

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LEON E. PANETTA  
SUBMITTED STATEMENT ON SYRIA  
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2012**

Chairman Levin, Senator McCain. Thank you for calling this hearing to discuss the ongoing violence in Syria, which has justifiably evoked the concern and outrage of the United States government, the American people, and much of the world.

At the outset, I would like to stress that President Obama has stated unequivocally that Bashar al-Asad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately. Furthermore, through its repeated violations of human rights, the regime has lost its legitimacy, and its right to rule the country. This situation demands an international response, and for that reason the United States has been leading efforts within the international community to pressure Asad to stop his violence against the Syrian people and step aside.

I know that there are some members who are concerned about whether we are doing enough to stem the violence in Syria and that is understandable. There are others who are concerned about the dangers of involving ourselves in still another conflict in this part of the world and that too is understandable.

Let me address these concerns by providing some context for what is guiding the Administration's views on Syria and our actions in response to the violence.

The turmoil in Syria is clearly part of a larger transformation that has been reshaping the Arab world for more than a year. The change we've seen manifests itself through peaceful protests and negotiations aimed at more responsive governments in some cases, but also in violent uprisings and brutal crackdowns from repressive regimes in other cases. Many countries have been affected by these changes. Although each situation has been unique, it is part of a broader trend that is fundamentally and irreversibly reshaping the politics of the Arab world.

Although this is clearly a challenging and unpredictable period of time, our goal must be governments that will do more to ensure that their people live in peace and prosperity.

As a global leader with a vital interest in the stability of the broader Middle East, this administration has been determined to do everything we can to positively shape the course of events in the Middle East. Each situation – by virtue of the politics, geography, and history of each country – is unique, and demands a unique response. There can be no cookie cutter approach for a region as complex and volatile as the Middle East.

Nevertheless, from the outset, we have made clear that our response has been guided by three fundamental principles:

- First, we oppose the use of violence and repression by regimes against their own people;
- Second, we have supported the exercise of universal human rights – which include the right to freedom of expression, the right of peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the prohibition against discrimination, and the right to vote through genuine elections that express the will of the electorate, and;
- Third, we support political and economic reforms that can meet the legitimate aspirations of ordinary people throughout the region.

## AS PREPARED – EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

These basic principles have shaped our response to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and now Syria. The violence there has become increasingly dire and outrageous. As Secretary Clinton has noted, the Asad regime has ignored every warning, squandered every opportunity, and broken every agreement. We are forging an international consensus that the Asad regime's brutality must end and that a democratic transition in Syria must begin. Although China and Russia have repeatedly blocked the UN Security Council from taking action, the UN General Assembly has given full support to the Arab League's transition plan – delivering a clear message from the international community that the Asad regime has lost its legitimacy.

The Administration's focus now is on translating that international consensus into action, along four tracks:

- First, we are working to increase the diplomatic and political isolation of the Asad regime – and encouraging other countries to join the United States, European Union, and Arab League in imposing sanctions on the Asad regime;
- Second, we are providing emergency humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, with an initial commitment of \$10 million;
- Third, we are working with the Friends of Syria and other groups to help strengthen the opposition, encouraging it to unify and lay the groundwork for a peaceful, orderly transition to a democratic government that recognizes and respects the rights of all Syrians, including minorities; and
- Fourth, we are reviewing all possible additional steps that can be taken with our international partners to support efforts to protect the Syrian people, end the violence, and ensure regional stability, including potential military options if necessary.

This approach has succeeded in putting unprecedented pressure on Asad, but it is clear that there is no simple or quick solution to this crisis. We believe that the best resolution to this crisis will be a peaceful, political, democratic transition led by the Syrian people and along the lines suggested by the Arab League. We believe there is still an opportunity to achieve that goal.

Although we will not rule out any future course of action, currently the Administration is focusing on diplomatic and political approaches rather than a military intervention. Guided by our approach from Libya and elsewhere, we believe it is important in this instance that we:

- Build multi-lateral, international consensus for any action taken;
- Maintain clear regional support from the Arab world;
- Make substantial U.S. contributions to the international effort, especially where the United States has unique resources that can be brought to bear;
- Have a clear legal basis for any action; and
- Keep all options on the table, but recognize the limitation of military force, especially U.S. boots on the ground.

However, each situation is unique and there is no simple solution to the situation in Syria. The reasons for a different approach between our approach with Libya and current approach to Syria are clear:

- Although there was widespread support in the Security Council and the Arab League for military intervention in Libya, no such consensus currently exists regarding Syria;
- It is not clear what constitutes the Syrian armed opposition – there has been no single unifying military alternative that can be recognized, appointed, or contacted. While the opposition is fighting back and military defections and

desertions are on the rise, the Syrian regime continues to maintain a strong military. For us to act unilaterally would be a mistake;

- As Secretary Clinton has noted, there is every possibility of a civil war, and an outside intervention in these conditions would not prevent that, but could expedite it and make it worse.

Even though our current approach is focused on achieving a political solution to this crisis, the Asad regime should take no comfort. The pressure is building on the regime every day. Make no mistake – one way or another, this regime will meet its end. We will continue to evaluate the situation and adjust our approach as necessary.

Let me close by briefly addressing the United States' broader strategic interests in Syria and the region. The stability of Syria is vital to the region – and to Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel. All of these countries and the United States have a strong interest in preventing a humanitarian crisis in Syria.

But perhaps most notably, Syria is a pivotal country for Iran. Syria is Iran's only state ally in the region, and is crucial to Iran's efforts to support those militants throughout the region who threaten Israel and regional stability. Unrest in Syria has already greatly weakened Iran's position in the region, and it is clear that Iran only stands to lose further as Asad is weakened further. As groups such as Hamas distance themselves from the Asad regime, Iran is quickly becoming the Asad regime's lone backer. This shows the world the hypocrisy of Tehran.

I cannot predict how this volatile situation in Syria will unfold, but the United States has made clear that we are on the side of the Syrian people. They must know that the international community has not underestimated either their suffering or their impatience. We all wish there was a clear and unambiguous way forward to directly influence the events in Syria. That unfortunately is not the case. That is not an excuse – that is the reality. Our only clear path is to keep moving in a resolute, determined but deliberate manner with the international community to find a way to return Syria to the Syrian people.

Thank you.

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