I thank the Chair.

Madam President, it is coincidental,

but my remarks follow in a logical

path from those of my colleague and

friend from Texas, particularly with regard

to the thoughtful questions he

raised about Syria.

I have come to the floor to speak

about the historic and extraordinary

events that are taking place in Syria

where, for the past 3 weeks, the Syrian

people have been peacefully and courageously

taking to the streets of their

cities. I wish to talk particularly about

what may happen in Syria over the

next 24 hours.

What is happening, of course, in

Syria is part of a broader story that is

unfolding across the Middle East—a

democratic awakening in which millions

of ordinary people are rising up

against corrupt autocratic regimes

that have ruled the region and suppressed

these people for decades. But

the strategic stakes in Syria are

among the highest anywhere in the region.

In fact, I would say what happens

in Syria in the coming days will have

far-reaching consequences for the future

of the Middle East and for our national

security here in the United

States.

The uprising in Syria began, like

those in Tunisia and Egypt, spontaneously

and unexpectedly. It rose from

the people, not from outside. It began

in the city of Dara’a, in southern Syria

near the Jordanian border, after the

Assad regime arrested a group of

schoolchildren there. When the citizens

of Dara’a began peacefully assembling

to protest this absurd act of repression,

the police responded by firing live ammunition

into the crowd. Rather than

being intimidated by this violence,

however, the protest movement persisted

and spread.

Although the Assad regime was trying

desperately to prevent accurate information

about what is happening inside

Syria from reaching the rest of the

world, it is clear that people in many

cities around the country are now in

open revolt against the Assad regime.

From Latakia, to Aleppo, and from the

Kurdish northeast to the villages along

the Mediterranean coastline, more and

more Syrians from diverse backgrounds

are rising up and demanding

their freedom.

What exactly are they asking for? It

is the same basic demands we hear

throughout the region, and they are

very familiar—they should be—to the

American people, because they are the

very demands that energized and motivated

our rebellion and the American

Revolution and the founding documents

of our country. The people of

Syria want greater political freedom

and they want economic opportunity.

They want into the modern world.

They want to be treated with respect

by their government, and they want an

end to the culture of corruption and

impunity that surrounds the Assad regime.

How has Bashar al Assad reacted to

these legitimate grievances? The answer

is he has responded not by offering

reform but by unleashing what

President Obama has rightly characterized

as abhorrent violence and repression

against the Syrian people. He

has responded with thugs and militias

who have attacked peaceful protestors.

He has responded by spouting conspiracy

theories rather than loosening

his autocratic grip. And as we know

now, he has responded by calling on his

allies, his patrons in Teheran, to help

him crush the demonstrations by the

Syrian people, just as the Iranian regime—

the fanatical, extremist, expansionist

regime in Teheran, stamped out

the protests that took place in Teheran

after the June 2009 election.

It is now clear what path Bashar al

Assad is on. Rather than pursuing reform,

he is taking a page from the Qadhafi

model. He is betting that he can

beat his people into submission

through force and that the world will

let him get away with slaughter.

Let’s be very clear what it means if

Bashar succeeds. It will send a most

perverse but unmistakable message

that leaders such as Mubarak and Ben

Ali in Egypt and Tunisia respectively

and who are allied with the United

States get overthrown, but leaders

such as Assad, who are allied with Iran,

survive. Is that a message we want to

send?

What about tomorrow? Why do I

focus on the next 24 hours? Tomorrow

is likely to be a critical day for the future

of Syria as protestors come together

after Friday’s prayers. There is

a significant danger that it will also

become a very bloody day if Assad continues

on the path of violence and brutality

against his own people.

This is, therefore, an urgent moment

for American leadership, at least for

America’s voice to be heard. It is important

for President Assad in Damascus

to know today, before the protests

that are likely to take place throughout

Syria tomorrow, that his regime

will be held accountable for its actions.

I hope we will be prepared to act

quickly together with the world community

if Assad fails to heed the will of

the Syrian people and tries to hang on

to power through repression and murder.

What can we do? Well, to begin with,

we can impose tough and targeted

sanctions on the Syrian officials responsible

for the human rights abuses

that are being perpetrated against

their own people. We can also work

with our allies to summon a special

session of the U.N. Human Rights

Council in Geneva, just as we did in the

case of Libya, and we can refer Assad’s

regime to the international criminal

court, just as we did with Qadhafi.

We should also embrace the Syrian

opposition, the freedom fighters. I hope

senior American officials will meet

with prominent Syrian dissidents who

are here in Washington now. I also urge

the administration to speak out clearly

in support of the Syrian people who deserve

praise for their courage as they

risk their lives for freedom and human

rights. They must know that the

United States, still the beacon of liberty

in the world, stands on their side.

In the face of attacks by the Syrian regime,

Syrian protesters have remained

remarkably peaceful, as the protesters

in Tunisia and Egypt before them did.

In the face of sectarian provocations by

Assad, the people of Syria who are protesting

have remained together, unified,

giving a message of national

unity.

I know some have suggested that we

should hesitate before throwing our

support to the Syrian opposition, to

the Syrian people as they rise up, and

this argument goes like this: Bashar al

Assad is the devil we know. We don’t

know what might replace him if he

fails. But we know enough about

Bashar al Assad to know, and we know

enough about the opposition to know

that it cannot be worse than Assad and

will be much better.

The arguments that we should wait

and see are, in my opinion, moral and

strategic nonsense when we look at the

record of Assad. He is Iran’s most important

Arab ally and, in some senses,

Iran’s only real ally and the strategic

linchpin between Iran and its terrorist

proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah, whom

he sustains with financial and military

support. Assad is responsible for a terrible

campaign, long standing, of intimidation

and destabilization of Lebanon,

and the blood of Lebanese leaders—

too many of them—is on his

hands, including that of the great Lebanese

leader Rafik Hariri.

As Senator CORNYN said, Assad also

has the blood of countless American

soldiers on his hands, having allowed

Syria to be used for years by foreign

extremist fighters affiliated with al-

Qaida and their ilk to head to Iraq to

attack and kill Americans and Iraqis.

Finally, let’s not forget Syria’s illegal

nuclear activities. This is a regime

that tried to build a secret nuclear reactor.

They did so with help from

North Korea. This is a regime that continues

to refuse to cooperate with the

International Atomic Energy Agency

in its investigation of Syria’s illegal

nuclear activities.

The plain fact is that Bashar al

Assad is not a reformer, he is a dictator.

He runs a totalitarian regime

that has long been one of the worst in

the Middle East.

This is a regime that has repressed,

intimidated, and, in fact, tortured and

slaughtered Syrian people. It is a regime

that is deeply corrupt, and it is a

regime that has been a menace to its

neighbors and to the cause of peace

throughout the region.

We now have an opportunity—and I

say a responsibility—to support freedom

for the Syrian people as they seek

a better future for themselves. It would

be a shame if they and we lost this opportunity

for the Arab spring to come

to Syria. I hope, together with our allies,

we will seize this moment and

stand in solidarity with the people in

Syria who are fighting for the fundamental

values on which our own country

was built: freedom and opportunity.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence

of a quorum.