Mr. President, I know

Senator DURBIN, Senator AYOTTE, and

others will be coming to the Senate

floor, but let me get it started. According

to the United Nations, more than

8,000 Syrians have been murdered in attacks

by the desperate regime of President

Bashar al-Asad of Syria.

We continue to receive press reports

on a daily basis about Asad’s forces

summarily executing, imprisoning, and

torturing demonstrators who want

nothing more than what we take for

granted, which is to live in freedom in

a democracy. This week we learned

that dozens of Syrian women and children—

some infants as young as 4

months old—were stabbed, shot, and

burned by government forces in Homs.

I know it is difficult for most of us to

comprehend—and most of us would be

so repulsed by it, we would not want to

comprehend the kind of brutality Asad

is perpetrating against his own people.

Yet in the face of these atrocities, Russia

continues to prop up the Asad regime

by providing arms that are being

used to slaughter these innocent Syrian

civilians.

Russia is the top supplier of weapons

to Syria and reportedly sold Syria up

to $1 billion or more worth of arms just

last year. Western and Arab governments

have pleaded with Russia to stop

supplying these weapons to the Asad

regime, but it has refused so far.

Russia is not just passively supplying

weapons to the Asad regime, it has recently

admitted to having military

weapons instructors on the ground in

Syria training Asad’s Army on how to

use these weapons. Russian weapons,

including high-explosive mortars, have

been found at the site of atrocities in

Homs.

This picture taken by Al Arabiya and

Reuters reads:

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov,

why don’t you visit Homs to see your weapons

and their effectiveness in the bodies of

our children!

The Syrian people recognize Russia’s

role in their current misery, as reflected

by this picture and by this

statement to Russian Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov. Rosoboronexport is

Russia’s official arms dealer. This company

handles about 80 percent of Russia’s

weapons exports, according to its

Web site, and it is spearheading Russia’s

continuing effort to arm the Asad

regime, which, in my mind, makes

them an accessory to mass murder.

I see the distinguished majority whip

has come to the floor, and I want to

give him a chance to make any appropriate

remarks he cares to make and

engage in a colloquy with him.

First, let me close my comments on

this concern I have. Not only is Russia

selling arms to Syria to kill innocent

civilians, but you can imagine my

shock and dismay when I found out

that our own Department of Defense

has a no-bid contract with this same

Russian arms merchant that is helping

arm the Asad regime.

This is a no-bid contract to provide

approximately 21 dual-use Mi-17 helicopters

for the Afghan military. As I

said, this is a no-bid Army contract

that was awarded last summer that is

reportedly worth as much as $900 million.

So the only thing I can conclude

is that the U.S. taxpayer is providing

money to a Russian arms dealer to purchase

Russian helicopters for the Afghan

military, and the very same arms

merchant is arming President Asad’s

regime and killing innocent Syrians.

I, along with 16 of my colleagues,

have sent a letter to Secretary Panetta

expressing our alarm and concern over

these arrangements, asking for further

information and urging them to reconsider

this contract with

Rosoboronexport.

I want to stop on this point: We must

keep the pressure on the Department of

Defense to reconsider this contract and

on the Russians to cease all arms sales

to the Asad regime.

I am hopeful that the upcoming debate

on the repeal of Jackson-Vanik

will provide an opportunity for the

Senate to further examine these serious

issues.

Again, let me state my appreciation

to Senator DURBIN, the distinguished

majority whip, for his participation in

expressing alarm and concern over

these circumstances and ask him to

make any comments he cares to make.

Is the Senator aware

the very same arms merchant,

Rosoboronexport, has also been documented

selling weapons to Iran and

Venezuela? As a matter of fact, according

to one published report, as late as

2005, Rosoboronexport sold Iran 29 Tor-

M1 anti-air missile systems worth $700

million. And Iran’s Revolutionary

Guard Corps successfully tested this

anti-air missile system in 2007. It is

also reported that in 2012, Russia will

deliver T–72 tanks, BMP3 infantry

fighting vehicles, and BTR–80A armored

personnel carriers to Venezuela—

just at our back yard in South

America. Also, in the last 5 years in

Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, a dictator

with strong ties to Cuba and Fidel Castro,

bought $11 billion worth of arms

through Rosoboronexport.

I wonder if the Senator finds that

surprising or alarming. Mr. President, I would

also ask the distinguished majority

whip whether he is aware of the testimony

within the last couple of weeks

before the Armed Services Committee

of Secretary Panetta and the Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The testimony

focused a lot of attention on

Iran, the principal state sponsor of

international terrorism in the world

today, and its destabilizing influence in

the Middle East. Iran is seeking, as

they are, a nuclear weapon which

would at the very least create a nuclear

arms race in the Middle East and

a consequential destabilizing effect in

that region.

I know the Senator is aware that

Syria is one of the principal proxies for

Iran. General Dempsey and Secretary

Panetta both said if Syria were to go

by the wayside, as various other countries

have in the Arab spring, that it

would be a serious blow to Iran’s aspirations

for hegemony in the Middle

East and something that is dangerous

to the peace and stability of that important

region. I know the Senator is

aware of the close relationship between

Syria and Iran, and I wonder if the

Senator cares to comment on that connection. Mr. President, I know

there are other Senators and signatories

of this letter who may well be

coming to the floor to talk more about

this issue, but I wish to express my

gratitude to Senator DURBIN. It is important

that the United States speak

out on behalf of people who have no

real voice in defense of their most

basic human rights. I would point out

that President Asad and his regime are

not only killing innocent civilians, but

also are being supplied by Russia, who

also—maybe not coincidentally—vetoed

the sanctions the U.N. was considering

with regard to Iran.

So it is very important that we not

only speak up on behalf of the people

who have no voice and no defense, but

also make sure the U.S. Government,

at a very minimum, isn’t doing business

with the very same arms merchants

that are supplying weapons to

President Asad with which to kill innocent

Syrians.

I am advised that Senator AYOTTE

was planning on coming. She is a signatory

to this letter and a member of

the Armed Services Committee who

shares many of these same concerns.

However, she is not going to be able to

come at this time. I am sure she will be

coming to speak on this later.

So with that, I yield the floor, and I

thank my colleague.