Mr. President, as we

prepare to head out for the August recess,

I have returned to the floor today

to speak, once again, about the horrific

and worsening situation in Syria—a

conflict that, we learned this week, has

now claimed 100,000 lives.

I would like to take a few minutes to

read from a remarkable statement that

was delivered on Monday by Mr. Paulo

Pinheiro, the chair of the United Nations

Independent International Commission

of Inquiry on Syria. The excerpts

I wish to read are long, but they

are shocking, and worth quoting in

full.

Here is the assessment Mr. Pinheiro

gave to the U.N., and I quote:

Mr. Pinheiro concludes with this

powerful plea for action:

Again, this is not my assessment; it

is that of a senior United Nations leader.

And I applaud Mr. Pinheiro for his

moral leadership on behalf of the Syrian

people. At the same time, I say

with the utmost respect that I disagree

with Mr. Pinheiro’s counsel for what is

required to achieve the goal we share,

which is to create conditions that favor

a negotiated end to the conflict in

Syria. I continue to believe that, while

there is not a purely military solution

to the conflict in Syria, I find it difficult

to avoid the conclusion that

military intervention by the United

States and our allies must be a critical

part of the solution we seek. Indeed it

is unrealistic to think we can arrive at

a diplomatic solution otherwise.

Let’s be absolutely clear about the

realities in Syria today and where this

conflict is headed. Asad is never going

to negotiate himself out of power or

seek to end the conflict diplomatically

so long as he believes he is winning on

the battlefield, and right now, he clearly

has the advantage on the ground.

This is thanks, in critical part, to his

air power, which not only allows Asad

to pound opposition military positions

and civilian populations—including

with chemical weapons, which nearly

everyone believes he has used and will

use again—but also to move his troops

and supplies around the battlefield in

ways that he cannot do on the ground.

Asad’s growing military advantage is

also thanks to the influx of thousands

of Hezbollah fighters who are leading

offensives in key parts of the country,

Iranian special forces who are training

and advising Asad’s troops and private

militias, Shia militants from Iraq and

Lebanon, as well as a steady and decisive

flow of weapons and other assistance

from Iran and Russia, which is

being brought into Syria with impunity,

including through overflights of

Iraq.

The consequences of this onslaught

for Syria are bad enough. The strategically

vital city of Homs is expected to

fall imminently, which would be a

major victory for Asad that would

strengthen his position immeasurably.

The consequences for the region, however,

are arguably worse. Syria’s main

export today is its civilian population,

which is flooding into Turkey, Lebanon,

and Jordan, by the hundreds of

thousands. Indeed, 15 percent of Jordan’s

population is now Syrian refugees,

and the fourth largest city in the

country is now a Syria refugee camp.

At the same time, Syria’s primary

import today seems to be foreign extremists

from all across the region and

indeed the world. It is well known from

estimates in published reports that as

many as several thousand people from

all across the Middle East have moved

into Syria to fight with Al Qaeda and

other extremist groups. But, in addition,

the New York Times reported this

week that Western counterterrorism

and intelligence officials now believe

that hundreds of Muslims from Western

countries have joined the fight in

Syria, including 140 French, 75 Spaniards,

60 Germans, a few dozen Canadians

and Australians, as well as fighters

from Austria, Belgium, Denmark,

Finland, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Sweden,

and the Netherlands. As many as a

dozen Americans are believed to be

among them. It is difficult to conclude

that Al Qaeda does not enjoy safe

haven in Syria today, and no one

should believe that it won’t be used

eventually to launch attacks against

us.

Make no mistake, this is where we

are headed. Syria is becoming a failed

state in the heart of the Middle East

and a safe haven for Al Qaeda and its

allies. It is becoming a regional and

sectarian conflict that threatens the

national security interests of the

United States. And it is becoming the

decisive battleground on which Iran

and its allies are defying the United

States and our allies and prevailing in

a test of wills, which is fundamentally

undermining America’s credibility

among both our friends and enemies

throughout the region and the world.

Some may see this as an acceptable

outcome. I do not.

I know Americans are war weary. I

know the situation in Syria is complex,

and there are no easy answers. That

said, all of us must ask ourselves one

basic question: Are the costs, and

risks, and potential benefits associated

with our current course of action better

or worse than those associated with

America becoming more involved militarily

in Syria? I believe our current

course of action is worse, because it

virtually guarantees all of the bad outcomes

that are unfolding before our

eyes and getting worse and worse the

longer this conflict grinds on.

Now, some would have us believe

that military action of even a limited

nature is too cost intensive, too high

risk, and too marginal in its potential

impact in Syria. In a letter dated July

19, 2013, to the chairman of the Armed

Services Committee and myself, the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

GEN Martin Dempsey, described the requirements

to conduct various military

options in Syria. He spoke of scenarios

that would demand hundreds of military

assets and thousands of special

forces to resource military options

that no one is seriously considering.

Now, in my many years, I have seen

a lot of military commanders overstate

what is needed to conduct military action

for one reason or another. But

rarely have I seen an effort as disingenuous

and exaggerated as what General

Dempsey proposed.

The option that many of us have proposed

is limited standoff strikes to degrade

Asad’s air power and ballistic

missile capability. But here is General

Dempsey’s description of what would

be needed to conduct ‘‘limited standoff

strikes’’:

This is a completely disingenuous description

of both the problem and the

solution. No one is seriously talking

about striking Asad’s naval forces as

part of a limited campaign. And no one

seriously thinks that degrading Asad’s

air power would require hundreds of

American military assets. The whole

thing is completely misleading to the

Congress and the American people, and

it is shameful.

For a serious accounting of a realistic

limited military option in Syria, I

would strongly recommend a new study

that is being released today by the Institute

for the Study of War, or ISW,

which was overseen by GEN Jack

Keane, the author of the surge strategy

that enabled us to turn around the war

in Iraq. This new study confirms what

I and many others have long argued:

That it is militarily feasible for the

United States and our friends and allies

to significantly degrade Asad’s air

power at relatively low cost, low risk

to our personnel, and in very short

order—and to do so, I want to stress,

without putting any U.S. boots on the

ground.

Specifically, the ISW study reports

that Asad’s forces are only flying a

maximum of 100 operational strike aircraft

at present, an estimate that ISW

concedes is likely very generous to the

Asad regime. The real figure, they

maintain, is more likely around 50.

What is more, these aircraft are only

being flown out of 6 primary airfields,

with an additional 12 secondary airfields

playing a supporting role. What

this means is that the real-world military

problem of how to significantly

degrade Asad’s air power is very manageable—

again, as I and others have

maintained.

ISW calculates that U.S. and allied

forces could significantly degrade

Asad’s air power using standoff weapons

that would not require one of our

pilots to enter Syrian airspace or confront

one Syrian air defense system.

With a limited number of these precision

strikes against each of Asad’s

eight primary airfields, we could crater

their runways, destroy their fuel and

maintenance capabilities, knock out

key command and control, and destroy

a significant portion of their aircraft

on the ground. The ISW study estimates

that this limited intervention

could be achieved in 1 day and would

involve a total of 3 Navy surface ships

and 24 strike aircraft, each deploying a

limited number of precision-guided munitions—

all fired from outside of Syria,

without ever confronting Syrian air defenses.

This should not come as a surprise.

After all, hitting static targets from a

distance is what the U.S. military does

best. And hitting static targets in

Syria, without ever confronting Syrian

air defenses inside of Syrian airspace,

is something that our Israeli allies now

seem to have done on several occasions.

Surely we can too.

There are other things we should do

in conjunction with targeted strikes

against Asad’s air power. We could expand

the list of targets to include

Asad’s ballistic missiles, as well as key

regime command-and-control sites.

This would be an equally minimal

number of targets that could be hit

with the same standoff weapons. We

should also stand up a far larger trainand-

equip operation than what published

reports suggest has been authorized

to date. What all of the Syrian opposition

leaders have told me their

forces need most of all is antitank

weapons that can destroy Asad’s artillery

and armor, which would remain a

major threat even if we significantly

degrade Asad’s air power. We should

give the Syrian opposition these kinds

of capabilities to level the playing field

themselves.

If we were to do all of these things—

degrade Asad’s air power and ballistic

missiles and train, equip and advise the

opposition on a large scale—it probably

would not end the conflict in Syria immediately.

But it could turn the tide of

battle against Asad’s forces and in

favor of the opposition, and begin to

create conditions on the ground that

could make a negotiated end to the

conflict possible.

We cannot afford to lose the moral

dimension from our foreign policy. If

ever a case should remind us of this, it

is Syria. Leon Wieseltier captured this

point powerfully in The New Republic

last month. His words are as true today

as they were then, and I quote:

We have had these debates before. In

Bosnia, and later in Kosovo, we heard

many arguments against military

intervention that we now hear about

Syria. It was said that there was no

international consensus for action,

that the situation on the ground was

messy and confused, that it was not

clear who we would actually be helping,

and that our involvement could actually

make matters worse. Fortunately,

we had a President who led—

who explained to the American people

what the stakes were in the Balkans,

and why we needed to rise to the role

that only America could play. Here is

how President Bill Clinton described

Bosnia in 1995:

Nearly two decades ago, I worked

with both my Democratic and Republican

colleagues in Congress to support

President Clinton as he led America to

do the right thing in stopping mass

atrocities in Bosnia. The question for

another President today, and for all of

my colleagues in this body, indeed for

all Americans, is whether we will once

again answer the desperate pleas for

rescue that are made uniquely to us, as

the United States of America.