

Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

Keynote Remarks

Moderator:
Toby Dershowitz,
Vice President for Government Relations and Strategy,
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Speaker:
Robert Ford,
U.S. Ambassador to Syria

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(Applause.)

AMBASSADOR ROBERT FORD: Thank you, sir. Good morning. It's very nice to be here. Let me thank Andy for that very kind introduction. And I'd also like to thank John Hannah for inviting me here to talk to the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. John and I go back to – some years back, John, when we were in Iraq together, another tough situation where we were trying to help promote democratic change in the Middle East. I'm only going to talk for about 10 minutes and then I'd welcome some questions and a little bit more of a discussion instead of just listening to me drone on.

I want to take just one minute and give you my sense of the situation on the ground in Syria, which is changing. Those of you who are following Syria day-to-day will have noticed that. The armed opposition, the Free Syrian Army, has made substantial gains on the ground over the past weeks, and in particular in eastern Syria has removed most of the government presence all the way up to the provincial capital of Deir ez-Zor.

This is the province in the eastern – southeastern part of Syria that border Iraq. The Syrian regime has also had to pull out of the Kurdish areas in the north and northeast. Syrian government no longer controls the border along – the Syrian-Turkish border, with the exception of one border post on the Mediterranean. They've lost control of most of the border along Iraq. And of course now, again, there is heavy fighting in some of the areas very close in to central Damascus itself.

It's very clear that the regime's forces are being ground down and that they are losing. That said – that said, the regime's protection units – 4th Division, Republican Guard and some special operations forces – continue to maintain some cohesion. And they still have some fight left in them, even though they are losing. And so I am sorry to say that I expect there will be substantial fighting in the days ahead.

At the same time that this is happening, extremist groups in Syria have, little by little, been gaining influence among the armed opposition. I want to be very clear here that the majority of the people fighting against Bashar al-Assad's regime are not extremists. They are people fighting for freedom and they are people who have pledged to abide by a code of conduct, including good treatment for civilians.

But that said, there is an al-Qaida in Iraq affiliate operating now in Syria more and more, the Jabhat al-Nusra, and there are groups that are cooperating with it. And that really is a problem. And I'll talk about this a little more, but what we hope to achieve – we, the Americans and our international partners, the Friends of Syria – hope to see a political solution. And so extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra are a problem, an obstacle to finding the political solution that Syria's going to need.

I want to just very briefly mention that as this fighting – which has been very intense over recent weeks – this fighting has also created a real humanitarian crisis. And I think this is very important to note. We estimate now that there are about 1 ½ million displaced people – Syrians

displaced from their homes still inside Syria. One and a half million out of a population of 23 million – it's a huge number.

And in addition, there are roughly 470,000 Syrians who've had to flee their homes and leave Syria. And they are now principally in the neighboring states of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, although there are Syrians who've gone as far away as Libya to see refuge. And this is causing a problem both for resources – in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and even Turkey – to provide the resources to care for these people. And all of these neighboring states are to be praised for their efforts to help these refugees.

But it also causes instability. And you have seen the little skirmishes, for example, on the Syrian-Turkish border. So, real quick, the Americans, what are we doing? I've already said, we strongly support – we see the only way out of this Syrian crisis is ultimately a political solution – a political solution. I want to be clear, we think and we have been saying since August of 2011 that Bashar al-Assad and his clique must go.

I want to be very clear about that. And today Secretary Clinton is meeting Sergei Lavrov and the United Nations and Arab League joint special representative. And they will be looking at how to move a political solution forward. But we are very clear – Bashar al-Assad must depart. He does not have a role in this political transition.

At the same time that we are working on a possible United Nations-Russia track, seeing if there's any possibilities there – we don't know if there will be or not; it's been blocked here to date by three vetoes from Russia and China – we have been working a great deal with the Syrian opposition. And so your forum's topic about dissidents and dictators, I think, is quite timely – at least for those of us that are working on Syrian issues.

Syrian opposition started out as a very peaceful movement. It basically started out with Syrians demanding, what I would say, respect for very basic rights and their dignity. The very first demonstration in Syria was in a market called Al-Hamidiyah market. People like Rafif and Ammar Abdulhamid will know it. And it basically started because a policeman beat up a motorist who didn't understand a contradictory traffic command from two policemen who didn't coordinate amongst themselves.

The motorist got pulled out his car and beaten up. People saw it and gathered. And this was on February 17th, 2011. And they said, the Syrian people – (in Arabic) – the Syrian people will not be humiliated. It's about dignity. Fundamentally, this started as an issue about dignity. Peaceful protests and the government – Bashar al-Assad's government responded with terrible force. And we've seen now what's happened, 40,000 dead and the number is climbing.

So when this peaceful protest movement confronted horrific violence – torture, arrests – tens of thousands arrested – and was under the pressure of the Syrian government not to organize, it became very difficult for the Syrians inside Syria to organize on a national level. And so these incredibly brave and courageous people, who frankly risk death and detention and conditions that we cannot imagine, it was very hard for them to work at a national level. So the protest movement initially was very much localized at town and provincial level.

What's, I think, very significant over the last months, and in particular last month in Doha, is for the first time there is now a national opposition leadership which includes people for all of the provinces – all of the provinces together for the first time, along with people who have been working in the opposition but have been living outside the country, in some cases for a few months in some cases for many years. It's the first time you have these people on the inside working with people who've been on the outside in one integrated group. And that is the Syrian Opposition Coalition.

We strongly encouraged the formation of that group. We pushed for it among our friends in the Syrian opposition. I know some of them thought we were a little too pushy. But we think that they will be able best now to chart a course forward for the Syrian people in the days and the weeks ahead. We expect to see them in Marrakesh next week. Secretary Clinton will attend a very large international gathering of the Friends of the Syrian People. It's a big conference which will be held in Morocco next Wednesday.

But I want to be clear even before that meeting: We strongly support the establishment of that opposition coalition. We look forward to working with it. We already have started working with it. I mentioned the humanitarian crisis. We're working with them already on figuring out how to channel more humanitarian assistance into Syria and how to do it more effectively.

The way forward from here, we think, is for the regime to understand that its days are numbered. The fighting in and around Damascus, the loss of control of large swaths of the country will only accelerate. The regime needs to step down now and allow a political process to go forward. The Syrian opposition charted out a transition plan which is actually very detailed. And it goes through a series of steps.

John, I don't know if you've studied it, but they've clearly looked at some of the lessons from Iraq. It charts a course from Bashar al-Assad's departure to the establishment of a temporary government, a transition government, revision of constitution, placing this new constitution to a popular referendum, and then finally, ultimately national elections for a new permanent government.

That was announced in Cairo last July. That is an opposition plan they wrote – they prepared and we strongly supported. It is a vision which we support. It is also very, very close to the framework that the secretary of state agreed upon with the other P-5 members at the United Nations Security Council as well as Turkey and the Arab League, what we call the Geneva road map. The two plans are almost identical. That is the way forward for a political solution.

When that will happen, I cannot tell you. I can tell you that the regime is losing, that its days are numbered, that it's increasingly visible to everyone and that this transition needs to go forward and that the Syrian opposition's steps to unify its ranks, inside the country as I mentioned as well as those working for the Syrian revolution on the outside, is a very positive step.

Let me stop there. That kind of brings you up to date with where we are. Toby, shall we take some questions?

TOBY DERSHOWITZ: First of all, thank you very much, Ambassador Ford, for those remarks. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that earlier today – I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that earlier today I saw a gentleman here named Zubair (sp) who is a victim – a survivor of the 1988 Halabja chemical weapons attack by Saddam Hussein. I'm sure we all have on our minds this morning the news that Bashar Assad is perhaps preparing to load chemical weapons into bombs. I wonder if you could comment on that before we take our first question.

AMB. FORD: You've all seen the press reports and I don't need to repeat them, but what I would say is that the concern we have about Syrian regime use of chemical weapons is not brand new. Even before I arrived in Syria in January, 2011, the United States was concerned about the Syrian regime's having these weapons.

We want to be very clear – we want to be very clear the Syrian government: As its situation deteriorates, they must not think about deploying these things. They must not deploy them. The president has laid out our position very clearly. The secretary of state has laid out our position very clearly. I don't think there's anything I need to add. But the message has to be understood in Damascus that utilization of those weapons in any way crosses an American red line – and frankly, that of the broader international community.

MS. DERSHOWITZ: Questions? Where's Charlie? Where's Charlie Molay (sp)?

Q: Mr. Ambassador, in 2003 in May I was in Baghdad. And there were a number of road maps. Every jurist had a road map. We're heading into another one of those situations where I don't know if the Alawites have developed anybody or a group of people to take over the government. In other words, the morning after, what happens?

AMB. FORD: Your question is a very good one. The most important thing right now is for the Alawi community in Syria to understand that they have a place in the future Syria where their community can live in safety, can live treated equally along with all other Syrians. Not with special privileges, but also not with special penalties or discrimination. Accountability for those who have committed crimes is a separate issue, and we, in fact, have established a training center in Lyon, France, with American money from the United States Department of State's Bureau for Human Rights and Labor, to train Syrian investigators in how to develop dossiers, how to develop criminal trials, for things like that. We're working with seven other countries in that center in Lyon.

But that aside – aside from those Alawis who have committed crimes, the broader community, in fact, has suffered just as other Syrians have suffered. And it's not that all Alawis in Syria lived like kings; in fact, many of them lived in villages – live in villages up in the mountains, and suffered terrible economic deprivation like other Syrians did. So I think the Alawi community itself is – how can I put it – they are changing. And we see this – let me give you some indicators: Bashar al-Assad's hometown of Qardaha, there are now disagreements in

his hometown about what the best strategy to go forward – I saw Tony Badran here somewhere earlier this morning – there he is – Tony actually work a very interesting article about this, some – what – maybe two months ago, Tony? Yeah – but I mean – what happened in Qardaha to us was unprecedented, to see people in his hometown literally come to blows about that.

We see other indications: Alawi – some Alawi senior officers have defected; at least one has appeared on television, and frankly, I think more Alawis would defect if they thought their families would be safe, but the regime will kill those family members of defectors who stay behind. If your family is still there and you defect, you have just given death sentences to members of your immediate family.

So it is important, therefore, for the Syrian Opposition Coalition to work with the Alawis and to help them understand that they do have a place in the future Syria, and a place where, as I said, they can live with safety and to enjoy the rights all other Syrians. So – a hard process, frankly, given the pressures that the regime puts on all of its citizens including Alawis.

MS. DERSHOWITZ: (Off mic.) John Hannah, please.

Q: Thank you – thank you Robert, again for everything you’re doing on this issue, and everything you’ve done in the past in terms of your service.

In addition to chemical weapons, another issue that’s been in the news quite a bit lately is the issue of whether or not Assad would actually leave the country, and be allowed to leave the country, and have a place to go to. A number of countries have mentioned; been reports in the papers that in fact, the Russians believe he might be willing to leave, but he can’t. He’s essentially in a box, because of the people around him who don’t get asylum will kill him if he tries to leave, and if the regime collapses, of course, the opposition might kill him.

I wonder if it’s speculation, but is there a U.S. position on the issue? You’ve called for him to step down, and that suggests maybe he could step down – he and his clique – into some kind of exile, in which case, of course, accountability, that you talked about, suffers. I wonder if you can talk us through that a bit.

AMB. FORD: As I mentioned, John, we’ve actually worked with Syrian investigators, started training them on how to develop war crime files, or criminal files.

We have a very clear position with respect to accountability, but I also have to say that ultimately, the political solution that we’re talking about has to be done between Syrians, not Americans. Ultimately, this is a Syrian revolution, not an American war or something. So if in the end, Syrians decide it is better not to pursue Bashar al-Assad, that is a Syrian decision. But we do think that the extent of the brutality and the extent of the violence requires that at least some level of accountability for officials in Syria is likely going to be demanded. I see Rafif (sp) nodding there vigorously, and I think a lot of Syrians will demand that. The particular status of any one individual, I’m going to leave that to Syrians. It’s not for me to say, but we have made tools available to them so that they can pursue options on accountability if they wish to do so.

Q: My name is – (name inaudible). This revisits the last few questions. I want to thank you first for representing our country with such courage, of the clarity and presentation.

Assad certainly knows that if he falls, or when he falls, his fate will be worse than that of Gadhafi. A good deal of what I've read centers on the possibility of his trying to maintain some kind of rule or presence in Alawi enclaves. What do you think of that scenario?

AMB. FORD: There are a lot of analysts around the world who are concerned that this genuine Alawi fear, this fear widespread among the Alawi community that there will be another Rwanda, will lead them to literally continue to fight, even if they lose Damascus – maybe I should say when they lose Damascus. And therefore, it puts additional pressures on the unity of the Syrian state, and I – we certainly do not want to see the Syrian state disintegrate. And that is absolutely not what the United States and the friends of Syria more broadly are seeking. So it goes back then to this question of how to convince the Alawi community that it has a role in the future of Syria, like other Syrians, and that there does not have to be – there does not have to be a genocide.

I was very struck by the editorial, or an opinion piece, in the New York Times – I think the beginning of last week, or the week before – about the world's next genocide being against Alawis in Syria. And that fear is certainly present among the Alawi community members. And so what you're talking about is just an extension of that. And I think the way around it then is – what I was mentioning is that the political solution – the longer the violence goes on, the more extremist groups like Nosra (ph) benefit, and based on what we've seen of Nosra's parent organization, al-Qaida in Iraq, Nosra will not be merciful at all to the Alawis. And so it is incumbent on us to bolster moderates within the political opposition, which is what we're trying to do.

MS. DERSHOWITZ: (Off-mic) Try to get two or three quick questions – right over here on – (inaudible) –

Q: Thank you – (name inaudible) – from al-Jazeera.

When you say the Syrian regime's day are numbered, is that the proverbial days, or you literally mean days? (Laughter.) And a more broader one, as you pointed out at the outset that the events started off in Syria peacefully, but later on, we saw international forces get involved – the Russians, the Iranians, the Americans, the Europeans, the Gulf Arabs – what mechanisms do you foresee for the future of Syria so that the interests of the Syrian people do not get overwhelmed by the interests of these outside forces?

AMB. FORD: First of all, I'm not going to predict what day the Bashar al-Assad regime crumbles. I cannot do that. But I think the direction of events on the ground, the direction is very clear now. When Damascus Airport – which is not far from the city – they have to close it, because it comes under attacked from armed opposition forces, when armed opposition forces seize the Marj al-Sultan air base on the outskirts of Damascus, when armed opposition groups seize control of air defense sites, inside the outer Damascus beltway – if I can put it that way –

the writing is on the wall, as we say. How much longer, I don't want to – I don't want to predict. (In Arabic.) I'm not a fortune-teller.

But I think your second question is very important. First of all, foreign intervention in Syria is not new with the spread of the revolution. Iran had a very close relationship with the Bashar al-Assad regime even before this uprising, before this revolution started, the same with the Russians. Going forward, going forward – if the Syrian people and in particular, the Syrian opposition, remains united and presents a common front. The opportunity for foreign countries to exploit differences and to work one side against another is diminished. And that is why, again, I mention that the establishment of this coalition in Doha is so important, because it brings them together in a new way that we have not seen before. That is why they are to be congratulated, that is why they must be supported. I mentioned about supporting moderate forces. If we can keep these Syrian leaders united, I think there will be less chance for Iran, Russia and other pernicious actors – Hezbollah, for example, to intervene in their typically negative way.

MS. DERSHOWITZ: One question here and one in the back, and then we'll wrap up.

Q: Andy Lapham (ph). Thank you for your service. When we draw – we seem to draw red lines very sparingly. What do you envision the response to going over the red line might be?

AMB. FORD: That is a question, Andy, frankly well above my pay grade – (laughter) – and justifiably so; I'm not elected. I don't want to presuppose what the president is going to do with the Cabinet, but I think what must be understood is that the use of those weapons is, for us, a qualitatively different situation, and frankly, countries in the region also view it that way, and so it will change our calculations in a fundamental way; it will change the way we have approached the Syrian problem, the Syrian crisis in a different way. Let me leave it at that.

MS. : (Off mic.)

Q: Hi – thank you. Khody Akhavi with al-Jazeera English. I'm right back here, sir.

AMB. FORD: Oh, thanks.

Q: Thank you so much for doing this. A question with regard to Russia. How have you seen or have you seen Russia's position vis-à-vis Syria change recently? You described them as a bit of a pernicious actor, but they might be essential to the political solution that you were talking about. Are they, and have you seen a change in where they might be going with this?

AMB. FORD: Maybe I should explain – why do I call their involvement in Syria “pernicious?” We were all watching these videos of towns being bombed, the Dar al-Shifa Hospital in Aleppo being one of the worst examples of this – a hospital that was bombed up in Aleppo, but by no means the only hospital; many hospitals have been attacked. The equipment that is being used – they are Russian-made helicopters; they're Russian-made jets. I think the Russians have a role in this, and they need to – they need to restrain the use of their own military equipment – stop it.

Going forward, we have – I mean, maybe I’m one minute back – three times we’ve tried to work with Russia and the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and the other members of the Security Council to develop a resolution that would express the unity of the international community and provide the possibility of applying worldwide pressure against the Syrian regime, and three times Russia and China have vetoed that effort. As Ambassador Susan Rice said, when the Russians implement that third veto, we understood then that there was nothing left to be done in the Security Council in the short-term, and we would work with our partners outside the Security Council framework, and that is what we have been doing in recent months. Everything from what we do in Doha to what we do with this accountability center that I mentioned – humanitarian assistance, et cetera.

The secretary is meeting Foreign Minister Lavrov right about now. We hope that the Russians will now understand the need not only for a political solution, which they say they understand, but the importance of applying pressure on the sides to get them there. It’s – otherwise, it won’t work. I mean, the Bashar al-Assad regime ignores repeated calls from the international community to move, and so we firmly are of the opinion that more pressure within a United Nations Security Council framework, but more pressure ought to be applied.

MS. DERSHOWITZ: Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

Ambassador Ford, nobody here underestimates the tough challenges you have ahead. Thank you so much for the work that you and your staff have so ably done. Please stick around for the next session, “What’s Next for Syria.” And to introduce the panel, Shoel Silver.

(END)