Well, I join you, Mr. Chairman, in welcoming our

distinguished witnesses, and we appreciate their testimony as we consider policy options toward Syria.

Since our last hearing a month and a half ago, the world has witnessed

the continued violent suppression of protestors and dissidents

by the regime of Bashar Assad and clashes between government

forces and the armed opposition, as the people of Syria seek to create their own Arab Spring.

Though the situation in Syria remains fluid, there have been important

diplomatic developments. A cease-fire has been agreed to,

and this week United Nations cease-fire monitors have arrived in

Damascus. Nonetheless, violence continues, underscoring the difficulty of the circumstances in Syria.

It remains to be seen whether this cease-fire is durable and how

it contributes to the goal of a genuine transition in Syria. Assad

has defaulted on his word in the past. He will be judged on his actions and not his promises.

In the first instance, the Syrian authorities and opposition forces

must guarantee the safety of the initial U.N. advance team of observers—

and the supervision mission that will follow—so that they

may carry out their responsibilities. Their ability to report on ac-

tions on the ground represents a critical step in limiting the bloodshed in Syria.

A sustainable cease-fire, of course, is only the beginning. The

international community has called on Assad to withdraw his

forces from population centers, to facilitate the provision of humanitarian

assistance to the Syrian people, and to implement the other elements of the Annan peace plan.

The situation in Syria presents many challenges for the United

States. Even as we are hopeful that the violence will cease and

that a political process to address the legitimate aspirations of the

Syrian people will be put in place, the outcome of events in Syria

will have profound effects on its neighbors—including our close ally

Israel, and on ethnic conflict and the broader stability of the region.

We must also remain mindful of the security concerns presented

by events in Syria. Terrorist groups may try to take advantage of

Syria’s political instability. Sectarian conflict could expand to draw

in Syria’s neighbors. And I remain deeply concerned about Syria’s

substantial stockpiles of chemical and conventional weapons. As it

develops United States policy toward Syria, our Government must

also focus its policy, intelligence, and counterproliferation efforts on

confronting and containing these threats.

But as I have said before, we should not overestimate our ability

to influence events inside the country. If the United States or other

Western nations insert themselves too deeply into this conflict, it

could backfire and give credence to the Syrian regime’s claim that

outside influences are the source of all their troubles. While the administration

should not take any options off the table, we should

remain skeptical about committing military forces to this conflict, for both constitutional and practical reasons.

As Congress works with the administration to develop and implement

options in this complex situation, I will be interested to hear

from our panel what courses of action they would recommend that

would advance American national security interests, are most likely

to produce an outcome favorable to the people of Syria, and would contribute to peace and stability in the region.

I look forward to your testimony. And I thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As some of you have recounted the history of Arab Spring in recent

months, in Tunisia essentially the regime resigned without

much intervention from anywhere. When we came to Egypt, fairly

early on the administration made statements to the effect that Mubarak

must go. Of course, this situation was even more pronounced

with regard to Libya. And for nearly 1 year, our President and our

Secretary of State have said Bashar al-Assad of Syria must go.

As Dr. Alterman has pointed out, maybe the differences are that

in Egypt essentially the military did not proceed to support Mubarak

and, as a result, he did go. And largely the military took hold.

Some would argue the military still maintains control despite the

procedures toward election of representatives and maybe a president.

In the case of Libya, not only did Qadhafi not go very fast, but

it really took extraordinary intervention by NATO countries to finally drive him out.

And now we come to the Syrian question, andthe administration

has indicated that Assad must go. The military in Syria still appears

very strong despite desertions of some, and the military is

pretty large in comparison with all of the potential opponents, even

if they were consolidated and armed by people from outside. And

so the military is probably in a position to defeat these folks. I

would say that the relationship between the leader, therefore, and

the military is fairly critical, and perhaps there will be some who

want to desert but others may see that as life-threatening for them

as military officers and others. We received some reports questioning

whether there are divisions between Alawites and the

Sunnis or the officiers and the enlisted personnel, but these reports are not very well developed at this point.

My point is that, as you pointed out, the military has not really

been strained to date and probably will not be unless a lot of people

are armed and somehow better organized, and that could take

quite a long while if there is to be that kind of military conflict

with or without Assad. Maybe he goes and the military fights it out

with whoever else is there to maintain the status quo in the country.

Now, I mention all this because there is, I think, almost an illusion

that our overall goal is somehow to formulate a government

that is acceptable to the Syrian people, the implication being that

there will be some degree of citizen participation and democratic

procedures, yet I see no conceivable evidence that this is likely to

occur within the next 5 years or the next decade. What could occur

with or without Assad is a military dictatorship of people trying to

pursue their own interests, and these may be sectarian interests

quite apart from the military’s interests as an institution.

Now, under those circumstances, we talk about diplomacy to

bring about something, conceivably a cease-fire. But as I understand

from press accounts, the administration as we speak is talking

about some sort of a pivot to plan B in which maybe we talk

about zones, zones on the border, in Syria, or elsewhere that offer

relief or possibilities of organization or training to various elements.

However, there is the implication that would create the

need for somebody in our military or somebody else’s military to

guard the zones to make certain that the Syrian army did not simply

mop them up. In essence, it may be not a full-scale military operation,

but it does have implications of military involvement, I hope not our own.

Having just heard this sort of the analysis, why at the present

time, first of all, have we been so intent on the fact that Assad

must go? And second, if that continues to be our policy, are we prepared

really to try to deal covertly with the Syrian military as the

most likely reason why he would go? And if not, what other military?

How do we organize this military? This is a real challenge to a very large army

that is there now and that may fight for its existence.

Dr. Wittes, do you have a thought about this? Could I ask

Mr. Alterman for a comment? Yes, sir? No.