Senator, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member

Lugar, Senators Casey, Cardin, Corker, thank you very much

for this invitation to come and speak to the committee about Syria today.

I do not want to do a long opening statement because I am hoping

we can open discussion about Syria, but I would just like to say

how much I appreciate this committee’s support during my time in

Damascus. Several times we got messages from members of the

committee staff asking how we were doing and how my team was

doing. I would just like to say that the team really appreciated

those messages, especially during some of the tenser moments. It

meant a great deal. I had a terrific team in Damascus, and I really

would like just to thank this committee for your support for our efforts.

Beyond that, I think the statement that Ambassador Feltman

made is quite good and I will stop there.

Thank you.

If I might, Senator, let me address three

issues real quick. First the economic situation that you asked

about, and then I would like to make two points on the political side.

First, with respect to the economy, it is in a sharp downward spiral,

a very sharp downward spiral. The exchange rate, for example,

has depreciated almost 50 percent in less than a year, really in a

space of about 7 months. That has driven prices up in the local

markets; for example, in Damascus where we monitor prices, food

prices went up something like 30 percent between December and

the beginning of February. It was a very sharp rise. What that is

doing in Syria is causing consumers to contract their purchases,

and that is aggravating the downward spiral. It is one of the reasons

the business community is so upset.

In that sense, the sanctions that we have imposed have had a

real impact. We have tried, as best we can, Senator, to target our

sanctions so that they do not hurt the Syrian people. We have tar-

geted government revenues, for example, in order to make it harder

for the government to pay for its repression, to pay for its military

and security forces. But we have never tried to block supplies

of, for example, heating oil or cooking gas that would go into Syria.

But there are terrible shortages of these things. When I went back

in December, after being in the United States last fall, the stories

I heard from people told of their fear of the repression and being

arrested, but the next thing out of their mouths was that there is

no cooking gas. There is no heating oil. And Damascus is surprisingly

cold in the winter. It snows.

So the economy is hurting. The food supplies are available, as

Ambassador Feltman said, but people are reducing their consumption,

generally because of prices.

With respect to the political side of this, Senator, two points I

think really must be made. First, the Assad regime in its darkest

moments will try to paint this as a fight against Sunni, Arab,

Islamist extremists; they are trying to frighten minority communities,

especially considering that these minority communities

looked at what happened in Lebanon and Iraq. They are very afraid.

I think it is important for Americans to understand that this is

not about Alawis versus a Sunni Arab majority. Lots and lots of

Alawis suffer just as much repression, just as much brutality as do

their neighbors down the road in Sunni Arab neighborhoods. It is

important, for example, that one of the leading activists on the

ground inside Syria right now—and she is in hiding and she moves

around from place to place and then will pop up at demonstrations—

she is an Alawi, a young woman Alawi, movie actress, very

well known, and she is very brave. I mean, the government has

tried to arrest her many times. So she circulates around. She is an

Alawi and people know that. This is not Alawi versus Sunnis. This

is about a family that happens to be Alawi that has dominated the

country and stripped it for 40 years. Alawis are suffering too.″

We have constantly urged in our discussions with the Syrian opposition

in the country and outside the country to underline to the

Alawi communities and all of the communities in Syria, whether

they be Christians or business people, Druze, Kurds—it is a very

complex social make-up—that all people in Syria would be treated

equally, that all people’s basic human rights would be respected

and that it would be a Syria where all different communities would

be able to live in harmony. We underline that message every time

we meet the opposition.

The opposition, as you have noted, is divided, and I think it is

probably a reach to think they are going to unify anytime soon into

one single organization. I do not think that is going to happen.

My question is a little different. Can they unite around a vision?

And I described and Ambassador Feltman has described our vision

and our suggestions. Can they unite around a vision and can they

unite around a transition plan? They do not have to unite into one

single party, but they do need to share a vision and they do need

to share an agreement on the way forward. And that is also what

we are counseling them. We are not writing their transition plan.

That is not our role. They need to do it. Syrians need to do it. But

they do need to come together behind a plan.

Senator Risch, it is a very fair question. It is

a very fair question.

It is the sad truth that not only in Syria, but in many countries

in that region, there is no history of rule of law and respect for

human rights. I mean, that is just the historical reality.

What I would say is just a couple of things on this.

One of the things that I have learned from the Arab Spring,

which is really unprecedented in my 30 years working in the region

going back to when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco in

1980, what we have seen in the last year is unprecedented. One of

the things that I have learned is there is a new generation coming

up, and this generation is very plugged into the Internet and it is

very plugged into satellite television. They know much more about

how to upload different kinds of videos. I mean, I had never

watched YouTube until I went out as Ambassador to Syria. Now

I watch it every day.

We will not go there, Senator.

But what I would say is there is no history, but the people there

that are leading the protest movement have a vision. They have a

vision. And I heard this very strongly when I went to Hama and

I heard this very strongly when I visited some of the restive suburbs

around Damascus and when I went to Jassim. I heard this

very strongly. They want a country where people are treated with

dignity, everybody treated with dignity. And that is the key word,

Senator, ‘‘dignity.’’ And they have a vision of a country ruled by

law. My own experience having served in Iraq for 41⁄2 years is this

is a very hard thing to do, and it takes time. I saw the same thing

in Algeria as well when I served there.

But there is change coming and values and norms are changing

because they are more plugged into the rest of the planet than they

used to be. And Syrians are actually surprisingly plugged into the

Mediterranean, for example. That was one of the things when I

went out there.

In Damascus, there are many mixed marriages—

many, many—and in other parts of the country as well. In

fact, one of the things, if we had Syrians sitting at this table instead

of me, they would say to you, Senator, but we have always

lived together peacefully and we have never had these problems.

We are not like Iraq. We are different.

I think one of the things that the political opposition needs to

do—and we told them this repeatedly—is they need to address the

fears directly and not simply fall back on the argument that Syrians

historically have lived together peacefully between communities

and therefore there is no problem. There is a problem. There

is a problem and they need to address it.

I think the younger people do understand that fear. In the demonstrations

every Friday where they have the big ones, the really

big ones, there frequently are banners. This is watching it on

YouTube that say Ash Shawb as Suri wahi, which is Arabic meaning

the Syrian people are one. And what they are trying to express

there is no sectarian divisions. Do not let the Assad regime play

one community off against the other, which is very much what the

regime ultimately is trying to do.

There are signs all over Damascus that the government put up

saying beware of sectarian strife. Well, the opposition is saying the

people are unified against you. It is the government that is even

raising the issue in the first place.

I liked your two words, Senator, ‘‘solidarity’’

and ‘‘commitment.’’ And I think especially right now, when people

in cities like Homs and Idlib and Zabadani are under siege, I think

holding this hearing is terrific and I think the concerns expressed

by bodies like the U.S. Senate are especially important. I would

never want Syrians to think that because we closed the American

Embassy, we are no longer interested in their efforts there to create

a new Syria that treats people with dignity.

And with respect to the commitment that Jeff was talking about,

I would just underline that we do need to get access. We have supplies

positioned. We just need to get access into the country. And

if the Russians would, indeed, translate their expressed policy into

actions in terms of pressure on the Syrian Government, we would

hope that they would do that now.

Senator, the opposition is divided. There is no

question about that. And it is fractious, and there are competing

visions within the Syrian opposition. There is an Islamist element,

for example, as contrasted to a secular element. And that is why

I spoke before about the need for the opposition to unify around a

vision and the need for the opposition to unify around a transition

plan. The transition plan would, in fact, be the way to attract people

that have been sitting on the fence so far to join the protest

movement itself.

I do not know what you heard in the briefing yesterday, but let

me just say from direct, firsthand experience, I have talked to people

who have organized the demonstrations, and I have had team

members from my embassy talk to them repeatedly. We got a very

clear message from them, the people who organized this, Senator,

that they have a vision of a state that abides by rule of law and

is not targeting the Alawis.

However, it is a complex society and the longer the violence goes

on and the government is driving this violence, perhaps intentionally

with this in mind, the greater the risk that the sectarian

conflict that we have seen in Homs but really has not been seen

to such a degree in other cities—Homs is the worst—that it would

spread and metastasize into other cities in Syria.

But let me give you some very concrete examples. There are

Druze communities in southern Syria. The Druze community is

now more and more saying that they should stop supporting

Assad’s regime and begin to support the protest movement. There

have been calls by leaders in a city called Suwaida, which is south

of Damascus, for Druze to stop serving in the Syrian military and

to join the protest movement. There have been calls within the

Alawi community, including Alawi religious figures, to stop supporting

Bashar al-Assad and his regime. I think the expression

they used in their communique last autumn was it will be the ruin

of us if we continue——

Yes, we do.

Senator, I am going to have to respectfully

disagree. The public statements from senior figures in the Free

Syrian Army speak about supporting a democratic state. We do not

know yet what they would do were they in power. We only have

their——

We are supporting a transition which the

Syrian National Council has laid out in connection with a roadmap

set out by the Arab League. In a sense they are linked. Out of that

would be a process by which a leadership would be chosen. I cannot

give you a name. I can define the process for you. But I cannot give

you a name. I think this is an important point, though, Senator.

The people who are doing the fighting say they are fighting to defend

the protest movement. So there is a link even if you cannot

say that the fighters themselves claim they are fighting for democracy.

Senator, as I said, we have been supporting

a plan developed by the Arab States for a political transition. The

Secretary spoke earlier this week of some of the discussions that

we have had in-house about how complicated this is in terms of

thinking about arming people in Syria, arming the opposition, how

complicated it is in terms of, A, knowing who is it, exactly, you are

giving the arms to and what do they represent. This gets into a little

bit of your question of what are they fighting for. How would

you deliver it? What good would it do when they are facing tanks

and they are facing heavy artillery? These are extremely complex

questions, and I think we are not yet at a point where we could

discuss it in this kind of forum at least.

I agree exactly with what Ambassador

Feltman said.

We understand the earnest desire, the need for people under

siege in a place like Homs or in a place like Dana when their

homes are being attacked by thugs and people want to take up

arms to defend themselves. We understand that. It is human, I

mean, to protect your family. We cannot criticize that.

However, Senators Kerry and Lugar both spoke about the need

for us to work with regional states to find a durable solution, and

that is our thinking too, and that is why we have been so strongly

in support of the Arab League initiative and the transition process

that it laid out.

If I may just add one other comment, Senator Udall, we too have

noticed the increase in support from religious figures in some Arab

countries for taking up more arms against the Syrian Government.

We have seen statements by various religious figures across the

Arab world. We have cautioned the opposition that if they declare

some kind of big jihad, they will frighten many of the very fencesitters

still in places like Damascus and it will make ultimately

finding a solution to this, a durable solution, more difficult. We do

not want to see Syria go toward civil war. We want to see the violence

stop immediately and to see Syria begin a political transition.

I would just underline that it is a subject of

great concern to us and we are looking at what needs to be done.

But let me assure you, Senator, we have got a lot of people working on it.