

Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

Congressional Remarks

**Introduction:
Ken Schwartz,
Member of the FDD Board**

**Speaker:
Senator Bob Casey (D-PA)**

**Location:
Newseum,
Washington, D.C.**

Date: Thursday, December 6, 2012

*Transcript by
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

KEN SCHWARTZ: (In progress) – to the Foundation for Defense of Democracy’s annual Washington forum. My name is Ken Schwartz; I’m a proud member of the FDD board. Today, I have the pleasure of introducing a distinguished public official, Robert Casey, the senior senator from the state of Pennsylvania. He has served since 2007 as chairman of the Near East and South Asia Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and this only in his first term.

One can scarcely imagine a more interesting or more challenging time to occupy that position. The past two years in the Middle East have seen wars across international borders and within them, the collapse of regimes that had ruled for decades, and the rise of new political movements that may yet turn hostile to the United States and its allies. In the face of these new developments, Senator Casey has led the way on many issues of great concern to FDD. He is the founder and co-chair of the bipartisan Senate Caucus on Weapons of Mass Destruction and Terrorism; in that capacity, he has worked across the partisan divide to highlight the serious threat of weapons of mass proliferation – that weapons of mass proliferation pose.

Few leaders have done as much as Senator Casey to confront Iran, our greatest threat in the Middle East. Senator Casey has often led the way on new legislation to pressure Iran’s leaders to abandon their unlawful nuclear activities and their efforts to destabilize the Middle East. In 2009, Senator Casey authored the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act, authorizing U.S. companies to divest their pension funds from any entities doing business with Iran’s energy sector. In February of this year, Senator Casey authored a bipartisan resolution passed by unanimous vote of the Senate expressing support for Iranians’ right to freedom of assembly, speech and due process.

A day earlier, Iranians had taken to the streets to lead peaceful demonstrations against the government, only to be pressed – be repressed by the Basij militiamen. During times of both peace and conflict, Senator Casey has traveled to the region to safeguard our interests and those of our allies. In July, he led a Senate delegation to the Middle East to discuss the ongoing threat posed by Iran and to review developments in the Middle East peace process. Senator Casey has traveled to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Israel, the West Bank, Lebanon and Egypt, where we he met with top officials. He met with U.S. troops in Iraq and Kuwait, and in Iraq, he also met with Vice President Biden and Senator Ray – I’m sorry, General Ray Odierno, commander of U.S. troops.

More recently, Senator Casey has come out in strong support of Israel during the fighting in Gaza last month. Senator Casey has said, quote, “The U.S. must continue to support Israel’s vigilance in preventing the militarization of Hamas. Israel has the right under international law to set up a naval blockade to keep weapons from being sent to Hamas and a responsibility to protect its homeland. Hamas is a terrorist organization that denies Israel’s right to exist. It has indiscriminately fired thousands of rockets at Israeli citizens and towns; it is a proxy for Iran and the main impediment to peace in the region,” end quote. And then he goes on to say, Israel’s citizens deserve to live without fear, and as we move forward, we must continue to do all we can to strengthen this unbreakable bond. How’s that for clarity?

And he – as he heads into his second term, I have no doubt he will continue to do just that. Please welcome me in joining our friend, Senator Robert Casey.

(Applause.)

(Off mic.)

SENATOR ROBERT CASEY (D-PA): Thank you. Well, thanks so much, Ken, for that introduction. I'm honored to be here for so many reasons. To follow the chairman is always an honor, and so grateful for that. But I'm especially glad to be here today, because I almost wasn't. (Laughs.) Not in the dramatic way, but we were all set to have a meeting and then a vote that would involve the debt ceiling; it just arose very quickly in the Senate, and as you know, not much arises quickly in the Senate on anything. (Laughter.)

So we – there was a meeting called for 1:00 with our caucus, and then there was going to be a vote after that, or so we thought. That lasted about – oh, about 18 minutes, and then it got changed. So thank goodness we're here. We probably should still do that vote at some point, but it won't be today. But I do want to thank you for this opportunity. I want to thank Ken especially for his kind words and his friendship. I also want to thank FDD's Chairman, Ambassador Jim Woolsey, its – your president, Clifford May and Executive Director Mark Dubowitz, who we saw coming in today, and also the staff who are responsible for our visit here and are so helpful when we have reached out to them.

And I have to thank my staff, but in a very specific way. Damian Murphy, who's here with us somewhere in the back – who does extraordinary work on my behalf and I think, by extension, on behalf of the people I represent, and really, the United States, because it's a lot of work in – to staff a member of the Foreign Relations Committee and to staff someone who is chairman of the subcommittee – the Near East and South and Central Asian Affairs Subcommittee. So I'm grateful.

I'm also humbled by the opportunity to speak to this audience. I come here not just in gratitude but with a full measure of humility, because I know of the collective wisdom, knowledge and experience of people in this room, and I'm especially grateful. I don't – on days like this – and I'm not sure I'm worthy to talk to you, or talk at you, so to speak, but I'm grateful to share some ideas, and hopefully to do some follow-up. We're a little a bit tight on time today, so we – as we were preparing today's remarks, yellow sections have been deleted, you'll be happy to know, in the interest of time. (Laughs.)

But I – I am grateful, because this is an especially difficult time in our country, because we obviously have huge economic and fiscal challenges that you're reading about, and frankly, there's a good degree of worry about every day. But those challenges, I think, are side-by-side with a whole host of international and foreign policy and security challenges, and we can't separate the two. When you're talking about our fiscal situation, there's an obvious connection to our national security. So I'm cognizant of the connection, but today, of course, we'll be speaking only about foreign policy in a particular – in a very focused way on Syria.

But I do want to thank those who have made this possible, and as the chairman of a key subcommittee, I value the work that you do – each of you do and FDD does on a range of policy issues, whether it's the security of our troops in Afghanistan – as I mentioned, Syria, which I'll focus on, but also the work that you do to strengthen our policy as it relates to the regime in Iran - and Ken was kind enough to outline some of my work there. But your team has brought to the forefront carefully thought-out and persuasive research and policy positions that have been an outstanding resource for those of us in Congress, and I'm especially grateful for that kind of help.

I know that the theme of this year's forum is, quote, "Dictators and Dissidents: Should the West Choose Sides?" unquote. Quite topical given the events that have played out most recently, whether it's the Arab Spring, whether it's the nascent democratic opening in places like Burma and otherwise. I would argue that the central question, maybe, is one of process. That question being, whether the U.S. and the West should support the democratic process such that citizens are able to choose their own leaders, even when the process gives rise to political movements and leaders that may disagree with the U.S. or even oppose our Western policies and U.S. policies. I think, moreover, in years past, the U.S. and Western diplomats have often had a – had a sole address to call upon in many countries, usually the doorstep of a dictator; that was the one place that they would go to engage with them.

I would argue that relations with countries that have duly-elected leadership are built on more stable foundations than the substantial yet ultimately brutal ties that the U.S. maintained with, for example, the Mubarak regime in Egypt or Saleh in Yemen. But nowhere in the region is the struggle against dictatorship more vital and acute than in Syria. Over the past 20 months, it's become abundantly clear that Bashar al-Assad in power – that there's no possibility – none whatever – for a democratic process in Syria.

For years, Syria has been one of the most repressive countries in the world, according to the State Department's rights reports and analytical studies done by Freedom House. Political dissidents were routinely imprisoned or disappeared, and journalists were silenced. Human rights activists operated underground, living in constant fear of the dreaded Mukhabarat. Meanwhile, Mr. Assad professed a commitment to playing a constructive role in the region, and he was – he was cast by many as a, quote, "reformer." But his terrible treatment of his own people should have been a strong indication of what he was really all about. How a government treats its people is a true testament to its character. How a government treats its own people is an indication of how it will act on the world stage. We've seen how Assad operates in the region and how his ties to Iran and Hezbollah have strengthened over the years.

Iran has desperately sought to bolster the regime in Damascus, its only true ally in the region. This has meant providing weapons, logistical support and tactical advice to Syrian government forces. Iran has also used Syria as a conduit for support to Hezbollah as that terrorist organization has substantially increased its arsenal of rockets and missiles, restocking after the 2006 war with Israel. I've sought to use my position in the Senate, as chairman of the subcommittee, to put a bright spotlight on the destructive terrorist activities that Hezbollah continues to conduct in the region and around the world. After al-Qaida, Hezbollah has killed more Americans than any other terrorist organization. In recent years, it and its Iranian backers

have been tied to terrorist attacks or planned attacks in Turkey, Cyprus, India, Thailand and Azerbaijan. The investigation into the July 18th attack in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists and the Bulgarian bus driver that was killed as well appears to have the markings of a strike by Hezbollah. Last year, I chaired a foreign relations hearing on the growing threat posed by Hezbollah, and in September, I led a letter of 76 senators to EU foreign policy – I’m sorry, EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton strongly urging the European Union to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The response that we got, frankly, was unacceptable, in the sense that it laid out a whole series of bureaucratic reasons or hurdles that would have to be surmounted to do that. I don’t think that should be acceptable to us ever, when it comes to this terrorist organization.

So in the coming days, I and Senator Lieberman and Senator Risch – which will make it tripartisan – (laughter) – will introduce a resolution with the same message that we sent to Catherine Ashton: Degrading the destructive power of Iran and Hezbollah is in the national security interest of the United States. Bashar al-Assad is a key link between the two of them. Efforts to support moderate forces opposing him within Syria should be considered now and considered seriously.

I’ve recently called for a more robust U.S. response to the crisis in Syria. I believe that a political transition to a government that reflects the will of the Syrian people is also in the core national security interests of the United States and the region. Moreover, this chain – this change would align with our values of supporting the democratic process and the basic rights and freedoms that should be enjoyed by all people, regardless of religion, ethnicity or gender.

Over the course of the past 20 months, the Assad regime has unleashed a barrage of unspeakable terror across the country, with the sole aim of remaining in power. We’re just hearing about it in the last couple of days, more – in the last couple of hours, even – more urgently about weapons of mass destruction and what that could mean. More than 40,000 – we know that’s a conservative number – more than 40,000 Syrians have been killed, and countless have been injured. Refugees have surged into neighboring Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, taxing the limits of those countries’ capacity and creating a regional crisis. Assad’s escalation of violence has reached a point where fighter jets – fighter jets – have been used to kill civilians standing in bread lines, according to Human Rights Watch. It’s hard to comprehend that happening in any country, but that’s what – that is what has played out.

This regime’s shocking capacity for widespread terror may only grow as we see reports that chemical weapons have been prepared for use. Meanwhile, international institutions have largely remained on the sidelines, held hostage by the reprehensible policies of the Russian and Chinese governments. Some news today that maybe there’s some change there; we’ll see what happens. The administration was right to initially work through the United Nations, but unfortunately, due to Chinese and Russian intransigence, these efforts have only served to prolong the suffering of the Syrian people. We need a new course.

Ambassador Ford – I know you’ve heard from him already – but Ambassador Ford has led the charge in coordinating humanitarian assistance. Let me share a few thoughts on this brave American, Ambassador Ford. I’m glad that he had a chance to catch up with you today

and speak to you. His personal courage and commitment to seeing a way forward in Syria are remarkable, and that's an understatement. His visit to Hama in July of 2011 stands as a testament to American commitment and concern for the Syrian people. I was proud to chair his confirmation hearing to serve as ambassador, and have appreciated his friendship and openness to engaging with Congress over the course of this crisis. He is precisely the kind of diplomat we need in these challenging times in the Middle East, and we need more Robert Fords, without question.

Ambassador Ford and his team have led an important effort to support a more cohesive and moderate opposition political group in Syria. This has not been easy, as you know. Opposition political organizing is difficult in the best of circumstances, not to mention during a war, and after decades of severe repression by the Syrian government. Despite these considerable challenges, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was recently established in Doha. This group is not perfect, nor should we expect it to be. I don't need to tell anyone in this audience that the work of political consensus is hard, especially those of us who work in the United States Congress.

Moving forward, I expect that that the administration will continue to communicate clear and achievable criteria for the formal recognition of this group as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Once met, once those criteria are met, the U.S. should move quickly to recognize and support – show support, I should say – to this group and continue to repeat the central importance of commitment to democratic principles and human rights for Syrians of all religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Time is growing increasingly short for these moderate elements among the political and armed opposition, as we see reports of increased influence of foreign fighters and jihadists in Syria. The space to positively influence the environment is narrowing and may be closing. The establishment of the new opposition group, combined with better understanding of the armed population, provides a renewed opportunity for a more assertive U.S. policy.

Let me propose a couple of ideas: Number one, first, the U.S. must lead an effort to better coordinate international support for the moderate Syrian opposition. Several countries over the past 20 months have provided different degrees of military, political and humanitarian assistance to Syrian opposition groups inside the country, which has led to a common complaint from those in the opposition. They say that the – that the U.S. and the international community have applied considerable pressure on the Syrian opposition to coalesce and to coordinate, yet these countries providing assistance to the opposition are sometimes not coordinated among themselves, and sometimes work at cross-purposes. They want us to heed our own advice, which I think is a fair statement. Lack of international coordination has served to exacerbate tensions within the opposition inside the country, and to empower jihadist elements who are active there. U.S. leadership among interested countries would help to better coordinate these efforts and bolster the position of moderate elements.

We must also work closely with Syria's neighbors, who are greatly suffering from the spillover effects of the crisis, to ensure that they are committed to hastening the end of the Assad regime. I'm very concerned that Iraq continues to allow Iranian flights to use Iraqi airspace to

transport military supplies disguised as humanitarian aid to the Syrian regime. Iraq's failure, failure, to inspect all flights and to turn back any that are carrying illicit cargo, violates international sanctions and directly undermines U.S. security interests. The Iraqi government must commit to inspecting all Iranian aircraft passing through its airspace to ensure that Iran is not able to facilitate Assad's brutality and prolong the survival of the regime. As a major recipient of U.S. assistance, Iraq must continue to undercut – must not continue to undercut our key interests in the region.

Second, the U.S. should consider initiating security cooperation to include training and intelligence sharing with heavily-vetted opposition groups that are committed to the democratic process and universally-accepted human rights – and human rights principles. I understand that organizations like the Syrian support group have developed criteria and secured commitments from commanders on the ground to abide by internationally-accepted human rights norms and conventions, relative to behavior during armed conflict. We should make sure that if we take this step, that we ensure that that happens.

Third, the U.S. should consider measures that would hamper the ability of the Syrian air force to conduct aerial attacks on civilians. NATO is finalizing the fielding of Patriot missile batteries, which is an important step in the right direction. While defensive in nature, I think that these batteries are an important display of international solidarity with Turkey and the Syrian people. The administration should also examine and assess other ways in which the Syrian air force can be deterred or degraded, including the use of surface-to-surface Tomahawk missiles to degrade the Syrian air force's ability to take off – so planes on the ground is what we're talking about here.

Fourth, as part of our support for the opposition, we should be working to identify ways to strengthen moderate elements within the country with direct monetary support. Years ago, the international community provided oil and energy assistance to towns led by democratic forces opposed to Mr. Milosevic in Serbia. This assistance helped to bolster the standing of these leaders in the eyes of their constituents, and helped them to provide much-needed heating services during the cold Serbian winter. In Syria, the humanitarian situation is considerably more dire, but so is the need for Syria's emerging democrats to deliver to their constituents. If we can help them, and help them on this front in a way that does not exacerbate international opposition dynamics, then we should.

Fifth and finally, as soon as the security situation permits, the U.S. should enhance our diplomatic engagement in Syria by sending emissaries to meet with members of the political opposition in the northern part of the country. This important display of solidarity would greatly enhance U.S. standing among moderate opposition – the moderate opposition – and would include our ability to undermine what will be considerable challenges in a post-Assad Syria. Greater U.S. engagement is essential to ensuring that this conflict ends with the removal of Bashar al-Assad, and that Iran and Hezbollah are significantly weakened.

All of this is clearly within our national security interest. While I do not support the use of U.S. forces on the ground in Syria, I believe that the U.S. can and should take more concrete steps to demonstrate support for the transition. While we can't predict exactly what a new

Syrian government will look like, we can encourage moderate actors to take center stage in emphasizing the importance of the process, the process of building institutions, the process of electing new leaders and the process of bringing together Syrians of different backgrounds to pursue a common goal of peace and representative government. This is a goal worthy of supporting, and I hope that the U.S. will demonstrate our commitment to these core principles in the weeks and months ahead.

I know we're short on time; I thank you for your attention. God bless you and thank you. (Applause.)

MS. : Senator Casey, thank you so much for your remarks. They could not be more timely, urgent or compelling. Just this week alone, or I should say, in the last week, 850 people have been killed by Bashar Assad, and as you mentioned, we face a prospect of chemical weapons being used on the Syrian population.

Thank you so much for your very, very important work. Thank you also to your very, very able staff, to Damian (sp) and others. And thank you for spending your afternoon with us, we know you're on a tight schedule. Thank you.

SEN. CASEY: Thank you – (inaudible) – appreciate it.

(END)