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House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

My thanks to the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade for inviting me to testify today, and to Chairman Royce in particular for his leadership and support over many years on the category of problems to be discussed today.

For a former US Government official, now in private life, to comment on operational challenges facing today’s policy officials is a little like a retired athlete watching the action on the field from the comfort of the broadcaster’s booth. It is a lot easier to talk about what others ought to be accomplishing than to have to do it one’s self.

But the Subcommittee is right to be exercising its oversight function now, when planning for future contingencies in Syria is most timely and appropriate. The Congress is also right to invite outside perspectives, and I am honored to have been asked to offer mine.

I know and respect many of the senior policy officials who will lead US Government efforts to secure dangerous weapons as conditions permit in Syria. For the American people, the good news is that we have no shortage of highly capable and motivated people in the State Department and other agencies who could contribute to the task.

The bad news is that chaotic and potentially risky conditions in Syria will not be their only barrier to success. In my view, there are significant structural and cultural impediments inside the U.S. policy bureaucracy that must be overcome if this effort is to be maximally effective.

Issue One – Breaking Through the Structural Impediments within the Policy Bureaucracy

By impediments I am referring to multiple organizations with overlapping jurisdictions, each cooperating superficially with the others but in fact operating separately, with all competing for authority and resources. Over the years, the number of bureaus led by Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretaries of State has increased steadily, as has the number of higher-level Under Secretaries. The Secretary of State now even has two Deputy Secretaries. As a general matter, it is not at all clear to me that more decision-makers improves the speed or quality of decisions.

Consider the search for Libyan weapons after the fall of Qadhafi. Since Libya had previously given up its WMD program, the focus here was conventional weapons, principally MANPADS (shoulder-fired missiles). The lead task was assigned to the Political Military Affairs Bureau.

Syria, however, has WMD, notably chemical weapons. Thus, the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation will assert the lead role; it is unclear whether the Political Military Bureau will migrate any field capabilities from Libya into Syria, or simply stay out because they do not 'own' this issue. The recently-created Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations has as a primary mission today to influence the conflict in Syria working through the refugee population across the border in Turkey. The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration may have a role there as well in providing humanitarian support to displaced Syrian civilians.

With at least two of these four 'functional' bureaus expected to be directly active in Syria after the regime falls, one should remember that the primary bureau managing Syrian policy issues in the State Department is the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

That makes five State Department bureaus, each with some claim of responsibility for addressing US interests as Syria undergoes a violent political upheaval, before we even address the essential support elements of intelligence and logistics to support field operations. Some of these bureaus may turn to private contractors to provide specific field services. Because such matters are handled as administrative and budgetary matters, a different set of specialists in the State Department, separate from the policy experts, will take the lead in the interest of assuring fair competition and transparency.

My advice – and I have no personal stakes in any contracting process – is that the policy experts play a direct role to ensure that before any contractors, and particularly foreign contractors, are selected, experts are convinced that these companies will fit best within, and be the most likely to contribute to, the overall US Government effort in Syria. Similarly, if the officials leading the effort decide they want the services of particular individuals outside of government such as former officials or well-connected Syria experts, the contract paperwork and basic security clearances should be sped through the bureaucracy in a few days, not months as is the norm.

Intelligence support is crucial. The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research is very good; but among the sixteen other intelligence agencies, some could play a vital role in locating and securing loose weapons in Syria. Yet, coordination among disparate intelligence elements can be a challenge in a fast-moving operation, as I experienced when I was a US Envoy. If, for example, the Defense Intelligence Agency has the best assessment of the organizational structure of military and paramilitary entities in Syria and estimates of the quantities and locations of their weapons, DIA's experts should become an integral part of the operational effort. The Pentagon and intelligence community have offices focusing on foreign weaponry; ensuring that they too are fully coordinated with – and in any case not operating independently from – the post-regime operation in Syria is important.

As for logistics, the State Department has often turned to the US military for airlift and protection on the ground in less-than-permissive environments. Planners should know now whether the State Department has sufficient organic assets to provide mobility and protection, or failing that, ready access to military or contract assets. Communications is also a vital element in a fast-moving effort to secure weapons. Do any of these State Department bureaus have field communications assets? I have become familiar with the very impressive Communications branch of USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, which has deployable teams and communications gear at the ready, including some at prepositioned sites overseas. Yet, under our bureaucratic system, it is hard to imagine assigning an OFDA capability to support a weapons collection operation run by entities external to USAID.

U.S. Special Operations Command is another organization with highly-developed capabilities in planning rapid response operations; could SOCOM work directly as a partner in a State Department-led operation?

'Whole of Government' and the need for a civilian-led Task Force

If this problem were mine to manage, I would create the civilian equivalent of a military task force commander leading the entire effort, with delegated authority and control over the funding, logistical assets and people from all Departments and agencies. As logical, even obvious as this may seem, in today's bureaucracy a true 'whole of government' operation would have to overcome deeply entrenched resistance in many quarters.

Nor would a successful effort be limited to our government. Syria was previously part of the French mandate, and the French government has maintained a strong interest in Syrian affairs as have other governments such as Syria's neighbors Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and particularly Israel. Robust collaboration with these and other governments could only benefit the mission.

With high-level endorsement, a truly empowered U.S. weapons security effort might even consider soliciting Russian cooperation, as Moscow would have a strong incentive to work with the Americans to gain some leverage over potentially highly prejudicial media exposure, and to mitigate the risk of compromising sensitive weapons technologies it has provided to Syria.

Beyond the US interagency, contractors and foreign governments, there is also the significant advantage of working with non-governmental parties inside Syria, including journalists and NGOs. This community of people may provide the most ready access to opposition militia leaders who might be expected to secure regime weapons for their own use. A lesson learned from the Libya experience is that accessing information about the Syrian armed resistance and mapping out known information on these groups should be happening now.

If stringing together and leading as an integrated unit all of these State Department bureaus, Defense and intelligence agencies, contractors, foreign governments and non-governmental organizations and individuals seems overly ambitious, my response would be that it depends on the importance one attaches to securing Syria's conventional and unconventional weapons.

Imagine if there were an American school in Syria from which 50 young American children were abducted and thought to be dispersed throughout the country. No one in Washington would question the need to pull all possible assets together, share communications links widely and stand up a country-wide, real-time dragnet without any concern for bureaucratic turf or who might access the assigned radio frequency. The sole focus would be the race to find and secure the children.

Is the task of finding and securing Syrian WMD and its large store of sophisticated conventional weapons any less urgent? That is for the Administration and Congress to decide.

Is Weapons Collection a Custodial Task, or a Key Element of post-regime Policy?

All of the foregoing presumes that after the regime has fallen, one or more functional bureaus at the State Department will be called into action to begin the active search for Syrian weaponry. With the regime out of power, the focus can shift to spotting trucks, inspecting facilities and collecting hardware. This is not unlike what was done in Iraq in 2003.

Recall that the US in Iraq chose to disassociate itself from any military entity affiliated with the Ba'ath Party, including not just the elite forces surrounding Saddam Hussein's regime, but the regular Iraqi Army in its entirety. The strategic unwisdom of that approach has been much discussed, as all organized armed elements turned hostile to the U.S. stabilization effort. Is the plan for Syria any different?

If one were to draw lessons from the Iraq experience, the alternative approach would be to explore whether overtures could be made now, through any credible intermediaries, to leaders of Syrian army and intelligence units, pointing to modalities for defection and also identifying weapons and sites to be turned over to the US or other friendly governments. Their incentive to cooperate would clearly be the fear that these deadly weapons could otherwise fall into the hands of opposition elements bent on exacting large-scale revenge against regime strongholds and Alawite population centers. To pursue not just the Syrian weapons but rather the influential figures who now control or can later help locate them would be to integrate fully the functional mission of securing these Syrian weapons with the policy effort managing the political end game in Damascus.

Secretary Clinton has recently described Iran's role as helping to "stage-manage repression" in Syria. I want to see the U.S. at least try to 'stage-manage' an acceptable end-state to the Syria

crisis wherein the Asad regime relinquishes power, a political process is organized without a sectarian bloodletting, and Iran's influence in Syria is lost. But whether or not our leaders harbor strategic ambitions in Syria commensurate with those of our adversaries, they should at least aspire to success in locating and securing the regime's most deadly weaponry.

Can we conceive of a top-down mandate to overcome bureaucratic stovepipes and rapidly merge administrative authorities with logistical, intelligence and diplomatic assets into an agile, unified operation under a strong civilian 'commander'?

I would not ask this question if I did not think it possible; yet I conclude by warning that years of adding more and more offices, ranking positions and staff to our national security bureaucracy has meant slicing areas of responsibility into ever-narrower portfolios competing for influence and support. The result is a slower and more cumbersome decision process, weaker strategic consensus across the bureaucracy, and uncertain operational effectiveness in the civilian policy sector.

One day perhaps there will be a serious effort to streamline, revitalize and empower our national security sector end to end. For now, it would be a significant accomplishment to organize our Syria planning effort by combining the best of our interagency capabilities into a highly effective operational task force, led by a qualified civilian, in which logistical tasks support larger policy objectives. Syria is the right place to mount a true whole-of-government operation that will give the U.S. the strongest chance of securing our considerable interests in a country whose role will be central to the future security of the Middle East.

I thank the Subcommittee and look forward to responding to any questions.