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Good morning, Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

Thank you for holding this important hearing on the human rights situation in Syria, and for inviting me to participate. Given the momentous nature of events elsewhere in the Middle East in recent months, the situation in Syria has not received attention in proportion to its importance.

Let me make three observations about the state of affairs in Syria:

- 1) Over the last four months, human rights violations in Syria have increased considerably. At least 1500 Syrians have been killed and countless more wounded, tortured, arrested, intimidated or harmed in some other way.
- 2) Protests throughout Syria will likely continue for the near future, and unfortunately, so will the Syrian regime’s brutal response to the Syrian people’s calls for freedom.
- 3) Most importantly, the Syrian regime itself—particularly President Bashar al-Asad—is directly and wholly responsible for this tragic state of affairs. Its response is further evidence that Asad is not and will not be a partner in a better Middle East.

Before the protests and subsequent violence erupted in Syria a few months ago, the international community primarily focused on Syrian actions *outside* of its borders. For decades, the Syrian government has been a state sponsor of terrorism, maintaining an increasingly intimate relationship with terrorist groups and rogue states, particularly Hizballah, Hamas, Iran and North Korea. For nearly four decades, the Syrian leadership has undermined freedom and democracy in Lebanon. Since 2003, it has helped to destabilize Iraq, often serving as the primary transit point for *ihadis* determined to harm countless Americans and Iraqis. And just a few years ago, the Asad regime covertly built a gas-cooled graphite-moderated nuclear reactor with North Korean assistance, an effort in direct contravention of Syria’s nonproliferation obligations.

Now, the focus has shifted *inside* Syria’s borders. Events over the last few months have demonstrated that Syria’s domestic policy cannot be ignored. Smaller protests in early 2011, spurred by events in Tunisia and Egypt, gave way to more fervent demands for freedom by the Syrian people. After some Syrian youths were detained

and tortured by their government simply for painting graffiti that criticized the Syrian regime, the Syrian people's frustrations reached new heights. Since then, a steady stream of increasingly massive and largely peaceful protests has erupted throughout much of the country.

Unfortunately, the Syrian government has responded with violence, repression, and insufficient reforms. Killings and arbitrary detentions have escalated. Reports emanating from around the country tell tales of mass arrests, gruesome torture, attacks on religious sites, killings during peaceful funeral marches, and the murder of young Syrians. The injured have been denied medical attention; indeed, on occasion Syrian security forces have taken over hospitals in an effort to better target and eliminate protestors. Let me be clear: the situation in Syria is grim. It is tragic. The mission of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Committee is "to promote, defend and advocate internationally recognized human rights norms." Today, the Asad regime's actions run utterly counter to that effort. Of course, the recent spike in human rights abuses should not obscure the fact that even before the uprisings, the human rights situation in Syria could only be described as perilous for those who dared to criticize the Asad regime.

As numerous sources have illustrated, the Syrian government's response to the protestors has been unabashedly violent. Key portions of the Syrian security services, particularly the Fourth Armored Division and the Republican Guard led by Maher al-Asad, the President's brother, have been responsible for many of the atrocities to date. With heavy materiel like tanks and helicopter gunships, Syrian protestors are being killed and wounded for demanding their rights— the freedom of speech, the ability to determine their leadership, and the power to seek better lives for themselves and their children. Others have faced the wrath of the *shabbiha*, ruthless gangs intimately connected to the Syrian regime, who have also viciously harmed protestors. Let there be no doubt: Syrian President Asad—working through these forces— is responsible for the countless human rights violations that we are witnessing in Syria today. Time and time again, across the generations, the Syrian regime has demonstrated its willingness and its capability to use systemic, indiscriminate, brute force against its own people.

The Syrian government has severely restricted media access in the country in an effort to stymie reports of these atrocities. With thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the violence and entering neighboring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon, greater detail is emerging about the tragic situation. Further, their efforts to evacuate Syria demonstrate that the current violence cannot be contained; it is spilling over into an already unstable region. Indeed, Lebanon is particularly vulnerable at this time given the release of four indictments implicating Hizballah members in the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister. Notably, the historically quiet Syria-Israel border has erupted recently as the Syrian regime seeks to refocus attention elsewhere.

At this time, it appears that the bloodshed in Syria will continue. The Syrian regime has repeatedly sought—so far unsuccessfully— to divide the protestors and to incite sectarian violence. Importantly, it has also refrained from making any real reforms that could stem protestors' demands. To be sure, the regime's survival is dependent on its authoritarian governance and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has demonstrated his unwillingness to make serious changes in this regard. Indeed, given the regime's unrepresentative nature and the brutality of the crackdown, it is difficult to conceive of any reforms by Asad that will be anything more than a façade.

What options does this leave for the international community? In a strictly humanitarian sense, Syrian refugees and those in isolated towns would benefit from the unrestricted access of aid groups and the free flow of much-needed assistance. Given limitations on medical services, protestors, in particular, would benefit from blood-clotting bandages, which have saved lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But such as it is, simply providing humanitarian assistance is not a panacea. Given the nature of events in Syria, the only way to truly halt the bloodshed—beyond total acquiescence to the Asad regime— is a holistic response involving key members of the international community working together to push Asad from power while pulling in a new leadership. Such a strategy starts with two critical realizations:

- 1) The United States and the international community cannot afford to be indecisive or unclear. Hedging is particularly harmful as it emboldens the regime and discomfits the protestors. It must be made clear to the Syrian regime that the world will not allow the status quo to continue.
- 2) Even if Syrian President Asad survives the current turmoil— a very real possibility—he is clearly no longer someone the international community can or should deal with. The violence in Syria has been horrific. It has also been clarifying. Events in Syria over the last few months have demonstrated, once and for all, the nature of the Syrian regime led by President Bashar al-Asad. Nearly two months ago, President Obama said that Syrian President Asad "can lead that transition, or get out of the way." Asad has clearly made his choice.

Change in Syria will not be easy, bloodless, or satisfying. It could involve elements of the regime remaining in power. But at a minimum, it is clear that the leadership of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has failed the Syrian people.

To conclude, one year before Tom Lantos founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, the world stood by as Syrian President Hafez al-Asad massacred thousands of his people in the city of Hama. Nearly thirty years later, is the world ready to again sit on the sidelines while his son follows in his footsteps?

I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

