditary dictatorship,

kleptocracy, or lack of opportunity and

stagnation. In the Arab world, as elsewhere, people should be free to choose

their own government to represent

them and to chart peace with their neighbors.

To conclude otherwise means that we

relegate tens of millions of people to

suffer the capricious ruthlessness of

their despots for generation after generation, or that we are willing to trade

the illusion of stability for the harsh

reality of their suffering. That is not

the choice we made for ourselves 235 years ago, and it is not one that we

should presume to make for others.

Bashar Assad is a ruthless tyrant whose time has passed and who clings

to power only by virtue of brutal force.

Our role and that of the international

community should be to work with

Syrian opposition figures and others to

advance a negotiated transition to a

new Syrian Government that will represent all Syrians and prevent the

trading in of one set of thugs for another. The Arab Spring cannot be allowed to fail because of brutal repression, the specter of religious fanaticism, a fear of the unknown, or the

cynicism born of unmet expectations.

The region’s many millions must have

the freedom to write a new chapter for themselves and their posterity.

In this, the younger Assad has taken a page

from his father, who unleashed his troops in

1982 to suppress a revolt by the Muslim

Brotherhood in the city of Hama, an offensive

that may have cost as many as 20,000 civilian

lives. Indeed, history may be repeating itself

as Hama has become a focus of both anti-government activity on the one hand, and the

use of extreme violence by the Assad government on the other.

For American policymakers, Syria presents

a collection of overlapping and sometimes

contradictory challenges. Like his father, President Assad has repeatedly tantalized the

United States and the west with the possibility

of a new opening, but he has never followed

through. Syria’s illegal and clandestine nuclear program, its alliance with Iran and its meddling

in Lebanon, a policy that culminated in the

2005 murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik

Hariri, form a compelling case that the Syrian

people and the world would be better off with a new leader in Damascus.