

**Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle  
East and North Africa**

***“BAD OPTIONS AND HARD CHOICES  
IN SYRIA POLICY”***

A Statement by

**Dr. Jon B. Alterman**

Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy &

Director, Middle East Program

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

**June 5, 2013**

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

Madame Chair, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members:

It is an honor and a pleasure to appear before the subcommittee once again, this time to talk about U.S. policy toward Syria. The ongoing humanitarian crisis is heart-rending, and the ongoing political struggle is engrossing. Yet, both sometimes distract from the very real stakes for the United States in Syria, and the likelihood that what happens in Syria will prove of strategic importance to the United States and will have a profound impact on U.S. interests throughout the Middle East.

It is hard for anyone to look at Syria and be satisfied, least of all U.S. government officials.

- The ongoing bloodletting in Syria is a tragedy to all who seek peace and security. As a country that has sacrificed blood and treasure to improve others' lives across the globe, it is difficult for Americans to watch the devastation unfolding.
- The cooperation between the Syrian government, the government of Iran, and proxies such as Hezbollah harms U.S. interests. Their actions together help them coordinate their efforts, build networks for future cooperation, and give more battlefield experience to a range of malign actors.
- The resurgence of jihadi groups on the back of the Syrian insurgency not only threatens the future of Syria, but also threatens the lands from which the fighters have come—which extends to Western Europe and even China. While jihadis in no way own the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, they have grown and profited from it, and a reinvigorated jihadi movement may be the most enduring residue of it.
- Syria's neighbors are already groaning under the price of the war for their ailing economies and fragile populations, and many more refugees may come. Jordan and Lebanon in particular are small countries already hosting large refugee populations from earlier regional conflicts, and the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees stresses everything from utilities to basic employment.

There is an important difference, however, between being dissatisfied with conditions in Syria and terming U.S. policy a failure. There is an even bigger difference between being dissatisfied with our current policy and implementing one that will work better. As we discovered all too well in Iraq, not all alternatives to a troubled policy are an improvement. Indeed, from the George H.W. Bush policy of engagement with Iraq in the late 1980s to a policy of coercive diplomacy in the 1990s to a policy of invasion and reconstruction in the 2000s, we have seen several decades of U.S. policies that have failed to meet even modest expectations set for them. Iraq is a reminder of our limited ability to shape outcomes in complex and polarized situations, and a reminder that the quality of outcomes sometimes has only a distant relationship to the level of effort put into them.

Six years ago, the full Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing with a somewhat more sober title than the present hearing, entitled, "Iraq: Is the Escalation Working?" Madame Chair, at that hearing you quite correctly said, "Before writing off Iraq as lost, we must ask ourselves what alternative policy is there, and what are the consequences for the safety of our troops and for the United States strategic interests of predetermining defeat." I agree, and it is the constructive spirit that you brought to the task six years ago that I would like to bring to the table today.

As you suggested at the time, the proper measure of a policy is the prospect of its alternatives. In order to judge that, one must first decide one's interests that the policy is seeking to preserve, and the tools at hand to protect those interests.

To me, the starting point is that Syria is strategically important because of its effects on its neighbors and its neighborhood. By both geography and design Syria is a hub state, with influence that reaches into the Levant, into the Gulf, and into the Caucasus and Central Asia. Most worryingly for the United States, all five of Syria's neighbors are important to the United States. One is Israel, with which the current government of Syria has reached a tacit understanding but which would face escalating threats if a genuinely hostile government—or no government—were to arise in Syria. A second is Jordan, a steadfast ally of the United States, facing a dismal economy and already reeling from influxes of Iraqis and Libyans from previous conflicts, who added to what is probably a majority Palestinian population that fled Israeli rule in 1948 and 1967. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled to Jordan in the last two years, adding to several hundred thousand Syrians already in the country. A third is Lebanon, a fragile state of eighteen distinct religious groups and no majority. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled there, too, and sectarian violence threatens to disrupt Lebanon's delicate balance. Fourth is Iraq, whose memory of a jihadi insurgency in Anbar—which borders Syria—is still fresh, and which fears that a renewed jihadism in Syria will spread back into Iraq across the border. Fifth is Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States that has also accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees, and which fears for the stability of its already restive southeastern region.

Preserving Syria's neighbors' security is no easy undertaking, and it takes more than money. It will take training, intelligence, and technical assistance to governments, and investment, education and infrastructure support to populations on the other. While the United States is the largest contributor to humanitarian assistance to Syrians, I worry that we see things too programmatically and insufficiently holistically. The holistic picture is especially important in the wake of Arab uprisings, with our enhanced awareness of the fragility of the status quo. I understand that budget authority is necessary to preserve U.S. interests, but it is not sufficient. As a government and as a nation, we need to do a better job understanding how these governments work and how their stability can be preserved.

The second aspect that needs attention is the rise of jihadi groups in Syria, who feed on the conflict to recruit worldwide. As we know from our successes battling al-

Qaeda, fighting jihadism requires a multi-pronged effort that combines law enforcement and intelligence, but perhaps with the largest role reserved for friendly governments. It is here that some of the most important work needs to be done—in law enforcement, in intelligence cooperation, and in delegitimizing the jihadi cause. In point of fact, an overwhelming majority of the jihadi fighters coming into Syria come from friendly countries. Further, almost all of the external funding for the jihadi fighters comes from friendly countries, and sometimes directly from friendly governments.

Because this task necessarily involves intelligence, I am unsure exactly what the U.S. government has already done to stem the flow of jihadi fighters into Syria and to block the funding going to jihadi groups in the country. I would argue, however, that the rise of a jihadi block in Syria is not merely a troubling matter but a threatening one. I would favor making efforts to stem the spread of jihadism in Syria a core focus of our bilateral relationship with relevant countries, and to hold close bilateral relations at risk if good faith efforts are not made. A jihadi core in Syria is far more threatening to U.S. interests than such a core was in Afghanistan, and it should be intolerable to U.S. officials that U.S. allies acquiesce, let alone abet, the growth of such a movement in Syria.

The third aspect is the malign efforts of Iran, Russia and others to shape a status quo deeply unfavorable to U.S. interests. This ranges from boosting the power of anti-American groups around the region to destabilizing friendly governments. Syria is a clear conduit for Iranian influence—while not being the only one—and part of the importance of Syria for Iran is to stave off Iranian isolation and to give it tools to affect other countries in the region. While some of this is intended to be defensive, it is in the interest of the United States to thwart these efforts.

There are a number of proposals floating around for how a different U.S. policy might lead to different outcomes than we have had, but I am not persuaded that their results would necessarily be better than our results have been thus far, or that they wouldn't cause grave harm to U.S. interests. The most obvious of these is to arm the opposition heavily. In my own lifetime, I have seen foreign-funded insurgencies go on for many years, and their outcomes have been quite mixed, if not even negative. There is a seductive argument to be made that people are loyal to those who armed them, but as I look at examples from Iraq to Afghanistan and beyond, it's hard to see much evidence that the loyalty is anything but transient. What we have seen in many of these cases is that the weapons go missing or are sold, and local political agendas quickly replace any ties of gratitude or loyalty to the United States. That is to say, the weapons last decades longer than any presumed ties of obligation.

There are other arguments for a vigorous U.S. military presence to guarantee the safety of Syrian civilians and to disable troops carrying out attacks on them. I am skeptical that we can fight a limited war in this environment. Further, I am concerned that we would be entering into an open-ended and ultimately growing

military commitment at a time when our military is seeking to redefine its global priorities to meet the budget that Congress and the American people are willing to commit to the military. People talk loosely about a “no-fly zone,” but in fact the term is so broad in terms of commitments and rules of engagement as not to be meaningful.

I fear that much of the talk of a no-fly zone stems from the perception that it represents a low-cost way to wage war. One danger of a no-fly zone is that it could in fact broaden the conflict, unleashing a war on the region that has no borders. Because of Iran’s relative weakness in conventional forces and strength in unconventional forces, it is hard to imagine another kind of response. Such an outcome would likely lead us to a conventional war with Iran, but not one that would guarantee a favorable long-term outcome any more than our war in Iraq has done.

One could talk about recognizing the Syrian opposition and treating it as a government in exile, which would provide benefits to the opposition and free the hands of those who seek greater force to attack Assad. In essence, this approach would make the opposition into the sitting government and Assad’s forces into the insurgents. The prospect is attractive because it could dramatically alter the legal framework governing the world’s interaction with Syria. Yet, the Syrian opposition is far from constituting a single government. The opposition has been riven by tensions—both between outside groups with different donors, and between those inside Syria and those outside. The paucity of donor coordination has made this problem worse, and there are few signs it is getting better. The prospects of recognition and greater aid flows would actually exacerbate the opposition’s dysfunction, because it would abruptly raise the stakes for competing factions while compressing the timeframe in which they would seek to compete. The winners are unlikely to be those seeking a more moderate Syria.

Instead of the more ambitious gestures outlined here, I would propose a more modest course of action that is largely consistent with administration policy but represents some tweaks to it.

- **Safe havens.** I share the American public’s caution about committing troops to Syria, and I fear that we could be drawn into actions that we neither intend nor desire. However, the first point I made above, about the fragility of neighboring states straining under the flow of refugees, needs attention. I am not sure how to stem the refugee flow without providing some greater security for civilian populations in harm’s way, and for that reason we should look at creating and enforcing havens inside Syria that can provide refuge without population displacement. The key to the success of such an effort is to ensure that U.S. and allied objectives are limited, and that the safe havens remain genuine refuges rather than protected guerrilla bases. At least initially, this may create conflict with rebel groups, who are likely to seek to use the havens for their own advantage. Our interest in creating the bases

- should be to protect civilian populations on both sides of Syria's borders rather than winning Syria's civil war.
- **Weapons.** I also see wisdom in providing limited weapons for self-defense, with the desire of helping civilians protect their homes rather than with a hope that weapons can tip the balance of the war.
  - **Diplomacy.** While reports suggest that the U.S. government has been pursuing diplomacy with friends and foes alike, from the outside it looks to me like there is too much "agreeing to disagree." With many of our Gulf Cooperation Council allies, reports of support for jihadi groups are numerous, persistent, and deeply troubling. While we cannot care about everything, we should care deeply about this, and also make clear that it affects the core of our relationship. In our negotiations with Russia, we need to be more creative finding outcomes that we find more congenial than the Russians do, and we need to be willing to pursue them unilaterally if we cannot get Russian support for a joint alternative.
  - **Intelligence.** Jihadi networks are notoriously hard to penetrate, but networks' need to recruit new fighters provides opportunities for friendly intelligence services to infiltrate these movements. While we need to try to weaken these movements in the future, understanding how they work and why is an opportunity we should seize now. We should also look for ways to share our intelligence with carefully vetting fighting groups, in order to help compensate for the superior aerial coverage that the Assad government and its allies are gaining from a stepped up drone effort.
  - **Settlement.** Odious as the Assad regime is, there should be little question that even more odious characters lurk elsewhere in Syria. A settlement that arises from a negotiated transfer of power stands a far greater chance of improving Syrians' lives than building from the ashes of even deeper sectarian killings and ethnic cleansing. A massive wave of post-Assad killing would put an even greater strain on neighboring states and further radicalize the remaining population on both sides.

Pursuing the course of action outlined here will not eliminate Bashar al-Assad anytime soon, nor will it strip his government of power. It will not liberate millions of refugees from their misery, or spare millions more from conflict. It may even, in the short term, mean that the killing in Syria will continue.

I suggest this path not because it is the perfect one, but because it seems to me to be the best out of a series of bad choices. We clearly could dislodge Bashar al-Assad with enough time, money and lives, but it is unclear we want to pay that price, or how we might shape the aftermath.

There is no simple solution to the problem of Syria, and even with the commitment of much greater funds, the battle is likely to last for many more years. When I worked on the Hill myself, the U.S. government supported decade-long insurgencies in Afghanistan and Nicaragua, and helped defend the government of El Salvador in its own decade of war. Regardless of what happens to Bashar tomorrow, the

problems of Syria will be with us for years to come. This is a wicked problem with no clearly positive outcome in sight, and embracing ambitious goals is far more likely to cause us to conclude that our policies are failing than to lead us toward success.

We all have hopes for Syria, and I'd argue that sentiment in the United States is relatively unified as to what a positive outcome in Syria would look like. Yet, rather than focus on our hopes, we must focus on our needs. We must pursue a policy that meets those needs for Syria while being attendant to the other demands placed on our military and our government. Our interests call for focus, and not ambition.