This hearing will come to order.

Thank you all. I apologize for being a moment late. I was over

on the floor and a little bit delayed there, and I will have to go

back there at some point in time. Senator Casey will chair at the

point at which I will have to do that.

We appreciate everybody coming here to discuss the ongoing situation

in Syria.

As we all know, Syria sits in the heart of the Middle East, straddling

its ethnic and sectarian faultlines, and all of the region’s important

powers have a direct interest in what happens in Syria, as

do nonstate actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, and others.

Al-Qaeda, through its affiliate in Iraq, appears to be trying to

take advantage of the unrest, chaos, if you want to call it that,

which is no surprise. Already as many as 9,000 civilians have died,

and many tens of thousands more have been displaced from their

homes. In the Syrian City of Homs, there has been indiscriminate

shelling for 3 weeks now. Hundreds have died and the city is running

critically low on food and medical supplies.

Given the indiscriminate killing of its own citizens and given its

back of the hand to the global community, as well as to the regional

powers that have tried to intervene, it seems clear that the

Assad regime is ultimately going to fall. But the longer the end

game, the messier the aftermath and obviously the more complicated

the in-between. The prospect of a full-fledged sectarian

civil war is a stark reminder that a terrible situation could become

still much worse with potentially devastating consequences for

neighbors, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and adverse implications for

the broader Middle East.

So the question being asked here in the Congress, as well as elsewhere

in America and in the world, is where do we go from here.

America may have little direct leverage on Syria, but the recent

Friends of Syria conference in Tunis was an important moment

that could galvanize the international community against the

Assad government, and none of us should ever underestimate the

ability of the global community to have an impact on any renegade

regime anywhere in the world when the full attention and focus of

the global community is properly convened.

The last year has shown that when the world acts with one voice,

motivated by the cause of freedom, a tyrant’s grip on power does

not seem so fierce. That is why the Russian and Chinese veto at

the United Nations Security Council was, in fact, so disappointing

because it actually extended to Assad a political lifeline to continue

to use violence against his own people. We need to encourage the

Russians and the Chinese and certainly let them know that while

we would like their positive involvement in putting a halt to the

conflict, we are able to do, and prepared to do, much more if they

continue to block all progress at the Security Council.

The Arab League and GCC have ramped up their political and

economic pressure. The EU and Turkey—Turkey, interestingly

enough, just a year ago, a close friend and supporter of Syria—

have broken and done the same. The U.N. General Assembly in recent

weeks voted 137 to 12 to condemn the crackdown. Two weeks

ago, the Senate passed unanimously a resolution introduced by this

committee condemning the regime for its brutal crackdown and expressing

solidarity with the Syrian people.

There are still serious questions about various opposition organizations,

including especially the Syrian National Council and Free

Syrian Army. They share the goal of getting rid of Assad, and they

have traveled some distance in the course of the last year. But they

have not yet unified in the way that the Libyan Transitional National

Council did.

So I believe it is time for us to redouble our efforts to engage

with Syria’s political opposition to try to shape their thinking, to

understand it more fully, to identify more fully the leadership to

strongly encourage them to coalesce into a coherent political force.

With the creation of the Friends of Syria group, there is now a

multilateral mechanism for supporting the Syrian National Council

and other political groups with technical assistance. But it is true

that many Syrians themselves remain on the fence, especially

members of the Alawite, Christian, and other minority groups.

They are horrified by the regime’s atrocities but they are also terrified

by the potential for broad-scale sectarian strife.

Thus, it is absolutely vital that the SNC do everything it can to

unify politically, to put national aspirations ahead of personal ambitions,

to categorically reject radicalism, and to reassure religious

and ethnic minorities that they will enjoy full freedoms in a tolerant

and pluralist post-Assad society. The nascent Syrian opposition

needs to understand that the international community’s political

support will ultimately be contingent upon their ability to speak

with one voice that represents the full diversity of Syrian society

and also embraces the values that will bring the global community

to its side.

A debate has started in Congress and in the region about whether

and, if so, how to support the Free Syrian Army. It is critical

that we all proceed with extreme caution and with our eyes wide

open. There are serious questions to be answered about the Free

Syrian Army, but it is not too soon to think about how the international

community could shape its thinking or encourage restraint.

We should encourage the Free Syrian Army to subsume

itself under the leadership of Syria’s political opposition.

Finally, we are all deeply concerned about the disposition of Syria’s

biological and chemical weapons and its lethal conventional

weapons systems. I know that the administration is fully engaged

with respect to this particular challenge and is working diligently

to make sure that there are contingencies to prevent these weapons

from falling into the wrong hands, and I would urge all of my colleagues

to be fully supportive of those efforts.

To help us work through the complexities of this situation—and

I want to emphasize this is not Libya, this is not Egypt, this is not

Tunis, this is a far more complicated and difficult proposition. But

to help us work through those complexities today we are joined by

two of the most talented and accomplished members of America’s

diplomatic corps. I am pleased to welcome Assistant Secretary of

State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeff Feltman, and former United

States Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford. I should say Ambassador

but not currently in-country.

Secretary Feltman knows the region well, and having served as

Ambassador to Lebanon, I think he understands as well as anybody

the full implications this crisis could have.

Ambassador Ford has worked tirelessly to engage with the people

of Syria during his tenure. And Ambassador, I think we all

want to commend you on your courageous and important efforts

that you made to distinguish between sort of the clientitis that

sometimes can embrace those abroad and your own connection to

the values that you represented. I think we all were very impressed

by that.

Ambassador Ford had to leave the country once in October because

of threats to his own safety, but he returned and he continued

his efforts until the Embassy finally had to close last month

because of the continued deterioration in security.

So we thank you both in advance for providing your insights and

look forward to your testimony.

Senator Lugar.

Thank you, Senator Lugar.

Mr. Secretary, if you would lead off and then Ambassador Ford.

Thank you very much. Your full testimony will be placed in the

record as if read in full.

Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. We appreciate that.

Ambassador Ford. Maybe you should not say anything. Just stop.

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

That does give us an opportunity to get a good dialogue, and we

certainly appreciate it.

Let me begin by asking both of you if you would share with us

your perceptions of the state of the Assad regime itself right now.

Are there any fissures? There have been some defections, not at the

highest level, obviously. There have been some executions, we understand,

of various military figures, maybe some others, as a deterrent

to any plots or defection. What is your judgment about the

current fragility, if it is indeed that at all, of an Alawite family enterprise

that has a lot to lose, obviously?

Mr. Secretary, do you want to add anything? You

do not have to. Do not feel compelled.

Today’s—I cannot remember which, whether it

was the Post or the Times, but there was a photograph of the Kuwaiti

Parliament having a vigorous debate and ultimately deciding

to condemn the violence. There seems to be a somewhat surprising,

unique if you will, movement in the GCC and among a number of

Arab countries to really taking unprecedented—the Arab League

taking unprecedented steps here. Could you speak to that and to

what the potential is that within the Arab world itself here what

the reactions may be, and therefore what potential there is for that

to have an impact on the outcome?

Mr. Secretary, based particularly on your experience

in Lebanon and the region, share with us your perceptions of

the risks of the ethnosectarian violence that could follow, I mean,

if there is a total explosion or implosion, however you want to

phrase it.

What are the dynamics, if you would, between

the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army and the internal

local groups, Mr. Ambassador?

Senator Lugar.

Thank you very much.

I need to ask you—hopefully we can stay. We have a lot of Senators

and I want everybody to have a chance to be able to get questions.

So we need to try to hang in on the time.

Senator Menendez.