Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Ambassador

Ford, Assistant Secretary Richard, Assistant Administrator

Lindborg for being with us today. And I’d also like to take a moment

to recognize my friend, the ranking member Eliot Engel, who

couldn’t be here today as he is in Israel for President Obama’s

visit, but he’s long been one of the most engage Members of Congress

on Syria, and on this conflict.

The uprising in Syria is about to enter its third year. Over

70,000 Syrians have been killed, there are over 1 million registered

refugees, 21⁄2 million internally displaced persons.

Our partners in the region, Turkey and Jordan, are sheltering

nearly 200,000 and 400,000 refugees respectively. International aid

to refugees has been slow to reach countries in need of support. In

fact, of the $11⁄2 billion of refugee aid pledged at the Kuwait Donors

Conference held in January, only 20 percent has been distributed.

We have to do more to insure that our humanitarian aid is reaching

those critical populations.

We can no longer look at Syria as a self-contained conflict. The

implications on regional stability are too great. As the fighting

rages on, the potential for spillover into the Golan Heights or into

Lebanon is great. As 300,000 refugees seek refuge in Lebanon,

there are Hezbollah fighters on the ground fighting alongside

Assad’s forces. Iranian arms flow through Syria to Hezbollah.

Assad is Iran’s closest ally. Iranian Revolutionary Guard members

are on the ground in Syria providing training to Syrian forces

and raising militias in Assad strongholds. The Iranian regime is

providing telecommunications equipment, arms, and money to

Assad. The collapse of the Assad regime would deal a devastating

blow to Iran and its ability to support Hezbollah and other terrorist

groups in the region.

I’m extremely concerned about reports that Iraq is turning a

blind eye to the Iranian’s use of Iraqi airspace to transport weapons

to Assad. This inaction is simply unacceptable. In fact, I’ll be

sending a letter to Prime Minister Maliki this week urging him to

immediately ground and inspect Iranian cargo and civilian planes

attempting to access Iraqi airspace.

For the sake of regional stability, we and our partners must cooperate

with urgency in order to bring this conflict to an end. So,

the obvious question remains what more should or can we do?

Secretary Kerry’s announcement of direct humanitarian aid to

the Opposition was a positive step. We need to engage with the opposition.

The people of Syria need to know that they have the support

of the United States.

We know that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are providing substantial

resources to the opposition. Our European allies led by France and

Great Britain are considering ways to get around the EU arms embargo

and provide lethal assistance to the opposition.

The arguments for arming the opposition are compelling. It could

shift the balance of power and it provides the U.S. influence with

those who may eventually govern a new Syria, but what are the

chances of success if we don’t provide assistance? And is the potential

outcome worse for U.S. security and security in the region if

we fail to act?

When Assad falls, and it is only a question of when, we have to

insure that our security interest will be protected. This means a

commitment from any new government that chemical weapons will

be secured and will be destroyed. So, as the discussion inevitably

shifts toward whether or not the U.S. should provide lethal assistance

to the opposition, it is our responsibility to determine whether

this can be done in a way that insures that U.S. arms will not fall

into the hands of terrorist organizations.

Our ability to vet opposition groups could be seriously improved

if Syrian Opposition Coalition leaders can form a strong chain of

command, and can unite the various groups fighting across the

country.

I’m encouraged that the Syrian Opposition Coalition chose a

Prime Minister for its exile government yesterday, but time is of

the essence in translating this leadership to ground operations.

There are difficult decisions that must be made in the days and

weeks ahead. Do we encourage the Syrian Opposition to establish

an alternative government on Syrian territory? Do we continue to

push for a U.N. Security Council resolution? Do we provide military

advisors and training? Do we provide direct military assistance;

and, if so, what kind? And, ultimately, is it realistic to believe

that Assad can be pushed to accept any negotiated end to this conflict?

The unconfirmed use of chemical weapons makes this more

pressing. The use of chemical weapons by this regime would be

horrific, but 70,000 slaughtered Syrians is horrific. The discussions

that we have in this committee are interesting, but the fact that

this is hard cannot stop us from acting.

Ambassador Ford, you and your colleagues know better than

anyone, there are no easy answers. Inaction, however, simply if not

an option. I look forward to your testimony and I yield back. Thank

you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’ll just follow-up on this

line of questions.

You’ve pressed the Iraqis, you’ve been direct with the Iraqis. The

fact is that the transfer of Iranian arms is subject to U.N. embargo.

There is so much at stake here. Let me try this a different way.

What specific leverage might the United States employ in those

direct discussions that are taking place with the Iraqis?

Understanding by the Iraqi Government would be

helpful. Action by the Iraqi Government is what’s necessary to insure

that that actually takes place.

I’d just like to focus on the two kinds of aid that are widely discussed.

One is, obviously, military.

Ambassador Ford, there’s a difference of opinion here on Capitol

Hill about whether or not to provide direct military assistance to

the Opposition. The argument is made that it’s really hard to know

where these weapons are going, that they might wind up in the

wrong hands, and that as we assess this, it’s just too difficult for

us, ultimately, to be able to decide how to get this into the right

Opposition group’s hands.

Do you agree with that, and the fact that it’s hard? Does 70,000

now dead Syrians, does that make it easier for us to assess the possibility

of doing this?

Mr. Ambassador, I understand that, and I’m not

suggesting an immediate change. I’m suggesting that this is an important

conversation for us to have, and it needs to take place right

now.

I’m asking if you agree that it is too difficult for us to identify

who should receive those arms if the policy were to change.

I appreciate that. Let me just turn to Ms. Lindborg

for a second in my remaining time.