

**The Honorable Steve Chabot, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

“Confronting Damascus: U.S. Policy toward the Evolving Situation in Syria”

December 14, 2011

The Subcommittee will come to order. Good morning. I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia.

As has been well-documented, the human rights abuses being perpetrated by the regime in Damascus are simply horrifying. The Report of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documents some of the most appalling and widespread human rights abuses that have been witnessed in recent memory. The commission explicitly notes extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual violence, and, perhaps most disturbingly, the abuse and murder of children. Witnesses interviewed by the commission are reported to have witnessed the torture, rape, and murder of children no older than 15 at the hands of the Syrian security forces. “One military defector,” the report noted, “stated that he decided to defect after witnessing the shooting of a 2-year-old girl ... by an officer who affirmed that he did not want her to grow into a demonstrator.”

The English language does not have words strong enough to adequately condemn the horrifying abuses that have been committed by the Assad regime and its allies against the Syrian people. Beyond questions of legitimacy, these despicable acts are proof that the Assad regime is morally depraved and it is my belief that we—and all other responsible nations—have a moral imperative to ensure that Assad and his ilk are removed from power as soon as possible. According to Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the civilian death toll in Syria now “exceeds 5,000 and the number of children killed is more than 300.” No responsible nation can sit by and allow this detestable display of depravity to continue.

Today’s hearing, however, was called to examine U.S. policy. Several months ago, this Subcommittee had the privilege of hearing Assistant Secretaries Feltman and Posner discuss the Obama Administration’s human rights policies towards Iran and Syria. Since that hearing, the Administration has taken a number of steps on Syria for which it deserves credit. Although it took far too much time and at least 1,900 dead Syrian citizens, the Administration has finally come out and called for Bashar al-Assad’s departure from power on August 18. It also implemented sanctions against the Government of Syria and various high-ranking Syrian regime authorities, many of which have been mirrored by our allies abroad.

Unfortunately I fear this is not enough. Syria currently stands on the precipice of full-scale civil war. Recent reports suggest that the ranks of the Free Syrian Army—the main armed opposition—continue to swell, likely fueled by a rise in defections and the intensified violence being perpetrated against the Syrian people by Assad and his band of thugs. As a result, the

number of confrontations between the regime and the armed opposition is on the rise. The longer Assad remains in power, the more likely this conflict is to degenerate into a prolonged conflict that risks splitting the country along ethnic and sectarian lines.

To date, the Administration has strongly discouraged all armed opposition in Syria. In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs, Assistant Secretary Feltman stated that “We do not want to see the situation descend into further violence. The best way forward is to continue support for the non-violent opposition while working with international partners to further isolate and to further pressure the regime. ... While we understand the Syrian people need to protect themselves, violent resistance is counterproductive. It will play into the regime’s hands. It will divide the opposition. It will undermine international consensus.”

This policy of encouraging non-violence in the face of the brutal tactics of the Assad regime grows more untenable by the day. It is not our prerogative to tell the Syrian opposition to eschew armed resistance against the Assad regime when it is that very regime that continues to torture, rape, and murder the very citizens who comprise the opposition’s ranks. It must be pointed out to those who maintain that only non-violent opposition is legitimate that it was the Assad regime and not the opposition which initiated the violence.

The Syrian people—like all people—have the right to defend themselves against the brutality of an illegitimate and repressive regime. Moreover, I challenge any who would defend the Assad regime by declaring that Assad is merely quelling an internal insurrection to show the Syrian people by what free and fair means Bashar al-Assad—or his father—attained and maintain power. This regime has declared war on the Syrian people and the Syrian people have a right to fight back; we must stand with them in this struggle. As helpful as international consensus may be, the outrageous and indefensible veto by Russia and China of a UN Security Council resolution against Syria does not inspire hope that the broader international community will be galvanized to any kind of consensus in time to stave off more death and the outbreak of civil war.

When this uprising began, many in Washington were fond of pointing out that, unlike his father who murdered over 20,000 of his own citizens to quell an uprising, Bashar al-Assad does not have the stomach for such brutality. They were wrong. It is time for us to face the fact that there are no depths to which Assad and his regime will not resort to remain in power and to crush all legitimate opposition. Asking Syrian protestors to remain peaceful in the face of Assad’s brutal crackdown is tantamount to asking them to commit suicide and I fear that doing so may eventually pit us against a legitimate opposition instead of against an illegitimate regime.