Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Lugar, distinguished members

of the committee, thank you for holding this important hearing.

I appeared before your regional subcommittee in November to

discuss the crisis in Syria. And since that time, our European

friends have joined us in sanctioning the Central Bank of Syria,

impeding the financing of the regime’s brutal crackdown. The EU

has completed its implementation of its embargo on oil purchases

from Syria, halting a third of Bashar’s government revenues. The

Arab League suspended Syria’s membership with many Arab

States downgrading diplomatic relations and freezing Syrian bank

accounts. The Arab League put forth a political transition plan for

Syria; 137 countries supported the U.N. General Assembly resolution

condemning the Syrian regime’s violence and supporting the

Arab League transition plan.

More than 60 countries and institutions met in Tunis as Friends

of the Syrian People to endorse the Arab transition plan, to demand

an immediate end to the violence, and to commit to practical

steps to address the Syrian crisis. The Syrian opposition in Tunis

articulated a clear, credible transition plan, and addressed minority

fears directly and convincingly.

We announced $10 million in immediate humanitarian assistance,

with millions more from other countries.

The U.N., the Arab League, have appointed a joint high-profile

envoy, Kofi Annan, with a mandate from the Arab League initiative

and the U.N. General Assembly resolution.

And just this morning, the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva

overwhelmingly passed a strong resolution, which is the council’s

fourth, essentially describing the situation in Syria as a manmade

humanitarian disaster. And we all know the identity of the

man responsible for that disaster.

Now, these are just some of the examples of regional and international

resolve. But nevertheless, as both of you have described,

we have also seen that the Assad regime has intensified its vicious

campaign of attacks against the Syrian people. The situation is

frankly horrific, including indiscriminate artillery fire against entire

neighborhoods and today’s reports from Homs are truly alarming.

Large numbers of Syrians are living every day under siege, deprived

of basic necessities, including food, clean water, and medical

supplies. Women and children are wounded and dying for lack of

treatment. Innocent people are detained and tortured and their

families left to fear the worst.

Yet, despite the regime’s brutality, the people of Syria demonstrate

enormous courage. Their determination to continue protesting

for their rights, mostly still peaceful protests, is an inspiration

and a testimony to the human spirit.

Now, as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs

watching the upheavals in the Arab world, I am humble enough to

say that we do not know for sure when the tipping point, the

breaking point, will come in Syria but it will come. The demise of

the Assad regime is inevitable. It is important that the tipping

point for the regime be reached quickly because the longer the regime

assaults the Syrian people, the greater the chances of all-out

war and a failed state.

All of the elements of United States policy toward Syria are

channeled toward accelerating the arrival of that tipping point. As

I referred to at the start, through the Friends of the Syrian People

group, we are translating international consensus into action. We

are galvanizing international partners to implement more effective

sanctions and to deepen the regime’s isolation. We are supporting

the Arab League’s and now the U.N. General Assembly’s call for an

immediate transition in Syria. We are moving ahead with humanitarian

assistance for the Syrian people demanding that attacks

cease and access be granted. And we are engaging with the Syrian

opposition on their vision for Syria’s future, a proud and democratic

Syria that upholds the rights and responsibilities of all of its citizens

regardless of their religion, their gender, or their ethnicity.

Now, together we are working to persuade frightened communities

inside Syria that their interests are best served by helping

to build that better Syria, not by casting their lot with a losing regime,

a corrupt and abusive regime which has been a malignant

blight in the Middle East for far too long. The goal of the opposition

and the Friends of the Syrian People alike is as follows: a Syrianled

political transition to a democratic government based on the

rule of law and the will of the people with protection of minority

rights.

I would like to close my opening statement by echoing this committee’s

praise of my fellow witness and friend, Ambassador Robert

Ford. Ambassador Ford’s courageous actions on the ground in Syria

these past months have been a great credit to him, to the Foreign

Service, and to the United States. He repeatedly put himself in

harm’s way to make it clear that the United States stands with the

people of Syria and their dream of a better future. And I want to

thank this committee for its leadership in supporting his confirmation.

A couple of things I would say on that,

Senator.

First, the Assad regime is under greater stress now, I think, than

it was even 2 or 3 months ago. This is in part because the military

is more challenged. There has been a steady stream of desertions.

The military has so far retained its cohesion. The security services

have retained their cohesion, but they are under significantly more

stress now in the first quarter of 2012 than they were, say, even

as recently as 3 or 4 months ago.

Within the ruling circle, if I may call it that, I think there is

greater concern. They are aware that the business community, for

example, is very unhappy. They have changed several times on a

dime some of their economic policies to try to placate an increasingly

unhappy business community which is suffering because of

the sanctions that we have imposed, that Europe and now Arab

countries have imposed. They are, I think, also concerned about

their support on the street. So in general, I think they understand

that this is the biggest challenge during the 40 years of the Assad-

Makhlouf family’s domination.

Just to refer back to that tipping point,

the breaking point that I talked about in my opening statement,

because part of the region’s and international community’s calculation

is to appeal to, as you talked about, Senator, those people who

have not yet made up their minds to side with change but who do

not like the direction in which Assad is taking them. So a lot of

what you see coming out of meetings like the one in Tunis are

ways to appeal to the broader Syrian population, as well as specifically

targeting some members of the military and the business

community, to try to move them toward change. A very important

part of getting to that tipping point is getting more and more people

on the side of change.

I think the Arab leadership on the issue

of Syria has been remarkable. As I said in my opening statement,

we are backing the Arab League’s own transition plan. Syria sees

itself as a major country in the Arab League. The Syrians call

themselves the beating heart of the Arab world, and suddenly the

Arab League has essentially suspended Syria’s membership in the

Arab League. This is not a North African country like Libya that

is a little bit out of the Arab mainstream. It is significant what the

Arabs are doing.

Now, why is this happening? I think in part this is happening

because of the Arab Spring. If you look at opinion poll after opinion

poll, Bashar al-Assad is at the bottom of the list of popularity

among Arab leaders. He has no credibility across the Arab world,

and I think Arab leaders want to show their own populations that

they get it, that they understand that they need to be in tune with

Arab popular opinion.

Without question, part of this has to do with the competition

with Iran. People know that Bashar al-Assad has made Syria a

proxy for Iran, a subservient partner to Iran, so part of this from

the GCC is competition with Iran.

But I would not underestimate the impact of the Arab Spring

even on those Arab countries that are not going through transition.

I believe that Arab leaders recognize that they cannot be on the

complete opposite side of their public opinion, that the Kuwaitis,

for example, would have seen this debate in the Kuwaiti Parliament

yesterday.

Well, without question, the minorities in

Syria look at Lebanon or more recently Iraq and they look at that

with fear. And I think we all understand their fear, and I defer to

Ambassador Ford to talk about the calculations inside Syria. But

I think we all understand that fear. And so part of our challenge

and particularly the challenge of the Syrian opposition is to disprove

Bashar al-Assad’s theory. It is his theory that says look at

Lebanon, look at Iraq. That is where we are headed if you do not

back me. And there is a real responsibility on the part of the Syrian

National Council, the broader opposition groups, to show by

word and by deed that that is, in fact, not where they have to go.

Ambassador FORD. Mr. Chairman, a couple of things I would say

on that. The two organizations are separate. There is not a hierarchy

between them. The Syrian National Council has its own executive

body and then a broader general assembly.

The Free Syrian Army, as best we understand, has its own leadership

hierarchy. They are not organically linked. However, they

certainly do talk to each other, and on the ground in Syria, local

revolution councils are being set up now. If you watch, for example,

Al Jazeera television, you will often see the spokesman for the Revolution

Council in Homs talking about the atrocities that are going

on there. It is a young man, a very brave man, named Abu Salah,

who literally will go through the streets. It was he that broke the

news about Marie Colvin’s death, for example. People like Abu

Salah talk to the Free Syrian Army but he is not Free Syrian

Army.

And so you mentioned in your statement, as did Senator Lugar,

about the divisions within the Syrian opposition and there are different

organizations. It makes it a little more complex. So they talk

to each other. Sometimes they coordinate, but they are not organically

linked.

Senator Lugar, the dangers you point out

are real. The opposition leadership recognizes those dangers. It is

one of the reasons why I said our policies to try to accelerate the

arrival of that tipping point—I do not know when the tipping point

is going to come, and I would not even venture a guess. But I hope

I did not make it sound as if it is coming tomorrow. I wish it were,

but we do not have any magic bullets to make it come tomorrow.

The longer this goes on, the deeper the sectarian divisions, the

higher the risks of long-term sectarian conflict, the higher the risk

of extremism. So we want to see this happen earlier.

But the risks that you point out are recognized by the opposition,

and despite all of the divisions that Ambassador Ford knows better

than I do between the government and the opposition, the leadership

of these various groups do seem to have a common goal. They

do seem to have a common understanding of the importance of the

fabric of Syrian society, the importance of preserving that fabric.

I was in Tunis with Secretary Clinton and listened to a very inspiring

address by the head of the Syrian National Council, Berhan

Ghalioun. He appealed directly to the Christians in Syria. He appealed

directly to the Alawites as well, but to the Syrians he said

something—I will not get the quote exactly right, but he said something

like many of you have left over the years. Many of you have

felt the need to leave over the years, and when you leave, part of

Syria dies. And we want a Syria where you can all come home.

Again, it is not an exact quote but I am trying to convey the sentiment

of that.

So I think there is something to work with with the opposition

leadership, which is an understanding that what is special about

Syria is that rich mosaic of communities, religions, ethnicity, and

people want to preserve that.

Now, the Alawites are scared. You are absolutely right, and Ambassador

Ford would know more about that than I do.

On the economic side of things, the Syrian business community,

as I understand, is a very—it is a Levantine—they are Levantine

traders. They have worked for decades, if not centuries, on commerce

across the Middle East, connections to Europe and beyond.

This is one of those communities that needs to understand, in our

view, that its future is better assured under a different type of system

than is there now. And one of the things that came out of the

Tunis meeting was a discussion—a commitment by the Friends of

Syria to set up a working group to talk about reconstruction of

Syria afterward in ways that the business community could see.

We are talking practically about the trade relations, the investment

relations, the financial connections that Syria can have after

Assad in a better system.

Right now, the sanctions that are being imposed on Syria by Turkey,

by the Arab world, by Europe, by the United States have cutouts

for humanitarian supplies, including food and medicine. Those

do not fall in general under any of these sanctions. However, food

prices are rising, without question. And with 30 percent of the population

of Syria under the poverty line before this started, without

question, there must be hardship for people inside Syria because of

the sanctions. But we are doing cut-outs for food and medicine. We

are making sure that we have supplies prepositioned in Syria and

nearby to reach vulnerable populations. Part of the assistance that

the Secretary announced in Tunis on February 24 was to make

sure that we had the money to pay for known partners who are

used to dealing in conflict situations to be able to get humanitarian

supplies into vulnerable populations.

Senator, thanks for the question. You put

your finger on a key element of any way forward in Syria, which

is what is the role of Russia.

I have to admit from the outset that I am not a Russia expert.

You know, I defer to my bosses and my colleagues in the European

Bureau to talk about Russian motives and things. But I want to

assure you that sort of the contact with Russia at all levels is continuing.

Russia has had interest and influence in Syria for a long time,

and it seems to us that Russia is not going to preserve those interests

that Russia deems to be important if it basically rides the

Assad-Makhlouf Titanic all the way to the bottom of the Mediterranean.

This is not a very wise move for the Russians to preserve

their interests.

I went out with a colleague, Fred Hoff, to Moscow a couple of

weeks ago at the request of the Secretary to actually have a pretty

deep discussion with the Russians about how we see the way forward

in Syria, how we see the inevitable demise of Assad. And I

felt that there was a lot of discomfort in Russia about where they

are. Their analysis is not all that different from ours about how

unsustainable the situation is for Bashar al-Assad inside Syria.

But so far we have been disappointed. I can use stronger language

about Russia’s action. Even today, for example, when the

Human Rights Council in Geneva passed a resolution condemning

what is happening in Syria, the vote was 39 to 3. Who were those

three? China, Russia, and Cuba who voted against the resolution

simply on human rights grounds.

We think it is time for the Security Council to act. We think it

is past time for the Security Council to act. This is the type of situation

in Syria that deserves Security Council action. So we are still

in discussion with the Russians in an attempt to persuade them

that they can be part of a solution. They can use their influence

inside Syria to be part of a solution rather than continue to block.

The question of arms that you raise is a deeply disturbing one.

Why are the Russians, who condemn foreign interference in Syria,

being the ones, along with the Iranians, to actually continue to be

shipping arms in Syria. But I think that for much of this, Senator,

we should probably have a discussion with colleagues from other

agencies in a different setting.

There has already been a spillover in the

neighboring countries as Syrians fleeing the violence go to neighboring

countries to look for refuge. You have families in Lebanon,

Jordan, and Turkey, Iraq that have taken in Syrian friends and

relatives. This is already an impact. In Lebanon, there have been

people killed across the border by Syrian forces firing across the

border. There have been violations of Lebanese sovereignty by Syrian

forces crossing the Lebanese border. So there is already a spillover

effect, Senator, which is deplorable. And we salute those families

in those countries that are hosting Syrians outside their borders.

Part of what we are trying to do is to provide assistance to

those host families and governments.

As Ambassador Ford said, Bashar al-Assad wants his people,

wants the world to believe that if it is not for him, there is going

to be a civil war. So part of this is the Bashar al-Assad propaganda

machine to frighten people into believing they have no alternative

but to stick with him or they end up in civil war. So part of what

the region is trying to do, the opposition is trying to do, the international

community is trying to do, is to help provide that path to

avoid the civil war because all of us do recognize that it is a risk.

But as Ambassador Ford said, more articulately than I can possibly

say, it is not a question right now of Alawites versus Sunnis.

It is a question of the Assad-Makhlouf mafia that has basically hijacked

the entire state of Syria for four decades in order to enrich

itself and protect itself against the Syrian people. That is what is

happening right now.

Senator, thank you. This is a question we

are talking about all the time. What can we do either ourselves as

Americans, but more importantly, what can we do together with

our partners in the region and beyond? And the ‘‘what we can do

together’’ question, I think, is the more important one particularly

because frankly our influence in Syria is much less than the influence

of some of our neighbors. Our economic ties with Syria before

all this started were extremely limited compared to the economic

ties between Syria and Europe, Syria and Turkey, Syria and the

Arab world.

And there was an international consensus that came out of Tunis

that we all need to be doing more on the humanitarian side working

with partners who have a history of working in conflict areas

that can get things in to vulnerable populations inside Syria, working

with the neighbors who are hosting people who have fled Syria.

There is a consensus, an international consensus, on that from the

region, from the world. That is an important short-term goal is getting

things in, making sure warehouses are stocked, supplies are

prepositioned.

There was an international consensus as well for increasing the

pressure on Assad through a variety of means. We have talked a

lot about the sanctions already. But there are always more sanctions

that can be done particularly from those countries, as I said,

that have had stronger economic ties in order to deprive the regime

of its income.

There is a consensus that we all need to be working with the

Syrian opposition in all of its forms, and Tunis there was a recognition

that the Syrian National Council is a legitimate representative

of the voices of the Syrian opposition and we are working with

that.

But I think that your question actually hints at something beyond

that. I think for more aggressive action, we would need to

have a larger international consensus than currently exists.

One thing that we are definitely working on, going back to Senator

Menendez’s question, is to see what role the Security Council

can play because we think it is high time. It is past time for the

Security Council to be playing a role. And that too was a consensus

that came out of Tunis, that people and countries and institutions

represented there want to see an end to the blockage by Russia and

China of the Security Council taking action.

I mean, I think it says something when

you have a terrorist organization that has been coddled for years,

decades, by the Assad regime basically pulling out saying that they

cannot even stand what the Assad regime is doing. But you are exactly

right. It gets at the popularity question.

If you look at Zogby polls, you know, Zogby has a long history,

credible history of doing polls in the Arab world. A couple of years

ago, there was a question posed to Arabs. Who is the most popular

Arab leader outside of your own country’s leader, since everyone

would have to say my own leader is the best? At least a couple of

years ago, they would have said that. And Bashar al-Assad was the

most popular leader outside of whatever the home country is. If

you look at the same polls today, the same questions in the same

places, he is at the bottom of the list. That is not lost on even terrorist

organizations like Hamas.

But this does not change our calculus on Hamas. Our demands

on Hamas are the Quartet demands on Hamas which is, you know,

Hamas, to be accepted as a responsible player, needs to accept the

Quartet conditions of recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence,

and adherence to all the agreements that have been signed between

the PLO and Israel. So it is interesting and telling that even

Hamas cannot stomach what Bashar is doing to his people, but it

does not change our calculation.

It is technically correct that they are not

prohibited from shipping oil to Syria. It is still morally wrong to

be providing diesel that can be used in military machines that

slaughter innocent Syrians. So it is morally wrong, but it is not legally

wrong.

But it also is not the same as what Syria had before November,

which is the ability to export its own oil, earn its own revenues to

put in the pockets of Bashar to do with as he wants.

I will make a couple comments and I will

let Robert talk about inside Syria.

I mean, first of all, I cannot believe that any of these countries,

anyone, is looking to trade one kind of tyranny for another type of

tyranny. We do not know for sure how these transitions across the

Arab world are going to turn out, but I think it is pretty clear that

this quest for dignity means that people are going to guard against

going from one tyrant to another type of tyranny. We have also

seen that while al-Qaeda has tried to exploit unrest across the region,

that that al-Qaeda ideology does not have any appeal for the

sorts of young people and protesters across the region that are

looking for dignity and opportunity.

In terms of the Syrian people, I will defer to my colleague, Ambassador

Ford, but I will give you one example similar to your experience

in Libya that he would probably be too modest to raise.

But when Ambassador Ford went to Hama, when Hama was being

encircled by Syrian tanks, the people of Hama tossed flowers onto

his limousine. He got back to Damascus and the regime staged an

attack against our Embassy. The people of Syria know exactly

where Robert Ford stood in terms of their rights and aspirations,

and Robert Ford represented us very ably in showing that is where

the American people stood.

Ambassador FORD. Senator, I think it is very telling that in the

demonstrations every week in Syria, they burn Russian flags, they

burn Chinese flags, they burn Hezbollah flags. That tells you what

they think. Frankly, from our strategic interests, that is a good

thing, I think, in the sense that we want Syria in the future to not

be the malignant actor that it has been supporting terrorist groups

and being the cause of a great deal of regional instability. And so

I think there is huge potential strategic gain for us as a country

with the changes going on in Syria.

But that is not why the Syrians are doing it. That is not why the

street protest is doing that. They are doing it because they want

dignity. And I think it is very important for us, as we go forward,

to keep in mind that the most important thing we can do is keep

stressing over and over our support for universal human rights

being respected in Syria like other countries: freedom of speech,

freedom to march peacefully, the right to form political parties, and

to have life under a rule of law, a dignified life. That is what I tried

very hard constantly to underline during my time there, just those

basic values.

The Syrians can work out their politics, and as Senator Risch

said, it is going to be hard. It is going to be really hard. But if we

stay on the track of respect for their human rights, we will ultimately

be on the side that wins here.

Chairman Casey, thanks.

In Tunis, the discussion on humanitarian issues fell into two categories:

first, how do we help those countries around Syria that are

hosting Syrians who have fled their country, and that is, frankly,

an easier topic. First of all, the countries themselves, the families

in those countries have been generous, and it is a question of helping

host—there are not large-scale, for the most part, refugee

camps. For the most part, people have gone to stay with friends

and relatives outside of Syria. And so it is a question of helping

those host families getting assistance to what camps there are, and

that is a relatively straightforward proposition. You know, on our

part, the State Department’s Population, Refugee, and Migration

Bureau is working in those areas.

But the second question is a much harder one that came up in

Tunis, and it comes up internally inside the United States Government,

which is access inside Syria. How do you reach the vulnerable

populations inside Syria? That is a much, much harder issue.

And right now, the problem of humanitarian deliveries in Syria is

not supplies. It is not related to money. The international community

has sufficient resources, has sufficient commitments. It is a

question of access.

Just yesterday, you had Valerie Amos, who is the U.N. Under

Secretary, the humanitarian coordinator, who had been waiting in

Beirut for days for a Syrian visa to go into Syria. She finally left

because it was clear the Syrians were not going to be giving her

a visa. And that tells you something, that not only is Bashar killing

his people, butchering his people, but he is also trying to prevent

the international community from having the right sort of response.

Now, it does not mean we are not responding. Unfortunately, in

today’s world, there are a lot of conflict situations around the

world. There are a lot of partners with whom we have worked in

conflict situations around the world already. So you can work with

groups, WFP, others. AID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance

has a history of being able to work inside conflict areas through

trusted partners to make sure that our assistance is going to where

it is directed. But it is not easy.

So the big question is access, and it goes back to Senator

Menendez’s question about the Russians because this is one area

where the Russians have expressed a lot of concern as well about

the humanitarian situation. And we would like to see that Russian

concern that is stated on humanitarian to be translated into the

type of pressure on the Assad regime that helps ease these questions

of access.

Senator, thanks.

You are absolutely right that we do not know how these Arab

transitions are going to turn out. And of course, the challenge is

that our interests in how they turn out are great, but we have to

be modest about how much influence we can play in helping to determine

those outcomes. And so you put your finger on a big issue

given the transitions going on in the Arab world.

But in terms of the United States, it is not in our interest to see

the Bashar al-Assad regime survive. We have, obviously, talked a

lot about the moral, the human rights, the ethical questions today,

but we have also touched on the strategic questions. This was a regime

that exported terror into Iraq that killed our soldiers in

Iraq——

But I think if you look at the Arab

League transition plan, when you talk about what happens

afterwars, the Arab League transition plan was designed with that

fear of chaos and civil war in mind because it was designed in a

way by which not Assad himself, but parts of the current system

and the opposition movement together work on a pragmatic, practical

transition plan that preserves the state’s unities, that preserves

the state institutions. It is one of the themes that we get repeatedly

from Syria’s neighbors, as well as from Syrian opposition.

The army has to be preserved. The security services need to be preserved.

And so I think the people are, in fact, working on a transition

plan with the idea that you can preserve the state but a state

that is no longer a malignant actor in the region but can be a positive

actor in the region.

Yes. Neither one of us are great experts

on China, having served our careers in the Middle East.

But China tends to follow Russia on the Security Council in

many of these cases is what my colleagues in the International Organizations

Bureau tell me. And China also has certain trading interests

inside Syria. But China also has interests elsewhere in the

Arab world, and there is where I think the dialogue with China

needs to focus on, which is what China has to lose by losing credibility

elsewhere in the Arab world.

Senator, we have been very hesitant

about pouring fuel onto a conflagration that Assad himself has set.

So we are very cautious about this whole area of questioning. And

that is why we have worked with this international consensus on

political tracks, on economic tracks, on diplomatic tracks in order

to get to the tipping point that we were talking about earlier.

Now, there is self-defense going on inside Syria right now. We

cannot criticize the right to self-defense when people are facing the

incredible brutality. But we would like to use the political tools

that are at our disposal. That includes the Security Council in

order to advance the tipping point because it is not clear to us that

arming people right now will either save lives or lead to the demise

of the Assad regime. There are a lot of very complicated questions.

Robert went through some of them earlier. Right now, the Syrian

regime is using tanks and artillery against entire neighborhoods in

Homs. I do not think when you hear the Saudis and Qataris talking

about arming the opposition, they are talking about somehow

getting tanks into the opposition and how would the opposition

know how to use them anyway? So it is a really serious question.

People are talking about it. People are looking at it. But there are

a lot of complications that one needs to consider.

Senator, you put your finger on an extremely

important point, and this is a topic that is being discussed

actively with Syria’s neighbors, with our allies in Europe and elsewhere.

Syria is not even a signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

This is just a reminder of the destabilizing role that Syria has

played over the years, the fact that these stockpiles even exist. We

do not have any indication at this point that these stockpiles have

fallen out of the control of the Syrian Government, but it is one of

the reasons why a managed transition is so important rather than

a chaotic transition program.

But we are watching this. We are watching this carefully. A lot

of discussions with the neighbors. Some of the discussion we would

have to have in a different setting than today.