

Testimony for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
“Human Rights in Syria”
July 12, 2011, Cannon House Office Building
Mona Yacoubian
Senior Program Officer – Middle East, U.S. Institute of Peace

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Thank you for inviting me to take part in this morning’s hearing. I want to commend the Human Rights Commission for holding this very important hearing on an issue of mounting concern—the human rights situation in Syria. I was asked to address the Syrian government’s response to ongoing protests and the resulting human rights challenges in Syria. I will keep my comments brief and ask that my prepared statement be made part of the record. Please note that my comments are my own and do not reflect the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace which does not take positions on policy.

When a Tunisian fruit vendor’s self-immolation last December ignited a wave of uprisings across the Arab world, few if any observers expected the “Arab Spring” to reach Syria. Yet, since mid-March, Syria has witnessed unprecedented popular protests, bringing thousands of demonstrators to the streets in cities and towns across the country. The Syrian uprising began in Dera’a, a sleepy town near Syria’s border with Jordan. It spread to the coastal cities of Baniyas and Lattakia and then to Syria’s Sunni heartland, notably to Homs and Hama. Significant unrest has also been reported in northwestern Syria, near the Turkish border, as well as the country’s eastern hinterlands, near the Iraqi border, in cities including Deir Zor and Abu Kamal. Protests have also erupted in the Syrian capital, Damascus, and its second largest city of Aleppo, although these have not yet garnered critical mass in the tens of thousands.

The Syrian regime has responded to these largely peaceful demonstrations with harsh repression, giving rise to accusations that the Syrian government’s brutal tactics, including systematic torture, indiscriminate killing and arbitrary detentions, constitute crimes against humanity. Given the Syrian government’s foreign media blackout and its repressive policies, independent reporting on conditions inside Syria has been difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, based on eyewitness accounts, YouTube videos and reporting from local Syrian human rights groups, international human rights organizations estimate that more than 1,400 Syrians have been killed and more than 10,000 arrested over the past four months. Victims are typically unarmed civilians, including women and children. In addition, conscripts who refuse to fire on civilians have also been killed, according to reports from army defectors.

The government’s violent crackdown has also provoked significant refugee flows, with more than 10,000 Syrians taking refuge in Turkey and another 5,000 in neighboring Lebanon. In some instances, Syrian security forces have fired on fleeing civilians in an attempt to prevent their escape. The Turkish government should be commended for welcoming the refugees, providing them with shelter, food and medical care through the Turkish Red Crescent. Nonetheless, conditions in the tent camps are difficult.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese army was accused of detaining fleeing Syrian refugees in late May. While the Lebanese government asserts the detainees have been released, conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon remain poor. Moreover, the Syrian uprising’s potentially destabilizing

spillover effects on Lebanon could be significant. A larger scale influx of refugees could easily tip Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance. In addition, sectarian violence in the restive city of Tripoli has already erupted in connection with the Syrian unrest. On June 17th, pro-Syrian Alawites clashed with Sunnis demonstrating against the Assad regime, leaving seven dead. The Lebanese army was mobilized to restore calm. Yet, sectarian unrest could well resume in Tripoli and possibly elsewhere in Lebanon over the coming days and weeks, particularly if the situation in Syria continues to worsen.

Numerous reports indicate the Syrian authorities have resorted to a number of deeply disturbing tactics in their efforts to put down the uprising. Particularly concerning is the extent to which children have been victims of the violence. In this context, it is important to recall that the Syrian uprising itself was sparked by popular indignation at the regime's arrest of a group of teenagers in Dera'a who scrawled graffiti calling for the regime's downfall. In its recent report on the Syrian government's crackdown on Tel Kalakh – a Syrian village near the Lebanese border – Amnesty International documented the arrests of at least three teenage boys. In Hama, as Syrian troops sought to reassert control last week, witnesses recounted that those killed included a 12-year-old boy. Most disturbing, a shocking YouTube video documents the brutal torture and killing of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib who was arrested by Syrian security forces in late April. His mutilated body was returned to his parents three weeks later, a cruel attempt to intimidate others from joining the protests. Instead, the video, which went viral, served to galvanize the protestors, attracting more to the streets.

The Syrian government's widespread human rights violations underscore that Bashar al-Assad's regime is not salvageable. By refusing early on to respond to popular demands for change, and instead attempting to brutally quash the protests, the regime has sown the seeds of its own demise. Hollow promises of reform and cosmetic attempts at dialogue with the opposition are belied by the regime's blatant brutality on the streets. In its most recent effort, the Syrian government sponsored a two-day "national dialogue" that concluded yesterday. However, most opposition groups boycotted the talks, citing the regime's ongoing repression and its imprisonment of thousands of political activists. Indeed, at the same time the talks were being conducted, Syrian troops stormed into Homs, firing on demonstrators. Instead, protestors are insisting that the regime cease its violent repression, release all political prisoners, and ultimately step down from power.

Any basis for Western engagement with Syria has now vanished. The Syrian regime's brutal response to popular demands for dignity and freedom has rightly earned it widespread international condemnation. Yet, more must be done to pressure the regime to cease its repression and cede the way for a genuine democratic transition in Syria. While the United States does not wield the same leverage with Syria as it did with Egypt, it can still spearhead a multilateral effort targeting the Syrian regime.

For a variety of reasons, military intervention is not appropriate in the Syrian case, and indeed, Syrian opposition figures both inside and outside the country have stressed that they do not favor this course. Referring Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), while perhaps warranted by the regime's behavior, is also not likely to succeed and may obstruct more potent venues for pressuring the Syrians. By creating more bluster than real impact, an indictment of Bashar al-Assad and other members of his regime could detract from serious efforts at pressure that could yield measurable results.

Instead, international efforts should focus on the regime's critical vulnerabilities – namely the cost to an already weakened economy of heightened international isolation. Syria does not possess the vast natural resource wealth necessary to sustain itself over a lengthy period as an international pariah. On the contrary, even prior to the current unrest, the Syrian economy was reeling from years of drought and economic mismanagement. The current uprising has already exerted a toll on the Syrian economy. The country's foreign exchange reserves are reportedly running low, and the economy has virtually ground to a halt, with trade at a trickle and unemployment on the rise. Syria is now on track to post negative GDP growth.

Specifically, the United States should undertake the following measures:

- Accelerate efforts with Russia, South Africa, and Brazil to pass a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Syria and laying the groundwork for broader international isolation;
- Seek European trade restrictions and ultimately multi-lateral sanctions targeting the Syria's oil and gas sector, a particularly resilient segment of the Syrian economy;
- Coordinate with regional powers, particularly Turkey—Syria's key trading partner—and the Gulf states to insure Syria's regional economic isolation by discouraging their trade and investment with Syria;
- Seek broader support for an international arms embargo on Syria;
- Ensure the continuing presence of U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford. His courageous trip to Hama last week, along with his French counterpart, is credited with having possibly abated more violent repression of protests
- Continue to pressure Syria to allow entry to a United Nations Human Rights Commission delegation seeking to investigate Syria's human rights violations.

In closing, I want to reiterate the importance of addressing the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria. While the wall of fear in Syria has certainly crumbled, the Syrian regime's reflexive reliance on repression appears unwavering. The United States and the international community more broadly should support the protestors' calls for change in Syria, particularly an end to the government's brutal repression of peaceful demonstrators and the release of all political prisoners.

I want to once again express my appreciation for the opportunity to address the Commission. Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today on such an important topic.