

The Security Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic – Implications for U.S. National Security and U.S. Policy Options

Prepared statement by

Elliott Abrams

Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies

Council on Foreign Relations

Before the

House Armed Services Committee

United States House of Representatives

1st Session, 113th Congress

Hearing on The Security Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic – Implications for U.S. National Security and U.S. Policy Options

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this invitation to appear before you to discuss the situation in Syria and how it affects U.S. national interests. For today's hearing, I will not dwell on past errors in U.S. policy that have led to the dire situation we now face. We can debate them, but we are where we are today.

In Syria today we see an Iranian expeditionary force, bolstered by an estimated 2,000 troops from Iran's ally Hezbollah and armed by Russia, seeking to crush a popular rebellion. Syria is 75 percent Sunni, so the Alawite Assad regime and its Shia supporters in Tehran and Lebanon will never win the support of the Syrian people to rule that country. The only hope for Iran, Hezbollah, and Assad is to kill enough rebel fighters and civilians to end the uprising. At this point they have killed an estimated 100,000 people and done immeasurable damage to Syria's economy and infrastructure—and they will keep on killing and destroying.

We and many other countries are addressing this humanitarian disaster through various forms of aid to United Nations bodies and other groups. But the question our country faces is whether to do more—whether to support the rebels or to use military force ourselves. In my view the answer to both questions is yes, because an Iranian victory in Syria would be a great blow to American interests.

The continuation of this conflict is itself a threat to U.S. interests and allies. For example, there are already roughly a half-million Syrian refugees in Jordan, and that number is rising steadily. Jordan does not have the resources—the money, but also other resources such as water—to sustain that number, and it could easily soon be 600,000, 700,000 and even at some point a million. This strain threatens the economy of Jordan and its security. The Kingdom of Jordan is one of our key allies in the Middle East and stability there should be a prime concern of ours.

As the conflict continues and more and more jihadis arrive in Syria, we must also wonder about their role tomorrow in Lebanon and along the Syrian-Israeli border. Their growing presence in the area is another serious threat.

But worse yet for us would be our defeat by Iran—and that is exactly how it would be seen. On one side, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia support Assad; on the other, the United States, EU, and our Sunni Arab friends from the Gulf support the rebels. Does it matter who wins? Yes—because around the world but especially in the Middle East allies and enemies will judge the power, influence, and willpower of the United States and our friends by the outcome of this conflict.

Should we prevail and the Assad regime be replaced by a Sunni regime oriented toward Syria's Sunni neighbors, this will be a huge defeat for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Involvement in Syria is already arousing discontent among Lebanon's populace, including Shia who wonder why their sons are dying for Bashar al-Assad, and a defeat in Syria will undermine Hezbollah inside Lebanon. Its power has been rising there for decades; now, a turning point might be reached and it might start declining. Given Hezbollah's global reach as a terrorist group, that's very much in our interest.

Similarly and even more importantly, the rise of Iranian power in the region would be seen to have been stopped if the Assad regime falls. Iran's influence has also been viewed as growing steadily—partly due to the demise of a hostile Sunni regime in Iraq (at America's hands) and to growing Iranian influence there; partly to Iran's perceived role in places like Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province; partly to Iran's steadily advancing nuclear program; and partly to the sense that America, the overwhelming power in the Middle East since World War II, lacked the desire or ability to stop Iran. If we defeat Iran in Syria, all this is changed and what King Abdullah of Jordan once called the "Shia crescent" stops being cemented.

Remember that Iran's only Arab ally is Syria, which also provides it with Mediterranean ports and a land bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon—and through Hezbollah, Iran gets a border with Israel. This all changes if Assad falls.

Conversely, what happens if we decide the game in Syria is not worth the fight, and the war goes on until Assad more or less crushes the rebellion? Many more refugees, threatening stability in Jordan and Lebanon. Iranian ascendancy, strengthening Hezbollah inside Lebanon and Iran throughout the Middle East. An emboldened Iran, seeing a lack of American desire to confront it, is logically more likely to become more aggressive in Bahrain, the home of our Fifth Fleet, in Saudi Arabia's heavily Shia Eastern Province, and in its own nuclear program. Surely a display of American lack of will power in Syria will persuade many Iranian officials that while we may say "all options are on the table," in reality they are not—so Iran can proceed happily and safely toward a nuclear weapon.

So what should we do, to prevent an Iranian and Hezbollah and Russian victory over our side, the United States, European allies, and our Sunni allies?

First, we waited far too long to provide military help to the rebels, a view that I share with former Secretary of State Clinton and former Secretary of Defense Gates. You will recall news reports that they called for such aid in internal administration discussions last summer—a year ago. I am not privy to the exact level and composition of aid being given today, but I hope it is not too little too late, and we do know that it is very late. One reason this war in Syria has gone on so long, and seen so many reverses for the rebels, is that Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have been more dedicated and generous to their side than we have to ours. We and our allies should step up the flow of weaponry, and do that fast.

I am well aware that many will say we have no “side” in this conflict, especially because thousands of opponents of the Assad regime are jihadis. To me, that is all the more reason to assist and strengthen those rebels who are Syrians and who are not jihadis, not only to win this war faster but to give them the upper hand when the war is over and a new government must be formed.

According to news reports, the aid promised by the Obama administration several weeks ago has not moved; the rebels have gotten nothing. In part this is said to be due to concerns about proper vetting of potential recipients. It’s impossible for me to judge who has the better of that argument, but I find it difficult to believe that our intelligence agencies are completely incapable of distinguishing among the groups. And as to arms getting into the wrong hands, well, they are today almost entirely in the wrong hands. We need to act if we would like to see some of them in the right hands.

Second, I do not favor a no-fly zone. That seems to me to be a long-term commitment of military resources, day after day after day, and we know from the Iraq experience how difficult that can be. Instead, I favor a one-time strike at Assad’s air assets and air bases. We know that the use of air power, fixed wing and helicopter, has been a huge advantage for the regime in its struggle to survive and prevail. If we eliminate or greatly weaken Assad’s ability to use air power, we will tilt the battlefields toward the rebels—militarily, politically, and psychologically. According to news reports, in taking this position I ally myself with Secretary of State Kerry who also favors it.

I would add that the House and Senate intelligence committees are said to have a second doubt about supplying some weapons to the rebels, which is that alone this action would have too little impact. It would not much change and certainly not transform the situation on the ground, some members are said to argue. I agree with that argument, and that is another reason why I favor both aid to the rebels and a strike at Assad air assets.

The first objection to such a strike is practical: too dangerous, we are often told, given Assad’s impregnable air defenses. General Dempsey was reported to have said to Secretary Kerry that we would need 700 air sorties to take down Syria’s air defenses. This strikes me as absurd, frankly, and my response is “tell that to the Israelis.” They have three times, that I know of, struck inside Syria. How is it possible that they can do it and we—who have stealth technology they lack, and far stronger forces in the Sixth Fleet and nearby bases—cannot? The Israelis did not enter Syrian air space, apparently using air to ground missiles. Can we not do this, in addition to using sea-based cruise missiles? My own conversations with military officers suggests that we can. We would not, this way, eliminate all of Assad’s air power, every base, every aircraft—but we would eliminate the bulk of it. So we should.

The second objection is that we cannot act without a UN Security Council resolution. Obviously we will not get one, given Russia’s support for Assad. The Committee may take that view, but it has not always been the American view. President Obama’s ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, wrote this analysis of the change in Clinton administration thinking about intervention in Bosnia in 1995:

Why was the summer of 1995 any different? Why the emergence of a firm consensus on a concerted strategy now when it had eluded the Clinton administration for over two years? The answer, in part, lies in the horrors witnessed by Srebrenica—a sense that this time the Bosnian Serbs had gone too far. That certainly proved to be the case in the Pentagon, where Defense Secretary William Perry and JCS Chairman John Shalikashvili took the lead in pushing for the kind of vigorous air campaign that was finally agreed to in London. The real reason, however, was the palpable sense that Bosnia was the cancer eating away at American foreign policy, in the words of Anthony Lake, Clinton's national security adviser. U.S. credibility abroad was being undermined perceptibly by what was happening in Bosnia, and by the America's and NATO's failure to end it. [“Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended,” by Ivo H. Daalder, Brookings, December 1998, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/1998/12/balkans-daalder>].

I would suggest to you that we are in a similar situation, with American credibility being undermined and our inaction in Syria in the face of the Iranian, Hezbollah, and Russian challenge “eating away at American foreign policy.” And of course, the Clinton administration finally decided to act in Kosovo in 1998, under the NATO umbrella, without a UN resolution. If we conclude that the humanitarian and national security justifications for action are sufficient, I would urge that we not be stymied from acting by the interests of Mr. Putin’s Russia.

Mr. Chairman, these comments no doubt give rise to many questions and I look forward to discussing them with members of the Committee. I am grateful to you for inviting me today and for holding this hearing on the very grave situation in Syria.