Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the

committee, it is a great pleasure to be back in this room where I

sat during the 99th and 100th Congress with my late boss, Senator

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in the days of Dick McCall and Andy

Semmel; and of course, Bertie Bowman is an institution in this

room. It is a special pleasure to appear before the committee rather

than behind the committee, and also a special pleasure to not have

to scribble furiously on my lap today.

It is an honor to talk to you today about Syria. In a year of tremendous

change in the Arab world, Syria is among the places

where change would be most welcome.

The Syrian people drew lessons from the political events in Tunisia

and Egypt in 2011 which they watched live on television. The

Syrian Government drew lessons too, and I would like to enumerate

five of those lessons here.

The first lesson that I think they concluded is concessions do not

give you security. When Zine al-Abdine bin Ali and Hosni Mubarak

gave concessions to the mobs, they only seemed to fuel the mob’s

anger. Moammar Qadhafi held out for months. And I think in the

view of the Syrian Government, were it not for NATO air strikes,

he would still be in power. So giving concessions does not solve your problem.

Second, militaries still matter. In Egypt and Tunisia, the military

decided the President’s time was done. In Bahrain, the military

helped decide the king would stay. Bashar al-Assad has been

careful to cultivate his military assets, leaving elite brigades under

the control of family members and ensuring that members of his

own Alawite minority are in control of the senior officer and enlisted ranks.

Third, allies matter and P5 allies matter the most. Assad has

been careful not to make the mistake that Moammar Qadhafi

made, utterly lacking any Russian or Chinese support. Assad has

been careful to cultivate Chinese and Russian support.

Four, minority rule is a resource. We often see minorities as a

source of cleavages in a society, but if you have minorities, they

often cleave to the Government for protection, and Bashar al-Assad

has been very careful to play on the feeling of vulnerability among

the minorities to stay in power.

Five, the nature of the opposition matters. And of course, Bashar

al-Assad has worked very hard to try to split the opposition,

goading them to abandon the pursuit of a peaceful resolution of this conflict.

What Bashar al-Assad is thinking is unknowable, but to the outside

observer, it appears that he believes he can withstand the current

challenge, much as his father stood down the Islamist opposition

in Hama in 1982. Reports continue to surface that Assad is obsessed

with comparisons to his father’s leadership, with siblings

and even his mother unfavorably comparing his resolve and his

ruthlessness to that of his father.

In my judgment, though, Assad has made fundamental miscalculations,

particularly with regard to the outside world, which

make his long-term survival unlikely.

First, he has alienated Turkey, which is incredible because Turkey

actually reached out to Assad and tried to embrace him. The

strategy of zero problems with the neighbors has been cast aside.

It would have been an asset to Assad, and he threw that card away.

He has alienated Qatar and Saudi Arabia, two countries that decided

that a cornered Bashar al-Assad was much more dangerous

than one they engaged with, and yet they have given up hope on

Bashar al-Assad and have decided he must go.

I think he has failed to create durable alliances with China and

Russia. When I speak to Chinese and Russian experts, what I hear

is the sense that they have interests in Syria, but all of those can

be managed. There is not the same vital interest in the survival

of Bashar al-Assad.

And I think he has failed to create a viable economy. It is an

economy which 20 or 30 years ago relied on subsidies from outside

powers and continues to rely on subsidies from outside powers. In

my judgment, the Iranians are going to be preoccupied this summer.

They are not going to want to throw him a lifeline. I think

the Russians and the Chinese will negotiate. I think as the sanctions

really start to bite over the summer, and he is going to have

bigger problems.

The timeline of ultimate change in Syria, though, remains a mystery.

If there is a long war of attrition between the Government

and the opposition, it could well drag on for years, as wars of attrition

do. And I was in this room any number of times talking about

the Contra war, which lasted for 10 years. It is worth remembering

that sanctions isolated Saddam Hussein for more than a decade

but were unable to remove him from power.

Over the next year, Syria may tilt sharply toward civil war. With

a ruthless government, a range of outside powers willing to support

proxies, the possibility of staging attacks from neighboring countries,

and a widespread perception that the alternative to victory

is death, antagonists are likely to dig in. Levels of violence could

escalate from what we have seen so far and approach what we saw

in Iraq in 2006–2007, with a similar sectarian flavor.

For those who seek change in Syria, it is worth noting that the

more militarized this conflict becomes, the more the advantage accrues

to the Government. Militarization puts the conflict into an

area where the Government is likely to enjoy a permanent advantage

in fire power and also legitimizes brutal attacks on civilian

populations that radicalize segments and authenticates the narrative

of a patriotic government fighting against foreign-financed

brigands. The Syrian Government is at its weakest when other

Syrians question its legitimacy, evidenced most clearly by massive

peaceful protests. I draw one chief lesson from Tunisia and Egypt,

two states with legendary internal intelligence services that had a

reputation for both effectiveness and brutality: police can be effective

against hundreds, but they cannot be effective against hundreds

of thousands. The quick scaling of protest movements swiftly

undermines the legitimacy of these governments. It is worth pointing

out, though, that the immediate transition in these cases was

not to a civilian government, but instead to some remnant of the

former regime that acted in order to preserve its own institutional legitimacy.

So I cannot give you a three-point plan on how to fix Syria this

month or even how to avoid disaster in the next year. We need to

be realistic, as the ranking member said, about how much we do

not know in Syria and how much we cannot even begin to predict.

Even so, I think several policy conclusions follow from the foregoing.

One, as the chairman said, we have to plan for a long engagement.

This is not likely to be a 1-month crisis, and we have to pace

ourselves and appreciate that.

Second, I do not think we should expect the opposition to sweep

into power. As I think back over the last 40 years, I have not seen

a lot of democratic opposition movements inherit the mantle of

power after a dictator has been swept aside.

Third, remember that militarization helps Assad. The more the

protest movement looks like an armed insurrection, the more it will

play into the hands of a relatively well-armed and well-trained Syrian army.

Four, as Murhaf said, remember that diplomacy remains vital. In

particular, keeping Russia and China open to the possibility of a

change in government in Syria is essential.

Five, be ready for nonlinear change. In my judgment, the most

likely outcome, not necessarily the most desirable but the most

likely, remains some sort of military coup which the neighbors see

providing their best opportunity to preserve their interests at the

lowest risk. Surrounded by neighbors that have the means, the resources,

and the interest to make such a coup take place, I suspect

that Bashar al-Assad will succumb to their actions.

Last week, I chaired a panel with two former national security

advisors, Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski. There is something

they both agreed on, which I agree fully. We cannot do this

alone. We share strategic objectives with both Turkey and Saudi

Arabia, and perhaps surprisingly there is a lot we agree on with

both Russia and China. If we seek to fine-tune a solution to the

problems of Syria, we not only almost certainly lose Russia and

China, but I think we are unable to be able to sustain Turkish and

Saudi support. If we seek to avoid the worst outcomes in Syria, we

are more likely to have their support and the support of others as well.

The Syrian people have suffered and continue to suffer, but we

cannot be their liberators. We will best serve their interests, as

well as our own, if we work broadly with others to limit the most

damaging outcomes that lay before us. Thank you.

Sir, I think it is likely that he will have to go because

of his own failures in leadership. I am not in the certainty

business, and I cannot predict with certainty. But I would say

there is more than 70, perhaps more than 80, percent likelihood in

the next 3 years——

Mr. Chairman, my understanding—you have met

Bashar al-Assad many more times than I have, although I have

met him and he strikes me as somebody who is a little bit insecure,

who has siblings and other family members who keep saying, ‘‘Why

can you not be a man?’’ And I think under that circumstance, it

is unlikely for him to make the kind of honorable deal to leave, because

he does not have the confidence to make that deal.

Whether there could be some part of the regime which would

agree to open up in the absence of Assad, some sort of split within

the regime to lead to a more orderly transition, I think that is very

feasible. I just do not know how to make it happen. But I think

it is certainly feasible.

We have a hard time fine-tuning the outcome of

political changes in other countries. We do not have very good instruments

to do it. I think that we can have a broader coalition the

less we try to fine-tune.

I was cautious about calling for Bashar al-Assad to go not because

I do not want him to go, but because that then invites the

question of ‘‘What are you doing?’’ And then, ‘‘OK, that is what you

were doing last week?’’ What are you doing this week? And you

start getting into a situation where the expectations of your abilities

exceeds your abilities.

As I say, in my career I have seen several times when we have

locked in to try to create change and we have often been moderately

successful over a long period of time. Everybody at this

table just lived through a year of fundamental change in the Middle

East in which we played a very small role. So I think just in

terms of the forces at work, we have to be modest about our ability

to understand them, to steer them, and perhaps what we have to

do is to find opportunities to work with them because we cannot

generate them on our own.

Senator, one other component of this is that Russia

and China, which have their own restive regions that are arguably

in rebellion, and who have deep concern about regions that go

into rebellion that displace sitting governments. One of the concerns

they have is that if there is an independence movement that

arises that is spontaneous, is able to bring the population together

and throw off the existing government, that precedent is bad for

Russia and it is bad for China. And one of the things that we will

have to manage is the fact that while that may be very much our

desired goal, it is very unlikely we will be able to get them to sign

on to support that goal.

What we can get them to sign onto is to avoid the Somali-ization

of Syria, the fact that Syria would be a base for terrorism that

would spread out because Syria is connected to the Caucasus,

which has its own problems with terrorism. The Russians certainly

have interests that we can build on, but one of their interests is

not creating the kind of open, democratic Syria that Murhaf described.

Sir, if I may. One of the problems we have sanctioning

Syria is that we have been sanctioning Syria for so long,

there is not much left for us to sanction. One of the things that we

have done is we have made it illegal for Syrian Arab Airlines to

land in the United States. They do not have a plane that can make

it across the ocean. So we are getting to that sort of level of sanctions.

So I think the important component of sanctions is not just to

punish but also to hold out the promise that the pain can end when

the policy ends. And I think one of the things that we have had

a problem with is it easier to put on sanctions than take them off.

But clearly for a lot of people, what we have to do is say this: ‘‘Yes,

this is going to hurt, and we know it is going to hurt. But when

this situation changes, it will stop hurting.’’ That is an inducement

to change not an inducement to have the regime control the economy

even more, which is one of the short-term effects of sanctions.

But it can provoke a split in the leadership that could be very, very helpful.

Sir, I think our interest is in stability and there

are lots of ways to get there, but we are not on the course to there right now.

Senator I think that the challenge of creating

these safe zones is they have to genuinely be safe, and that is not

a small achievement. It could mean either a significant military

commitment by the United States and a whole series of allies, or

the possibility the Syrian army would shell the zones creating a

humanitarian disaster. I think it is an option that, if we consider

it, is essentially amounting to war, because we are putting troops

on somebody else’s sovereign territory. We should do that with eyes

open, not saying it is just a sort of temporary measure.

My concern about arming the groups is that as I think back to

examples of armed opposition groups, it generally takes a decade,

and they do not always win. I remember the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

I remember the Contras in Nicaragua. There have been

examples of our efforts to create these armed groups, and I cannot

think of a lot of examples where they have been successful in 6

months, 9 months. My recollection is that they often take a very

long time and are not always successful.

I think where this regime is vulnerable is precisely what we

learned from Egypt and Tunisia. When the institutions at the top

of the regime feel that all of their legitimacy is being compromised

because hundreds of thousands of people are in the streets, that is

when the regime shakes because the institutions break apart. I

think we have to be looking for that kind of split. That is the faster

split. That is the cleaner split. I think that is the split that leads

to a better outcome for Syria. I worry that the context may change

before Syria changes. I do not know what the situation is going to

be with terrorism in the Middle East over the next 5 to 10 years.

I do not know what anything is going to be in the Middle East for

the next 5 to 10 years. And if we are investing in a 10-year process

of military-led change in Syria, the whole context could change dramatically

in the next 2 years, and I do not know where that leaves

us, and I certainly do not know where it leaves Syria.

Senator, I am cautious about our ability to be

more patriotic than Syrians themselves, and I think that the more

we visibly support opposition groups, we run the danger of

delegitimizing these opposition groups. The fact is there is a diversity

of views in Syria about the regime. There is a diversity of

views in Syria about the opposition. A lot of the trading families

in Damascus and Aleppo, a lot of the urban middle classes feel that

if they go the route of regime change, it will be chaos and disaster.

It will be everything they cannot stand. And from their perspective,

if you respect the rules of Assad, which is you do not get involved

in politics and you keep your head down, and if you make money

and you pay off the right people, you are fine. Those people have

not switched. When we are thinking about what our role should be,

our role has to be to persuade those people who are currently in

the camp of the Assad regime to switch over.

The way we deal with the opposition should be careful not to do

anything to make the opposition less attractive to those people. Instead,

we need to be thinking about ways to make the opposition

more attractive to those people, because I think when those people

go, that will be the fulcrum of change in Syria.

Partly it is this sense of holding out a vision for

what post-Assad Syria looks like. Partly it has to do——

As I say, I think that our goal needs to be to

present Syrians with a choice, that there is a choice that is painful,

economically painful, to many people, or there is a choice which is

less painful. And I think that that means we have to send clear signals

about the kinds of people we would be willing to work with

and the kinds of people we would not be willing to work with. The

precedent we set in Iraq with de-Baathification I think is a precedent

that many people in Syria look at.

As I say, I think we have to pressure Assad, but

what we also have to do is send signals to people that we would

not repeat the experience we had with de-Baathification in Iraq

where anybody who was a member of the Baath Party was pushed

out because there are many people who are close to the regime.

What we precisely want is for them to think that they have——

Yes. Well, it is not it. And I think there are probably things we——

Or some sort of transition that comes after massive

demonstrations in the street.

I very much agree the point of monitors is to expose

the illegitimacy of the actions of the Government. I think it

is very unlikely that monitors are going to actually be able to prevent

something, but it can bring countries in because they feel they

have a stake because their monitors are there and are put in danger

because of the actions of the Government. That helps build this

international coalition to build escalating pressure. It helps keep

the Arab League pressuring Bashar al-Assad.

Certainly one of the things I worry about—it sounds like there

are several people who feel it could not get worse. I think it could

get worse. One of the ways it could get worse is if Assad is successful

in negotiating a way back into the Arab fold, a way back into

mending his relations with Turkey. I do not think any of that is

going to happen now, but it may be his 2- to 3-year plan, and I

think that puts us in a much more difficult situation. It leaves him

much more entrenched in Syria, one of the things we should work to prevent.

To my mind, the way to leverage the Russians

and the Chinese is to persuade them that the route we are on is

a route that leads to chaos, which they do not want and which we

agree with them that we do not want. I do not think we are quite

at that point now, and my guess would be that both Russia and

China would oppose armed monitors. I do not think they feel we

are at the point of crisis yet, but that point may be coming soon

and we should be alert to opportunities to work with them on that.