Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I join

you in welcoming Assistant Secretary Feltman and Ambassador

Ford to this committee. We do appreciate their leadership as events

in Syria have proceeded.

Ambassador Ford and his team on the ground in Syria deserve

great credit for documenting evidence of the Syrian Government’s

aggression against its people, despite substantial personal risk.

Our hearing today takes place amidst the deadly violence, the

gross human rights violations, and degradations that the Assad regime

continues to inflict on the Syrian people. Since our last hearing

on Syria in November, the death toll in this 11-month conflict

has risen dramatically. We are confronted by horrific images of the

depths to which Assad will go to preserve his power, including tar-

geting civilians, journalists, doctors, aid workers and women and

children.

I welcomed the meeting in Tunis last week of the Friends of the

Syrian People that brought together 60 nations and international

organizations. We should continue to focus attention on humanitarian

needs in Syria. The absence of Russia and China from the

meeting was an abrogation of their responsibilities in my judgment

as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Events in Syria will impact United States national security and

the interests of our close ally Israel. The outcome in Syria will have

deep implications for the internal politics of neighboring countries,

ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, and broader strategic issues.

Terrorist groups are likely to attempt to take advantage of political

instability, and intersectarian violence could spill over Syria’s borders

as groups settle old scores or defend brethren from attacks.

In the midst of this upheaval, we know Syria has substantial

stockpiles of chemical and conventional weapons that could directly

threaten peace and stability throughout the region. Our Government

must be focusing intelligence and counterproliferation assets

on containing this threat.

The development of a definable opposition that speaks for most

Syrians would improve chances that the damage to the Syrian people

and risks to regional stability could be contained. Some constructive

opposition voices are attempting to emerge. But at

present, the Syrian opposition lacks cohesion and a sufficiently defined

political agenda. As a practical matter, it also lacks the physical

space and technical means to mature, overcome its internal differences,

and develop a plan for a democratic transition. Deep sectarian

divisions, outside influences from Iran and elsewhere, and

the lack of a democratic political culture weigh heavily against the

short-term emergence of a unified opposition on which to base a

tolerant democracy.

This presents the United States with limited options. Clearly, we

must oppose the Assad regime’s aggression against its own people

and support international humanitarian efforts. We should also

work with willing states to limit any spillover effect generated by

violence in Syria. But we should not overestimate our influence to

shape events in the country. Further, attempts by the United

States or the West to closely manage the opposition could backfire

in an environment where the government blames outside influences

for Syria’s troubles.

While not taking any options off the table, we should be extremely

skeptical about actions that could commit the United

States to a military intervention in Syria. Under the constitution,

any decision placing us as a party to armed conflict in Syria rests

with the Congress. As you and others in the administration consider

a way forward together with our international partners, I encourage

you to work closely with Congress as plans evolve, particularly

as the situation becomes more complex.

I look forward to your testimony very much and we are honored

that you are with us today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to take up a point that you made, Secretary Feltman,

about the European Union’s embargo of Syrian oil exports and the

success this initiative has yielded in terms of bottling up a high

percentage of the government’s income. Both this measure and

other sanctions, including our own, against Syria have caused what

seems to be, in normal terms, an economic depression in the country.

This is likely to grow further.

Are you aware of how much food is currently produced in Syria

and what food supplies are available to the people of the country?

We understand a drought has occurred this year. This was a critical

factor clearly in Egypt. Even while things were going on in

Tahrir Square, food subsidies had ceased and those in the country-

side were not eating very well. This was a cause of considerable unrest.

But even if there were these problems with the business community

or with the moneys for the Assad regime, it would appear still,

at least from press accounts, to the outside observer that the

Alawites, who are certainly a minority at 10 or 11 percent of the

population may face an existential problem. Now, not all of the

Alawites may be in favor of Assad, but there is, I think, general

fear that their fate is likely to be very, very grim. As a matter of

fact, there is not likely to be, as you called for, protection of minority

rights.

But I was interested in your prediction of a more accelerated

turnover of the regime than most are predicting. Most press accounts

that I have seen from various scholars indicate that the

Assad regime might remain in power for several years rather than

months, and that the lack of cohesion among the opposition could

increase rather than diminish as more independent opposition

groups enter the force.

Can you comment generally on the critical problems of the

present, including the economic depression and maybe dire food

shortages that lead to general unrest, quite apart from the lack of

cohesion among the opposition? Further, can we reasonably anticipate

in any period within, say the next 3 to 5 years, that there can

conceivably be a transition to a government that is even tenuously

democratic and compliant with international norms? The general

prediction that I see among observers of this situation is that

Assad might go, but the chaos that would ensue would be horrible

with regard to the killing of people and the general melee. It is not

a question then of choosing sides. It is a question of containing the

disaster that has been created by the lack of authority.

I thank you very much.

Do you have a comment, Ambassador, on that?

Thank you.