

WRITTEN STATEMENT
FREDERIC HOF,
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR REGIONAL AFFAIRS,
OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND
SOUTH ASIA

“U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE EVOLVING SITUATION IN SYRIA”

December 14, 2011

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Ackerman, Distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the evolving situation in Syria and the prospects for a successful transition to legitimate, democratic governance.

In March of this year Bashar al-Assad abrogated, in a practical if not legal sense, his responsibilities to the Syrian people. By unleashing uniformed security forces and armed gangs against citizens seeking peaceful political change, his regime wrote and signed its own political obituary. In a desperate attempt to preserve itself, his regime is willing to sacrifice the safety of the Syrian people, the unity of the Syrian nation, the institutions of the Syrian state and the stability of the region.

The last six weeks have seen the Syrian regime sink to an unprecedented level of regional and international isolation. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership and, for the first time in the organization's history, imposed comprehensive sanctions against the regime. Turkey suspended strategic cooperation with Syria, adopted tough trade and financial measures, and joined the United States and Europe in calling for Assad to step down. The UN Human Rights Council held its third special session on Syria, drawing the largest number of co-sponsors of any session since the Human Rights Council was created, and passed a resolution strongly condemning the ongoing abuse of Syrian civilians. The message of these developments is clear: the regime's crimes will not be tolerated by the Syrian people or the international community.

Meanwhile, the United States and the European Union expanded our already crippling sanctions, designating more individuals and entities that

have aided or abetted the regime's human rights abuses and repression of the Syrian people. We are working with our international partners to identify and freeze regime assets while taking diplomatic action to ensure that third parties do not help the regime to evade our sanctions. These efforts are working. The regime is in dire financial straits and has angered its few remaining supporters with misguided attempts at economic protectionism. The regime's money is running out, but if given the choice the regime may well elect to hang on, reduced to presiding over a Levantine North Korea.

We are determined not to let this happen. While the regime's situation grows ever-more desperate, Assad himself seems increasingly disconnected from reality. During his recent interview with Barbara Walters, he challenged her to provide evidence of his regime's brutality, yet he will not allow international press or monitors into Syria. He said that he enjoys overwhelming popular support, yet he prohibits peaceful protest and has rigged elections for over a decade. He said he has never given his security forces orders to shoot civilians, yet he will not order them back to their barracks or prosecute those responsible for abuses.

The last six weeks have been the bloodiest of Syria's revolution. November alone brought over 950 deaths and further evidence of regime brutality, including rape and the targeting of children. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights now estimates more than 5,000 Syrians have been killed since March, including more than 300 children. The independent international Commission of Inquiry (COI)'s November 28 report detailed substantial evidence of gross human rights violations by regime security forces and noted that crimes against humanity may have been committed. Consequently the United States, the Syrian opposition and the international community are making the protection of civilians their top priority.

Syria needs credible witnesses throughout the country that can both document and deter the regime's worst excesses. The regime claims to have accepted an Arab League plan to deploy monitors but continues to bicker with the Arab League to buy time, clinging to the misguided notion that it can kill, beat, and torture its way out of this crisis. The Arab League is having none of it and has responded to these delaying tactics with stiff penalties. We wholeheartedly support the Arab League's efforts and would welcome the full and immediate implementation of its plan. In the event it is not, we and the international community will work with the Arab League to

ensure Syrian civilians are not abandoned to a regime that is willing to spill their blood in a futile effort to save itself.

The international community's duty to the Syrian people transcends power politics. If the regime succeeds in its bloody-minded effort to save itself at Syria's expense, everyone will lose. So we ask those states that have opposed UN efforts to protect Syrian civilians to reconsider. We ask that Russia, China, India and others address some basic questions. Does the regime permit peaceful protest? Does the regime allow the political opposition to organize, discuss and deliberate without fear of assassination or arrest? Does the regime, in accordance with the Arab League plan, allow human rights monitors and the press to deploy without restriction to witness what is happening and report to the world? Does the regime permit the COI to enter Syria and do its internationally-mandated work? These are not difficult questions. We ask those governments that are insulating this regime from the will of Syria's citizenry: do not make innocent civilians pay the price for your political calculations.

The Syrian people have displayed remarkable bravery and persistence in the face of the regime's relentless violence. They have carried Syria's revolution past the point of no return. Peaceful protest will not stop until Assad and his inner circle are gone. Nor will international pressure relent until the violence has ceased and Syrians are afforded the dignity and good governance they deserve. But speed is of the essence. This regime will destroy Syria if given enough time. Already it has made clear its intention to hold hostage Syria's minorities as it tries to hang on. Already it has brutalized peaceful protest to the point where violent resistance becomes inevitable, if profoundly regrettable. The United States continues to urge against violent resistance not because we are naïve, but because we firmly believe the effort to extract this regime from the Syrian state will succeed more quickly and bloodlessly if the revolution remains entirely peaceful.

Syria's political opposition understands this and is working against the clock to preserve the prospects for a peaceful transition. I recently joined the Secretary of State in Geneva for a meeting with senior members of the Syrian National Council (SNC), a leading and legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful, democratic change. Given Syria's only-recent emergence from a 40-plus year political coma, the SNC and broader opposition have made impressive strides, winning the support of Arab, Turkish, European and American leaders. In their meeting with the

Secretary, SNC leaders described their efforts to protect civilians and preserve the Syrian state. First, they are working to counter the regime's divide-and-conquer strategy that cynically seeks to pit Syria's ethnic and religious groups against each other. They are working to include more Christians, Alawis, Kurds and other minorities into the SNC's leadership and making the case that all Syrians will be better off when this regime is gone. The United States agrees with them. Second, they are planning for a peaceful transition and the establishment of legitimate, democratic and pluralistic governance. Third, they are making clear that they seek to salvage the Syrian state and its institutions from the regime's downward spiral. They recognize that the state belongs to its 23 million citizens -- not to one family -- and must be preserved and reformed.

In the end Syria's nightmare will give way to a new era reflecting the enterprise, generosity and unity of the Syrian people. We will not support the replacement of one form of tyranny with another. We share the opposition's vision of a Syria governed by the consent of the governed in accordance with a Syrian formula for democracy. We want citizenship to rule over distinctions of ethnicity, sect and gender. We want a Syria where everyone, from the president to the pupil in school, is protected by and subject to the rule of law. We want a Syria where majority rule is tempered by minority rights. We want a Syria in which the state, to borrow from the words of Turkey's prime minister, is secular and equidistant from all faiths.

It will take time to achieve these results. The terrible costs of delay can be minimized if Assad and his inner circle cede power quickly and quietly, as even their former friends and allies have urged them to do. Those currently trying to serve the Syrian state with dignity and honor should persuade the regime to leave while it can. Upstanding officers, soldiers and officials should be joined by business and religious leaders in demanding that the regime release its grip on Syria. Those who act to protect the Syrian people and state will earn the gratitude of millions of Syrians and will be on the right side of history. By contrast, those who aid or abet the regime's predations should know that they will face certain justice. They must choose between serving Syria and serving a murderous and ultimately doomed criminal enterprise.

In the end we are confident that the number of Syrians willing to stick by Bashar al-Asad and his ruling clique to the bitter end will be few in number. This regime is already part of the past. Syrians and their

international partners are already hard at work building Syria's brighter future.

Thank you. I would be pleased to address your questions.