Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of

the committee. Thank you very much for inviting me to come talk

with you today. I know our time is limited so I’m going to keep my

remarks quite brief.

As you noted, Mr. Chairman, what started out as a peaceful demand

for dignity and freedom has turned, instead, into a devastating

conflict with a horrific human toll. Syrians face a new

level of ruthlessness from the Assad regime, which is raining Scud

missiles down on residential neighborhoods, bombing hospitals,

bombing schools, and sending out its thugs into streets to terrorize

and arrest fellow citizens.

More than 70,000 Syrians now have died since the beginning of

this conflict, and the number is rising, especially as fighting in Damascus

and Southern Syria now is intensifying. More than 1 million

Syrians have left their homes in their country to seek refuge

in neighboring countries, a number which could quadruple by the

end of this year if the increase in refugee flows continues. It’s very

striking that Jordan’s fourth largest city now is the Zaatari refugee

camp.

We are working to alleviate the human suffering. The United

States is the largest bilateral humanitarian aid donor, and my colleagues,

Anne and Nancy, can tell you more about our humanitarian

assistance efforts. So, let me talk, instead, about how this

can end.

Beyond addressing humanitarian needs, the United States is acting.

The United States is helping Syrians who seek a government

that will respect the dignity and the rights of all Syrians and that

will foster, not threaten, stability in the Middle East.

Since December 2012, the United States along with our international

partners have recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition

as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The Coalition

has a diverse group of representatives inside Syria as well as outside,

and the Coalition is committed to a democratic and inclusive

government, free from the influence of violent extremists. And now

it needs help providing basic services in liberated areas.

Secretary Kerry in Rome at the end of February announced a

new assistance package of $63 million to help the Syrian Opposition

Coalition, to help Syrians on the ground inside Syria, and to

provide food and medical supplies to the Supreme Military Command

of the Free Syrian Army, and to the Syrian Opposition Council

for those in need.

Our aid, along with that of our partners is very important, especially

to forestall the complete collapse of state institutions. This is

a point which Secretary Kerry has emphasized repeatedly. But, ultimately,

we perceive that a negotiated political transition is the

best long-term solution to the Syrian crisis.

The Geneva Communique´ agreed upon by the permanent members

of the United Nations Security Council, Turkey, the Arab

League States calls for a transition governing body to be set up

with full executive powers, and this is important, formed on the

basis of mutual consent between the Opposition and the Syrian regime.

We cannot see how Bashar al-Assad and his circle who long

ago lost their legitimacy, and whom the Opposition will never accept

in a transition government, we cannot see how he and his circle

can play any role in that transition governing body. He must

step aside.

We need to get to negotiations to establish that transition governing

body, but it is not easy, and how are we to get there? As

Secretary Kerry has noted, we need to change Bashar al-Assad’s

calculations because he still thinks he can win militarily.

Therefore, we are working with our partners to strengthen the

Opposition and to change the balance on the ground to help give

the Opposition the leverage they need to negotiate and to change

Bashar’s calculations.

Let me note here that the election of Ghassan Hitto as Prime

Minister for the Coalition is a step forward, and we look forward

to working with him and with the Opposition Coalition President,

Muaz al-Khatib in the weeks ahead. And let me also say that we

look forward to working with the Congress as we seek to support

the needs of the Syrian people in their struggle to create a free,

stable, and democratic Syria. Thank you.

. Mr. Chairman, so far we have no evidence to

substantiate the reports that chemical weapons were used yesterday,

but I want to underline that we are looking very carefully at

these reports. We are consulting with partners in the region and

in the international community.

More broadly, we have been very clear from the beginning about

our concern that as the Assad regime’s military situation deteriorates,

and it becomes as the Director of National Intelligence said,

it becomes ever more beleaguered, that it might be tempted to use

chemical weapons. And the President has been very clear in saying

that if Assad and those under his command make the mistake of

using chemical weapons, or if they fail to meet their obligation to

secure them, then there will be consequences, and they will be held

accountable.

. Mr. Chairman, in a hearing like this, I absolutely

do not want to go into hypotheticals. I do want to underline

that we take these reports and these possibilities very seriously,

and we are using all of our available means to determine exactly

what has happened.

. Mr. Chairman, thank you for that.

A couple of things I’d like to note first. The Iranian relationship

to the Bashar al-Assad regime is not new, but as you noted, their

assistance to the regime in this conflict has grown substantially.

I could just cite, for example, that the Iranian Revolutionary

Guard Corps lost a general in Syria. And they have lost other personnel,

as well. And, of course, I don’t want to fail to mention that

Lebanese Hezbollah is also playing a very pernicious role. And

there are even reports we are seeing now, Mr. Chairman, of Iraqi

Shia extremists going to places like the Sayyida Zainab neighborhood

of Damascus, and even up to Homs. So, this is a serious problem,

and it is absolutely prolonging the conflict.

We have raised on multiple occasions with Iraqi officials, and I

have done so myself when I visited Baghdad at the end of last year.

We had a senior Iraqi official here in Washington 2 weeks ago, and

we raise it during visits here in Washington, and as well out in

Baghdad. We will keep pressing the Iraqis.

We want the Iraqi Government to understand that it has no interest

in having an extremist government in Syria, and the longer

the conflict continues, the greater the influence of extremists on

the ground. Iraq should be working with us to get to that negotiated

settlement that I talked about.

. Mr. Chairman, let me assure you we have

had very direct conversations with the Iraqis. I have, our Ambassador

in Baghdad, Stephen Beecroft, has, and officials here in

Washington, the White House and the State Department have. As

I mentioned, we had a senior official here from Baghdad the week

before last, and we have been very direct with them about the importance

of not allowing Iran to exploit the crisis in Syria, and how

it is not helpful to Iraqi interests, nor the region’s interests.

. Congressman, I don’t want to go into great

detail here about our diplomatic discussions with the Iraqis, but

you mentioned the arms embargo and the United Nations resolution,

and we have discussed that with the Iraqis.

In a sense, in the end what matters is that the Government of

Iraq understand that its own interest is going to be best served not

by facilitating Iranian efforts to prolong the crisis in Syria, but

rather in bringing about a transitional government that would

have good relations with the government in Iraq.

. Congressman, first let me say that all of us

working on the Syrian issue are incredibly saddened by the human

toll in Syria. I was there, and I visited the people in Hama, and

they were certainly peaceful. What’s happened to them is atrocious;

what’s happened to other Syrians is atrocious.

With respect to direct military assistance, our policy now is not

to provide military assistance to the Supreme Military Council and

the Free Syrian Army. We do regularly review this, be very clear

about that, but our policy is not now to provide such assistance. We

are, above all, focused in our efforts in convincing both sides of the

importance of a political solution and getting them to that negotiated

political deal.

We have taken a major step in terms of our relations with the

Supreme Military Command of the Free Syrian Army by now for

the first time providing food and medical assistance to it for those

in Syria in need, but we are not providing direct military assistance.

. Congressman, as we review whether or not to

provide direct military assistance, we do it within the context of

trying to decide if it would help us get to the political settlement

that we think is the only way to get to the long-term crisis. So, the

question you asked is one question, but it is not the only question

that we take into consideration.

Ms. Lindborg, I want to thank you. I want to thank you for the

work that you do. I want to thank you for the work that USAID

does.

At the end of your testimony, you commented this hearing is a

wonderful opportunity for you to further your message. I hope that

people will focus on your message. I hope that in all of the discus-

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28

sions that take place here about whether or not to provide military

assistance, and working with the Opposition, and doing all the

things that we need to, to ultimately push Assad out, that there

is a very clear understanding about the work that you and the

agency does every single day, the work that you do every day to

address this humanitarian crisis. And, most importantly, your efforts

as you describe them, to make sure that the Syrian people understand

that even as we have all of these other discussions, that

the United States of America is committed to working to address

this humanitarian crisis in a very serious, and in a very concerted

way.

I want to pass on my sincere thanks, and I hope that you and

the work gets the attention that it deserves perhaps as a result of

this hearing. Thank you, and I yield back.

. With respect to the rebels and who they are,

I divide them into two categories. There’s a political opposition, and

there is a military opposition. Both are not entirely unified; although,

on the political side the Coalition headed by Sheik Muaz

al-Khatib, the Coalition that chose Ghassan Hitto yesterday as

Prime Minister, are becoming more and more unified. And they

have representatives from both inside the country, as well as outside

the country.

On the armed opposition side, they have established a Supreme

Military Command headed by a man named General Salim Idris,

whom I have met several times. He has said to us and to others

that he will respect a political deal worked out by the political opposition;

that is to say, he does not perceive that the Free Syrian

Army should have a political role in the future of Syria.

To be very frank, Congresswoman, that is one of the reasons we

decided to provide direct food and medical assistance to Idris and

his command to help him within the context of the broader Syrian

opposition.

Let me add, also, with respect to your question on weapons of

mass destruction, even when I went out as an Ambassador several

years ago, this was a huge issue for us. And it has, if anything, become

even more of a concern given our worries about the regime

in its desperate military situation using chemical weapons. So, let

me assure you, we continue to talk regularly to the International

Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. We continue to urge that the

Syrian regime be completely transparent with the IAEA about

what it has been doing with respect to its nuclear program.

With respect to access, we have long wanted that. We argued for

it consistently. I think now with the fighting in the area, we would

have to figure out if the IAEA itself would want to go.

. Congressman, with respect to changing

Bashar al-Assad’s calculations, I’m not a psychiatrist, and I have

seen his press statements where he said he would never leave

Syria. We’ve seen that. Maybe he’s telling the truth. I don’t know.

We also know, Congressman, that the military balance is turning

against the regime. They lost a provincial capital at the end of February,

the regime’s governor and other senior officials were actually

captured. They’ve lost control of the border along Turkey and Iraq.

There is heavy fighting now in Damascus, itself. In fact, we’ve been

getting messages from Syrians inside Syria and Damascus that

there was heavy fighting right up close to where the President

lives. Certainly, it would have been rattling his windows.

Will he then decide to negotiate and to save himself? We want

a negotiated political deal as the best means to get a sustainable

new government. That has to be, in a sense, agreed upon by the

different sides to the conflict. That does not mean we will ask the

Supreme Military Command to implement a cease fire, but we

would like to see negotiations.

I was struck that the regime has now offered to send a delegation

headed by the Syrian Prime Minister, but I don’t know if that

is serious, and it has to be to discuss not a Bashar al-Assad reform

program, but rather the Geneva Framework for a transition government

in which Assad has no part.

. Congressman, a couple of things I would like

to emphasize. First, I was in Iraq for almost 5 years, and I saw

what happened to the Iraqi Christian community, and it was terrible.

Even now, they’re still often under threat, those who remain.

So, I’m very sensitive to that. The administration is very, very sensitive

to that.

A couple of things I just want to highlight. First, we are deeply

concerned about the threat of Islamist extremists within the Syrian

Opposition. That is why the administration designated the al-

Nusra Front in December 2012 as an affiliate of the al-Qaeda organization

in Iraq. And we did that specifically to warn others in the

Syrian Opposition of the risks that they take by working with al-

Nusra Front.

And I’m encouraged, Congressman, that there have been instances

now where other Syrians who want a tolerant society, other

Syrians who believe that all Syrians should be treated equally

without respect to their religion or their ethnicity, are starting to

push back in some instances against al-Nusra on the ground. But

there is a great deal of concern.

Second thing, I just want to assure you, I mentioned I have met

people from the Free Syrian Army, from the Supreme Military

Command, and we have highlighted the worries of minority groups,

Alawites and Christians, not that we are against the Sunni Majority

of Syria, we are not, but the minorities are nervous, and their

rights must be protected and respected. And we hear good things

from them. And I can tell you, for example, that they have met

Christian leaders from some of the communities in Syria, and have

told us afterwards that their meetings were positive. We have to

keep pushing in that direction.

. We view this issue with extreme seriousness,

Congressman. It is incredibly important to us, so we approach it

on several fronts.

Right now, we are trying to verify the reports that we have seen

recently about the use. There are reports of their being used both

in the North, and in the Damascus suburbs, the Eastern suburbs

of Damascus. So, we’re trying to verify those reports with our

means. We’re talking to our partners about what they have been

able to find out.

In addition, we have had regular discussions with other countries

that have interests in Syria, who have influence with the Syrians

to (a) urge that the Syrian regime not use these weapons and, instead,

maintain tight control over them. And (b) to pass the warning

that there would be consequences, and there would be accountability

for those members of the regime that would ever think of

using these things and would deploy them.

. Several things on that, Congressman. First,

we don’t say dialogue because for us this is not about having a conversation

between the Opposition and the regime. This is about negotiating——

. To me, they’re very different meanings, and

they matter here.

. They matter here because we’re talking about

him stepping down, not dialoguing but him stepping down, and setting

up a new transition governing body.

Now, with respect to accountability, we have said he should be

held accountable, and that members of his regime with buckets of

blood on their hands also should be held accountable. We are actually

helping train Syrian investigators to prepare dossiers. We are

showing them—this is ongoing activity that we are doing, the State

Department’s Democracy and Human Rights Bureau is undertaking

this along with Stephen Rapp, our Ambassador-at-Large for

War Crimes. We are training Syrian investigators so that they can

prepare dossiers to be used at an eventual court proceeding. The

Syrians, themselves, ultimately will have to decide by what mechanisms

they will hold people accountable. That can’t be something

that we dictate to them. But we are anxious to provide them the

capability to pursue people in this way.

. Congressman, we saw the Russian statement

that the rebels, Free Syrian Army, yesterday used chemical weapons.

I just want to say we have no evidence to corroborate that, and

we’re very skeptical of it. We’ll look at it, but our initial impression

is we’re very skeptical.

With respect to the Russian position, they say that they are not

attached to Bashar al-Assad, and they say they would accept a

transition governing body. They signed up to the Geneva Framework

that I have talked about. However, we would like Russia to

go far, far beyond that.

We would like Russia, first of all, to stop delivering arms systems

to the Syrian Government. And this is an ongoing conversation

that we have with them. We would also like the Russians to join

the rest of the international community in the very tight economic

sanctions regime which we have developed with the Europeans,

with countries in the Middle East, with the Japanese and other

countries. We would welcome the Russians joining that, all with

the goal of getting to a sustainable political solution.

. Congressman——

. Sorry.

. Congressman, I’m happy to share a little bit.

I would encourage Assistant Administrator Lindborg to talk about

this since it’s more her people and her programs. But we understand

the utility of Syrians seeing $385 million in American assistance

going in to help Syrians in need. We are the largest bilateral

donor. And there are some places where we have been able to do

branding, but in other places there are security issues. Nancy, do

you want to say more?

. To be very brief, Congressman, I personally

don’t agree that we waited so long, on the ground there. We were

helping democracy activists when I was in Syria in 2011, and we

were doing a lot to help.

. Congressman, for a long time, Syrians themselves

didn’t want outside interference in their uprising, what they

called the revolution. For a long time, through 2011, the Syrians

themselves wanted their demonstrations to be peaceful. They did

not want foreign armed intervention. In fact, they were bitterly

criticizing Hezbollah and Iran for their intervention.

. Congressman, I’m not the spokesman for the

Russian or Iranian Foreign Ministry——

. Let me just say a couple of things. First, the

very nature of the Iranian actions in Syria now suggest to me that

they’re very nervous about the Assad regime’s long-term prospects.

They are plussing up their assistance, they’re plussing up their

people on the ground, they’re plussing up what they’re sending in.

That doesn’t sound like a confident stance, to me. That sounds like

they’re nervous, and they ought to be nervous.

I mentioned before about how the military balance has shifted

strongly against the regime in a war of attrition.

. Absolutely, we help that nervousness, Congressman.

Let me give you an example. You know, a lot of this war

is being fought on video.

. And much of the equipment that provides the

YouTube videos that you and I see, that actually comes from us.

. We are the ones that are helping the Opposition

both get information from the outside world through the internet,

and also to upload stuff back to the rest of planet Earth.

For example, the chairman in his opening remarks talked about

the devastation to the City of Homs.

. We have worked very closely with the Homs

Provincial Revolution Council to make sure they can stay in touch

with planet Earth.

, I’ll to you again, initially. As you stated, our

goals currently are to see the Assad regime leave as soon as possible,

to have a negotiated settlement, retaining Syria’s national

unity, and fostering an emergence of a new Syrian Government

that enhances, rather than lessens the security within Syria and

around the region.

As we look at that, and we’re developing our strategy, what

events, trends, or other developments might be indications that our

desired or stated objectives aren’t achievable? And if we start to see

those, what are our best alternatives if national unity isn’t achievable?

. We worry, Congressman, about the collapse of

the state. And I don’t mean the government of Bashar al-Assad, we

think he’s going to go in any case sooner or later, but collapse of

the state institutions. We have seen that in other places, including

in the Middle East, and we do not want to see the Syrian Government

disappear. The institutions of state, the judiciary, a police

force that is able to maintain law and order, banks, financial systems,

et cetera, so infrastructure, electricity.

Where we see that degrading further, that would be a sign that

things are going even worse, will create more refugee flows, will

help extremists. And that is why we are increasing our assistance

to these areas which have been liberated from government control,

and where state institutions, frankly, are failing. So, we are directly

now helping local administrative councils, which have been

set up by the Syrian revolution.

We will work very closely with Prime Minister Ghassan Hitto to

funnel assistance into these local councils so that they can prevent

the full collapse of state institutions. I think that is our biggest

concern in terms of maintaining unity, and keeping Syria from

being an operating base for terrorists, extremists, helping maintain

security. That’s the main thing.

. Congressman, I think today, March 20th, we

can get to a solution that maintains the unity of Syria. The different

groups in Syria represented in this Coalition that I talked

about all want to maintain Syria’s unity, even the people, the foot

soldiers of Bashar al-Assad’s ruthless army are not calling for the

division of the country. I don’t think Syrians are looking to divide

their state. So, we have to figure out a way to get a negotiated

agreement where everyone feels safe within a unified Syria.

It could be that the government is going to look entirely different

from how this last government did. It certainly has to with respect

to its treatment of citizens in terms of dignity and respect for

human rights. But I can imagine lots of political scenarios where

you can work out deals between the groups.

. Congressman, I really do not want to speculate

here about hypothetical situations. What I do want to underline

is that the President has said there will be consequences, and

that we will seek strongly that the people who use chemical weapons

be held accountable. Exactly what those consequences would do

today, I cannot speculate on.

. I am very certain, Congressman, that they

have been discussed. But, again, I don’t want to speculate on what

the hypothetical possibilities are. I just—I do not want to go there.

I do want to underline how seriously we take the reports.

. Syria has, the Syrian Government has the

largest stocks of chemical weapons of any country in the region,

and it includes the things that you mentioned. So, because we cannot

yet state with certainty that chemical weapons have been used

in the last days, I cannot tell you what happened.

I can tell you that we have a large team of people working on

it right now. And I understand your concerns about explaining to

the American people, but I think first we need to understand what

exactly has happened, if anything.

. We understand the risk you’re talking about,

Congressman, in terms of leakage of materials, which is why we

have underlined to the Syrian authorities, and to their friends that

these materials have to stay in their sites, and they have to stay

secure.

. Correct. But I would also say, I mentioned

that I have met General Idris, and we have also told him that we

would view their using these kinds of weapons also as completely

unacceptable.

. Congressman, they have the neighboring

states, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. We have different kinds

of bilateral programs with Iraq, with Jordan, with Lebanon. Certainly,

with Turkey, again, we have a regular conversation on the

question of the Syrian chemical weapons stock, and what is to be

done about it. So, what I can tell you here is that all of the countries

are sensitive to the risks.

We are looking to be helpful with them to address those risks,

and each government is taking different responses according to its

differing needs.

. Congressman——

. Congressman, our policy is not to give military

assistance. That is, actually, exactly factually right. However,

it is not factually right to say that the United States thinks that

it is okay for other countries to provide assistance to the Assad regime.

I did say already that we have urged the Russians not to send

military equipment to the Assad regime. I have said already that

we’ve asked the Russians to join us and the rest of the international

community in putting pressure on the Assad regime.

We, Congressman, have been at the forefront of countries denouncing

Iranian behavior in Syria. It was the United States that

first started talking about it publicly. And the same with North

Korea. We have had sanctions in place on Iran and North Korea,

as well as on the Syrian regime precisely because of this kind of

behavior which we find destabilizing not only in Syria, but to the

broader Middle East region.

. We’ve studied those remarks very carefully,

Congressman. And you have hit exactly what concerns us, is that

as the military balance shifts steadily against the regime, and it

grows more beleaguered and more desperate, that they will try

some ruse and end up using them themselves. And that is why we

take the reports the last couple of days very seriously, and we’re

trying to determine what’s happened.

. Congressman, there is a variety of external

actors now in the Syria crisis. Some are trying to help the government——

Mr. WEBER. I’ve got time, go ahead and describe it.

[continuing]. And there are some that are trying

to get rid of them, like the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.

We think the Jabhat al-Nusra still is a minority within the armed

Opposition, maybe 10, 15 percent.

. Against the regime, yes, it would be.

. And then there are other countries that are

also involved in the fight against Assad’s regime, but what concerns

us are the extremists at the top of that list. There are others,

but at the top of that list.

. There are a variety of groups fighting in different

cities against the regime. I’ll just throw out some names.

One of them is called the Hawks of Syria, Saqur al-Sham, one is

called——

. Smaller than Jabhat al-Nusra, but their

strength varies location to location. A lot of these are very localized

groups, Congressman.

. What’s interesting about Jabhat al-Nusra is

it has a national command, and it’s more dangerous that way.

. You asked what would a post-Assad——

. Yes. The Supreme Military Command of the

Free Syrian Army, General Idris and his people, did not allow al-

Nusra and extremists groups to join that military command. We

think that they will resist the influence of those groups after Assad

departs. And I mentioned already that in Syria we see some places

where extremist groups have tried to impose religious courts, and

generated a very negative reaction near Aleppo, and also down in

the Damascus area, for example, most recently in Eastern Syria in

a place called Mayadin.

We have seen places where Jabhat al-Nusra has tried to impose

imams in mosques replacing them with foreigners instead of Syrian

imams. And, again, it’s generated a very negative reaction.

. What I think is important, Congressman, is

that in this Syrian uprising, in this revolution there are two competing

visions of a future Syria. One is an Islamist extremist vision

supported by this al-Qaeda affiliate and others, and there is a vision

promoted that would be of a tolerant Syria which respects the

rights of all Syrians equally.

We want to weigh in strongly on behalf of those who advocate

that second vision, and that is what we are——

. We understand that, Congressman.

. Secretary Kerry during his visit to the Middle

East recently highlighted that we are increasingly confident that

countries that are providing assistance can do so in ways such that

arms do not get in the hands of extremists. This is something that,

frankly, we talk to them daily about.

. Oh, absolutely he knows that.

. Congressman, I think today he has not yet

decided that his days are numbered, and that he’s going to have

to leave.

. I hope the Congress will work with us to

strengthen the Syrian Opposition. I hope that Congress will support

our efforts. We’ve talked about Iraq and its role. We need all

the pressure we can get on the Iraqis to get them to see where

their long-term interests are best found.

We need, also, to show political support to the vision of Syria

that I mentioned, that is of a tolerant society where there is coexistence——

. A couple of things. Thank you, Congresswoman.

A couple of things.

I understand the concerns about arming and our policy, again, is

today——

[continuing]. Not to provide armed assistance.

. With respect to the political side, we think—

let me say a couple of things about the Prime Minister that they

selected yesterday, that was elected. He was happily in Texas, and

gave up his work there to go and work on behalf of Syrians, and

in particular to help organize humanitarian assistance efforts, in

fact, and Nancy’s people in Turkey worked with him there. And he

made a very favorable impression. He is a capable manager.

. I’m not an expert about Afghanistan, so I

can’t address that question

. But what I would say to you is, in the end,

the Syrian Opposition itself has said that a transitional government

will have to be established. So, whether or not Ghassan Hitto

has a role in that, I think is not determined. We view this as a

short-term step to help provide services, to help provide humanitarian

assistance into areas of Syria liberated from regime control.

And that’s how he defines his role. He spoke yesterday to the press

in Turkey about that.

So, his long-term prospects politically, I just can’t speak to. I

don’t think that’s what they’re thinking about now. They have

much more urgent problems with respect to the outflow of refugees

into the neighboring countries, and the dire circumstances of Syrians

inside Syria.

. I make a distinction between legitimacy and

the collapse of the state. There’s still large——

. Damascus, for example, is still—Central Damascus

is very much under government control.

. Fourth largest city. Hama is still very much

under government control. But in areas where the government’s

control has receded, in the North, and in the East, for example,

their court system, financial institutions, et cetera, in large part

have stopped working.

. And this is what I was talking about. These

were huge problems in Iraq 10 years ago.

. Congressman, let me tell you a little bit about

the head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition. We talked with Congresswoman

Bass about the gentleman that they elected yesterday

as Prime Minister, but let me talk about the President of the Opposition

Coalition.

He is an imam from the largest mosque in Damascus, actually

the Umayyad Mosque. I’ve met him many times. I think what most

impressed me about him was after we designated the al-Nusra

Front as a terrorist affiliate of the al-Qaeda and Iraq group, there

was a lot of criticism of us inside Syria. That is not a secret.

In a very public speech broadcast throughout the Arab world at

the Friends of Syria meeting in Marrakesh in mid-December, Muaz

came right out directly and said, ‘‘The kind of ideology that al-

Nusra espouses, the extremists, the intolerance, even imposing a

special tax on Christians,’’ which hasn’t been done in the Middle

East in hundreds and hundreds of years, ‘these things are rejected,’’

he said. ‘‘That is not what we are about.’’ He talked, instead,

about reaching out to Alawites, who are the backbone of

Assad’s remaining support. He said, ‘‘Join us. Don’t fight us, we’re

not fighting you. Join us.’’ This is what I’m talking about with the

kind of tolerance.

Sheik Muaz wrote an open letter to the Syrian Christian community.

We’d be happy to get you a copy of it. And I know it has had

a big impact, because Syrian Christians have talked to me about

it. But this is a vision of respect for the dignity of all Syrians. This

is a vision of tolerance, of coexistence, and I think, frankly, the vast

majority of Syrians really want to believe in that vision.

So, the extremists that we’ve talked about are a minority, but I

have to be honest and say as the violence goes on, those extremist

voices are getting louder.

. I’m not a psychiatrist. I’ve met Bashar al-

Assad twice, but I wouldn’t say that I understand his psychology

perfectly. I think today he still thinks he can win militarily with

help from Russia, from Iran, from Lebanese Hezbollah, but I think

he also must understand as his windows rattle because the fighting

is getting closer, he must be thinking about whether or not his calculations

are correct.

We think, Congressman, that Syrians will have to decide how to

hold him and his ruthless circle accountable. It is ultimately a decision

for Syrians to make. What we have sought to do is help them

develop the capabilities so that they can hold trials, if that’s what

they want to do, so that they can assemble evidence packages up

to international standards. And we actually are helping a center

which we set up in Lyon, France to do that with Syrian investigators.

. I don’t—two things I would say on this, Congressman.

First, I don’t know where he would go either, if he decided

to flee. I mean, I just—I do not know. There are going to be

a lot of countries that wouldn’t take him because of all of the awful

things that he is responsible for. I would also comment, he has a

family, and he’s got to think about them. He has young children.

He has a wife, so what’s going to happen to them?

And then, finally, in the end, Congressman, I don’t think these

are decisions that Americans have to make. These are decisions

that Syrians are going to have to make, because they’re going to

have to live with the results. So, what we have tried to do is to

give them options, to give them capabilities to deploy if they decide

to follow a particular option. And I’m very proud that we have

given them those options, and I know that they appreciate it.

. Congressman, first, can I just add one point

to the women, because this is important. We have in the Congres-

sional notification, the way we intend to use some of our assistance

monies in Syria, we will spend approximately $5 million to help the

Syrian Opposition Coalition and these local councils that I talked

about in liberated areas to develop their police forces, because law

and order as you heard in Turkey is a big issue. So, we need—

working with partners. I think the Germans are going to help us

with this. We need to help get the police force——

. Yes. Oh, on the——

[continuing]. On the question about Assad,

there’s two possibilities. We see him pulling forces in. Will he hold

out in Damascus at the end? Maybe, but a lot of observers think

he might, instead, retreat to the heartland of the Alawaite base of

his support, which would be up along the coast in Northwest Syria.

We’re not quite sure which he would do.

. We think he——

. No.

. Absolutely, it is not. The al-Qaeda affiliate is

a small part of the Opposition. It’s a small minority, but his voice

is getting louder.

. I’ve met him twice, Congressman, and he

struck me as more Texan than Muslim Brotherhood, frankly.

. I don’t know what his political affiliations

are, but I do know that he also has a tolerant vision of Syrian society.

He is not a religious extremist, far from it. And that he has

at some self-sacrifice gone over to help with the humanitarian crisis

in Syria. He did not have to do that. He was comfortable in

Texas.

. I think Hezbollah wants to remain a potent

force in Syria. There’s no question of that, and that’s why they are

increasing their presence now, and they’re increasing their assistance.

But I have to tell you, Congressman, that when I talk to Syrians

across the spectrum, those who do not support the government,

the anger at what Hezbollah has done to help the regime is

palpable. So, I think the transition government, when it comes, and

the government after that is not going to want a relationship at all

with Hezbollah, like what the Assad regime had.

. I can’t go into details here in an open session

on the intelligence, but what I can say to you, Congressman, is that

arms continue to reach Hezbollah from Iran. But I think, also,

Hezbollah’s actions in Syria suggest to me, as do Iranian actions,

that Hezbollah is very nervous about their stakes in Syria, and it

will have an impact, also, on their position in Lebanon.

. The end of the Assad regime will present us

with big, new strategic opportunities to stabilize that part of the

Middle East. Iran’s losing access to Lebanon through Syria will

help Lebanon. In addition, losing the Assad alliance will make it

harder for Iran to spread its influence through terror groups that

have worked with Syria, and with Iran. For us, it would be definitely

a strategic gain.

. The group that concerns us most, al-Nusra

Front, started out as largely inspired by jihadists from Iraq.

. I think that is very possible.

. They do, Congressman, and that’s one of the

things that enable them to attract a lot of recruits. I think a lot

of Syrians who fight under their banner are not, in fact, extremists,

but they can get food, they can get ammunition from them. And al-

Nusra and other extremists have a very well developed network of

private finance that moves up to them, and that they are able to

access.

. The groups we’re talking about, the jihadists,

Congressman, hate Iran, hate it passionately, so I don’t think they

would ever work with Iran. In fact, I would be concerned that they

will actually go out and kill Syrian Shia at the end of fighting.

That’s a different concern, but they won’t have any truck with Iran.

. People such as the Supreme Military Council,

I think also are going to be so—well, they already are, and they

tell us this, they’re already so frustrated with Iran, and so angry

at the Iranian intervention. In many cases, it’s Iranian equipment

that’s causing them casualties, I don’t think they’re going to have

a good relationship at all with Iran after this crisis comes to a close

and we have a transition government.

. That is exactly our concern, Congressman,

that my experience in other countries where I’ve worked, such as

Algeria during their civil war, and in Iraq, that as the violence

grows, extremists profit from that. They benefit from that. Their

loud voices, their hard lined positions, the grandstanding appeals,

and so we think it is really important to empower people who have

a much more tolerant vision of what Syrian society should be. We

need to target, as best we can, resource flows that go into these

jihadist groups, and that is one of the impacts of our designating

al-Nusra, for example. And we have to find ways to help the Syrian

groups that are inside the areas liberated from government control

to provide basic services which will undercut a lot of the appeal

that the extremists have. That is why we have notified Congress

about programs we want to start to enable the local councils and

the Syrian Opposition Coalition to provide those services.

, you emphasized the need to solidify, and I

think your words were solidify the efforts of Syrian moderates who

are competing for influence with extremist groups, and to curtail

the influence of extremists by helping the national and local Opposition

leaders, providing the vital services, food, water, electricity.

I heard you, and understood you correctly on that. Correct?

The question comes in is, why are we providing so much of this

support through U.N. agencies that rely on the consent of Assad regime

for their access. You’ve talked about crossing lines and there’s

support for crossing lines, but I see it as strengthening and prolonging

the survival of the regime by allowing it to dictate the

terms of access. And then, in turn, they’re able to claim credit for

providing services to their civilians.

Wouldn’t you agree that that would be how Assad sees that, and

how——

. Congressman, I’m making a huge distinction

between helping local councils in liberated areas provide basic services.

Getting chlorine so that public water taps can be turned back

on, buying some generators so that essential buildings will have

electricity. That is not the kind of humanitarian assistance provided

to people in need in government-controlled areas. That’s a

different thing. So, there are the programs that we’re talking

about. This is the $60 million that Secretary Kerry announced in

Rome, and that we just sent notification of to Congress at the beginning

of the week. That is to work specifically to strengthen

these nascent governing bodies in liberated areas, and to help knit

together this national Opposition leadership with people on the

street.

. No, no, we do that——

. We do that directly.

. That has nothing to do with our United Nations.

. The easiest answer to that question, Congressman,

is we aren’t heading in. Syrians chose him, we had nothing

to do with it. We know him because we were working with him

before on getting humanitarian assistance into Syria, into the

checkerboard that Anne just described. But we certainly didn’t

choose him, and he’s not—I mean, we stayed out of it entirely. He

was chosen, Congressman, by a council of people from both inside

and outside Syria to play that role.

. No, I understand the thrust of your question,

but I don’t know that he has a long-term political future in Syria.

He has been elected for an immediate task of managing——