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Transcript

TURMOIL IN SYRIA AND THE REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

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Washington, D.C.

MARWAN MUASHER: Good morning, everyone. Let me first welcome you all and say how pleased I am to have this function jointly with the Brookings Institution and my very good friend Ken. I hope we will have many such joint events in the future as well. Before I start, I think Ken would like to say a few words.

KENNETH POLLACK: Thank you, Marwan. And yes, I did just want to thank Marwan and Marina for agreeing to do this. This was a happy confluence of what might otherwise have been a very painful moment. Marwan and Marina and I independently had both decided that the morning of May 25 at 9:00 a.m. was the perfect time to have a Syria event. And rather than have competing events, we decided to pool our efforts. It's wonderful. I'm delighted and thrilled that Marwan and Marina were willing to do it. I hope this is only the first of many such collaborations.

MR. MUASHER: Absolutely. Thanks, Ken. Thank you so much.

Well, today, we have a very distinguished panel to speak to us about the turmoil in Syria and the regional consequences. And what I thought I would do today is to, you know, maybe present a question to each speaker and have them respond or maybe say any other things they want or maybe not respond at all – it's up to you – (laughter) – and then maybe engage in a conversation both with me and with the audience rather than, you know, have each give any formal remarks.

As I said, we have a very distinguished list of speakers. To my immediate left is Tamara Wittes. You all know her, both from her times at Brookings, working on democracy and political reform issues in the Arab world, and from her current position as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, where she continues to work on such issues and is even busier than when she was at Brookings. (Laughter.)

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Itamar Rabinovich is no stranger to this town. Itamar, of course, was ambassador here, head of the negotiations team with Syria; an Israeli academic who is specialized in the area with special emphasis on Syria. And I look very much forward to his remarks on what is going on.

Next to Itamar is Ammar Abdulhamid. Ammar also has been associated with Brookings at some point. He is a democracy activist and exile from Syria as of five years, six years ago, and is the founder and director of The Tharwa Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa.

Next to Itamar is Murhaf Jouejati, another Washington regular and long-time friend. Murhaf is a Syrian-born specialist on Middle East affairs; and of course, particularly on Syrian affairs and the Levant. He is professor of Middle East Studies at the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic studies and also a lecturer at George Washington University.

And finally, Paul Salem, who you also know very well, is the director of the Carnegie Center in Beirut. Paul just came from Beirut, and we would also be very interested in his remarks on what is going on and its impact on Lebanon and the whole region as well.

So with that, let me maybe first turn to our Syrian friends to tell us what, in their opinion, is taking place in the country before we turn to the other panelists. And Ammar, if you would like to start.

AMMAR ABDULHAMID: Well, first of all, thank you very much for having this event and for combining it. Think tanks of the world unite, I guess. (Laughter.)

Basically what's happening in Syria is something that was, you know, very predictable. Anyone who can – who read the Arab Human Development Report that came out in 2001 and onward can – should have been able to predict that sooner or later – in fact, sooner rather than later, Syria among other countries will witness this time of event. The demographic realities are such that the youth bulge is something that's, you know, going to shape the future for sure from now on. The development gap is extremely big. And the expectations of the young people in terms of employment; of opportunities for, you know, social mobility and whatever, are – you know, cannot be met under the existing regimes in the region.

And this has been really highlighted; and in the first report, second report, third report; and by a lot of activists as well. I'm one of the people who've been saying for years that the region is heading towards this kind of a scenario. And of course, by way of making it into a self-fulfilling prophecy, we were activists on the ground. We were working to make sure that this is the kind of scenario we will end up dealing with sooner rather than later.

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So what happened really in Syria was the product of many years of seeding the right messages, of trying to educate and raise awareness as to the need of the people taking charge of their own destiny and not to wait for opposition groups nor for the governments to actually do the change, because the governments are incapable for reforms for most part; and the opposition groups, because of so many years and decades, in fact, of oppression, they've really lost contact with the vibe of the streets. And many of the leadership have -- you know, is too old to be really connected to the changing demographics on the ground.

So for this reason, we wanted people to simply begin to act on their own and to take leadership. And I think year after year, this message began to take hold, especially as we moved into social networking and we used the kind of conduits that are popular with the young people in Syria and elsewhere in the region, that message began to percolate and reach a lot of people in the country.

The last couple years have really been very important. A lot of people haven't really realized that we had major dislocation as a result of job conditions in the northeast part of Syria, government neglect and the fact that Bashar actually emerged as the – after a period of isolation under the Bush administration, he emerged as the man in charge. And therefore, people expected then, OK, now you're out of isolation; deliver on promises, you know, because the problem was that he always complained about international pressures and all of these issues as why he couldn't sort of enact certain reforms.

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So when he had the power to finally began reforming, nothing happened. So there was a lot of anger basically. And in fact, what was supposed to be a golden opportunity for Bashar was again wasted because of his lack of interest in serious reforms.

So as a result of that, we had finally young people deciding to take the initiative into their own hands. For a while, they've been organizing themselves on the ground, creating networks that are independent of any sort of opposition movement; and, you know, waiting perhaps for the right moment to do something. They were really waiting for confidence. And what happened in Tunisia gave them that spark of confidence.

So once you had one spark somewhere, the ground elsewhere in the region was really ready for that spark. It's – you know, a lot of people had been ready on the ground for a long time. So soon the spark took off. The events – the specifics of how this whole thing got started is perhaps not as important anymore because the reality is initially we've sort of – opposition group and certain activists groups sort of played the role in communicating with young people inside the country and trying to decide on a particular date and whether we can sort of have the first protest movement.

But soon after the beginning, soon after the first spark in Syria, especially in Dara'a, the movement became self-organizing. It wasn't any more reliant on any sort of input from outside. Right now, I think the majority of the opposition figures and dissidents and activists are really mere advisers to the young activists on the ground who are, in fact, making the operational decisions and organizing the protest movement.

There are a lot of debates taking place within the small circle of activists in different parts of Syria. There are right now – you know, the revolution is happening in 30 different places at the same time. And we have 30 different groups of activists, you can say, or committees that are organizing on the local level and communicating with us and trying to say, look, this is what we need to do. Toppling the regime is what we want. Assad's ouster is what we want. They may not have started this way, but you know, after the first crackdown in Dara'a, everybody was really in agreement that we cannot talk to Assad – he lost legitimacy.

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So the attitude hardened very much like the crackdown hardened. And I think right now, we are at a situation where the opposition have a chance now to either take the lead and be able to represent the people inside the country to the international community by forming a transitional council so we can push more and more toward not simple sanctions against Assad but now clear calls for the ouster of Assad and indictments for ICC and perhaps the beginning of a transitional process that can be supervised by the international community through different regional actors, including Qatar and Turkey, among others.

Or we can lose that fight. The opposition may not be able to rise to the challenge. And then that doesn't mean the protest movement will disappear. The protest, as I said, is self-organizing, but it means that now it's going to become a longer-term affair and the protest movements inside the country have to fill their own leadership one way or the other and try to sort of present up alternatives themselves.

What we happen right now in Syria – what we have right now in Syria is a situation that's irreversible. The status quo ante is gone. A lot of people who were comfortable with the Assads because it's the devil they know have to realize the devil they know is terminally ill and is gone and that the age of the devils in our region is no longer possible. We need governments that are responsible to the people, no matter how imperfect they might be. But we don't want dictatorships anymore. We don't want dictators anymore. We don't want cult of personality. We don't want leaders who think themselves indispensable to the stability of the country. Young people have matured, and they have seen changes elsewhere in the world, and they really realize that – especially now from – you know, on the basis of their own experiences in the country that they can make a difference and that they really don't need and they don't buy into that cult of personality anymore.

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So that era has gone. We really – what the international community has to realize is that the task at hand is managing the transition ahead, not halting it, because it's unstoppable. There could be setbacks on the road for

Syria, for other countries, but setbacks are part of the process. But this transition is ongoing. And a new era has begun.

And what I really like about, you know, President Obama's speech last Thursday is the fact that he seems to have shifted America's policies from a pragmatism based on security concerns and stability to a pragmatism that's willing to err on the side of the people, you know, that commits itself to managing the transition and realizing that decisions have to be made in favor of change, not in favor of keeping things as they are. And that's a good, positive step, and I think – and it's a step in the right direction.

Of course, we still hope, as dissidents and opposition groups and activists, that President Obama, among other world leaders will call on Bashar Assad to step down, because in our opinion, that once this call are issued, then we can see cracks in the system. We can see military generals beginning to review their calculations. We can see the commercial elite in Damascus and Aleppo begin to sort of distance themselves from the regime. But as long as Bashar Assad seems to be called upon to change or to lead the reform process, then his position is legitimized, and the army generals will say then why should we challenge a leader that the international community still considers somehow as legitimate despite the sanctions? Because sanctions are now viewed as just an element of pressure on Assad so he can, you know, reconsider the alliance with Iran.

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So it's not been seen in the right context. I can see it here basically, because I'm based in Washington, D.C., and I can see that his kind of logic is not really true and that a lot of people in the administration realize Bashar is not going to reform,. But people in Syria, the generals, the Ba'ath Party officials, they don't see it this way. They have a deep suspicion vis-à-vis American motives to begin with. Let's not forget that Syria is a hotbed of anti-Americanism in the region. And for them to, therefore, be able to switch positions requires a very clear-cut stand by the international community against Assad. Assad should go. Once that statement is made by President Obama, by other world leaders, I think you'll begin to see changes in the attitude of army generals and the attitude of top Ba'ath Party officials and the attitude of the commercial elite in Damascus and Aleppo.

As for the people themselves, it's interesting to see that over the last few weeks, they have began to chant anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iran statements and even burning flags of Russia and China. So what you have right now on the street is an opportunity. They're even praising a NATO ally, which is Turkey. They're reaching out. They're calling for U.N. and U.S. and France to basically be on their side.

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So here you have a country that has been bred on suspecting America, on suspecting the international community, being critical of the alliances of the Assad regime and opening themselves and sort of stretching their hands towards America. This is, in my opinion, a golden opportunity for realignment in the region. If you want to know what the alternative is going to be to the Assad, just consider the statements made by the protesters. It's the kind of statements that everybody here should be happy with because it signifies that that alliance you want to end with Iran is going to end, because this is what the people want. They want to get out of the system. They want to be more open towards the West, and they're hoping that the West, therefore, will be willing to be on their side at this stage.

So there is a historic opportunity right now, but we know our region is a region where historic opportunities have been consistently missed. And I simply hope that this will not be the case anymore and that this administration among – and European governments would realize that there is a unique opportunity and that there is, as usual, an expiring date on it, that we cannot wait for too long until, you know, reaching out – back to the Syrian people and

say yes, you know, we're willing to support you, we're willing to be on your side and push for the change and manage the change.

This is where we are right now, I think: a self-organizing protest movement, an opposition that needs to rise up to the challenge, an international community that needs to reciprocate the gesture of trust.

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MR. MUASHER: Thank you, Ammar.

Murhaf, Ammar says that the situation is irreversible in Syria. I'd like your ideas on whether you agree with this assessment or not, or whether you think that the regime is capable of reforming itself or that any minority regime can reform itself, knowing that in the end it might lose its grip on power?

MURHAF JOUEJATI: I agree with Ammar. I don't think there is any going back. There are many things that are irreversible. The Assad regime has lost credibility. It has lost legitimacy. And what is going to be needed for it to fall is really a pincer movement between the international community and domestic society that is in an uprising against the regime.

Now, unfortunately, the Assad regime happens to be, as you know, determined to survive. Evidence of that determination is, until now 1100 people killed, over 10,000 people arrested, a lack of hesitation of shooting tank fire into civilian neighborhoods, sieges around cities, an embargo on electricity and water to towns that have been in uprisings. So there is a determination to survive.

Other piece of evidence is that interview that was made a few days ago by The New York Times by Mr. Rami Makhlouf, who, I think, is the most frank of Syrian spokespeople and who truly reflects family thinking – this notwithstanding the rebuttals of a Syrian ambassador. (Laughter.) Now, I am the son of former Syrian ambassador, and I can tell you that that rebuttal is meaningless.

(Laughter.)

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So, yes, the regime is determined to survive. Unfortunately, the opposition, which is obviously very well meaning and has done a remarkable job in coordinating protesters on the ground and coordinating demonstrations and even slogans, until now shows itself to be fluid; leaders are individuals rather than a political platform. And so the opposition still needs, I think, a lot to do in order to present the international community with a vision of what Syria is going to look like in the future so as to enable the international community to dialogue with it.

The Assad regime knows full well that there are divisions in the Security Council. They know that the U.S. will not intervene militarily in Syria. They know that there is going to be opposition in the Security Council by Russia and by China to condemn Syria and let history show that Russia is OK with 1,100 people killed. But there is that division.

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If things, I think, were held equal today, the Assad regime will survive. But it's not going to be able to survive for very long. And here we just have to look at the political economy of it. The costs of the apparatus of violence has

increased dramatically. And simultaneously, we have a dramatic drop in oil production. Tourism is in the toilet. Business has come to a grind. In order, again, to – in order to gain some political points, the Assad regime now is turning back, is reversing the taking away of subsidies policy, which is going to increase the inefficiency of the economy. It is trying to create jobs right and left, which further increases the inefficiency of the economy. Inflation is at 18 percent. So I really frankly don't see down the road a regime that has lost credibility, that has lost legitimacy and that is unable to function at the economic level how it could possibly survive. So again, in sum, I think the Assad regime will survive this, but not for very long. How long? I don't know. But it's not going to be too long.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you, Murhaf.

I want to turn to Itamar and ask a question which I think is on many people's minds. The Assad regime, Syria, has built its reputation in the Arab world as being the one Arab country that stands up to Israel, and yet it is the one Arab country that Israel is supporting the most now and calling on the U.S. not to abandon the Assad regime. I wonder if you can shed some light on the Israeli position and whether you agree with that assessment.

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ITAMAR RABINOVICH: Thank you, Marwan. Let me begin with disassociating myself and I think Israel from the latter part of your introductory comment. I don't think that Israel is exerting any influence on – that it may have on U.S. policy in the Middle East to support the Assad regime. I think Israel is sending a message of passive – almost indifferent attitude. It's a regime that we've had an ambivalent attitude to, and it's a regime that we tried to make peace with throughout the 1990s and during the – during the Olmert years. But it's also a regime that has been at the forefront of opposition to Israel, manifested itself primarily through Lebanon and through Hamas in Gaza and of course being the stepping stone facilitating Iran's access from the eastern part of the Middle East to the core area of the Middle East. So it's been a very effective opponent and could be a very bitter opponent.

And I think the two sides of this equation can be illustrated by the issue of the nuclear reactor that we took out in September 2007. I mean, on the one hand, here was a regime that was willing to go to the length of surreptitiously building or having the North Koreans build for them a nuclear reactor in order to develop nuclear weapons, and yet when it was destroyed by us, displayed enough self-control not to retaliate. So I think this aptly illustrates the two aspects that we have seen in this regime.

Now, when Israel ponders the fate of this regime, it is therefore ambivalent, because it can look at either side. Of course, a big question mark for us, as for everybody else, is, what is the alternative? From what we've heard eloquently at the outset, there's a very impressive area of civic and prodemocracy groups. I have not seen that they have coalesced into a coherent political movement that can form a regime and a government. In my (estimation ?), it will happen at some point, because I agree with Murhaf. I think the regime is terminally ill. It may take a while before it is toppled or collapses under its own weight, but there will be a change. We don't know who's going to take over, and therefore we cannot be enthusiastic about the prospect.

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Now, let me go back for a moment to that Rami Makhlouf interview which I thought was extremely interesting, because there was a threat directed at us and at the United States, saying that if there will be no stability in Syria, there will be no stability in Israel; and two, we are not going to go away quietly.

Now, I think we saw a sequel to that threat a week later when several hundred Palestinians, pro-regime, were sent to the fence near Majdal Shams, went over the fence and penetrated Majdal Shams. And clearly they were sent by the

regime. They all carried pro-Bashar Assad placards and made pro-Bashar Assad statements. And to me, it seemed like a demonstration of what was implied in Rami Makhlouf's statements.

But one can even look at more ominous threats. I mean, Syria sits on an arsenal of Scud missiles with chemical and biological warheads that are pre-targeted. And if they decide that they are not going to go away quietly, there is some damage that they can inflict. So that's something we need to ponder. This is not a reason for supporting the regime, but something that we need to ponder and worry about.

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And second, from a – let's call it a parochial Israeli point of view, what is happening in Syria weakened the Iranian axis, the axis of resistance. If the fall of Mubarak was an achievement or a plus for Iran, what is happening in Syria is a minus. And I think the fact that Khaled Meshaal ran to Cairo to sign the agreement that he had not been willing to sign for a long time reflects the fact that in Hamas' own view this is a threat for them. So, that is another dimension.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the "Syrian option," quote/unquote, is not on the table for now. They – the Israeli peace strategy since the early 1990s, since the beginning of this peace process, was always based on looking at the two option(s) and asking oneself whether one wanted a Syria-first or a Palestine-first policy. And Israeli policy has shifted between the two at times.

In recent years, particularly after the 2006 war in Lebanon, there was a strong lobby, particularly inside the national security establishment, that argued for a Syria-first option, that things are not going to move very soon with the Palestinians; a deal with Syria is easier to make. And if we make a deal with Syria, we take a big break out of Iran. So that was an argument; sometimes it was echoed in the media but it was primarily an in-house debate inside the Israeli national security establishment.

But that argument is not valid anymore. Nobody's going to argue for making a deal with the Assad regime or with any regime in Syria before it consolidates itself, which means that of course the Palestinian option, the Palestinian track, has been beefed up by these events as an – as a policy option for Israel, which takes me to the next point.

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Some of the debate inside Israel goes to the point of, what if we had made a deal with the Assad regime? The people who supported the idea of a Syrian option are now being asked: Suppose that a year ago we would have made a deal with Syria, signed away the Golan Heights to Bashar Assad? And look at where Bashar Assad is today. What's the value of making such a deal? That I think needs to be seen in the larger context of the debate about existing peace treaties with Jordan and with Egypt, mostly in Egypt.

And some of the Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen are for abrogating. And in the establishment, people like Amr Moussa or the foreign minister are not for abrogating but are putting, I would say, tough interpretation on the agreement. And my message to those in Egypt who would like to take a more narrow, less well-intentioned interpretation of the peace agreement with Israel, don't do that, because you would be dealing a major blow to future agreements. Because in the internal Israeli debate, this will become a major argument: What's the point of making an agreement, making a territorial concession and finding out, maybe not five years later, in the Egyptian case, 30 years later that another government comes to power and changes that? Of course, at the end, it is a pro-democracy argument, namely democratic governments have a better record of keeping agreements than nondemocratic governments, which brings me to my final point.

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Israelis have a natural sympathy for the democracy movements, both as a country with its own democratic regime, and its people who believe that in the long range, peace agreements and our existence in the region will be secure when we live in a democratic region. So that is definitely the case.

The problem is that the road to that destination is bumpy. And on the road to be surrounded by democratic neighbors, there will be or there may be quite a few setbacks. This is hardly the case with regard to our outlook on Syria right now, because things are still at an – at an early phase and more to our general outlook on the region.

One final point about U.S. policy. The way I heard President Obama's speech, I think it was very categorical. He said to Bashar Assad, he said, either you lead a democratic transition or go away. Well, leading a democratic transition is going out from the left door and always going out from the right door. So I thought he was very clear. Thank you.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you. Well, that's a natural transition to Tamara, who can tell us best about U.S. policy. What is the U.S. policy towards Syria? Is the president ready or close to asking Bashar to leave, and how is that policy different from the one in Libya or Yemen?

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TAMARA WITTES: OK. Marwan, thanks, and thanks for the opportunity to be here with a group of real experts on Syria and the region. And I'm grateful for the chance to discuss this with all of you today.

I think that what you've heard from my colleagues is a consensus that things in Syria have changed irrevocably; that there's no going back; that one way or another, the Syrian government's relationship with its people, the Syrian nation's relationship with the region is never going to be the same. And I think that's a matter of absolute consensus, that's something on which we agree. The Syrian people have made crystal clear at this point their demand, and their demand is for a transition to democracy. And so I think Itamar's interpretation of the president's words is pretty accurate.

And, you know, just to be completely explicit about this, I think we have to say clearly that there's no foreign conspiracy here as some in Syria might claim. There's no external generator. What you see in Syria is what you're seeing across the region, driven by the same indigenous trends and forces that are driving change elsewhere in the region. And you see the Syrian people standing up with great bravery and determination and discipline, I would say, in the face of this for their dignity.

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The response of the Syrian regime of course has been one of murder and mass arrests. And I want to just say a word about an issue that's come up in these comments and a lot of the public discussion, which is the question of stability. And, you know, there are those who would argue that what's happening in Syria right now is a threat to regional stability and that people in the region are anxious about instability in Syria, especially, you know, should Assad leave office. So I think it's very important to note that it's the Syrian regime here that is the generator of instability in their response to what's taking place. They are fomenting violence and fomenting danger.

And the only way in Syria and, indeed, region-wide, to achieve true stability is through a process of democratic change and through reform across the region. And that was the president's message last week very clearly; that for all of us who have interests in the region – and the United States has clear and keen interests in this region – the demands for change must be responded to in a peaceful and appropriate manner, a manner that leads to a foundation for lasting stability in the region through reform.

Now in terms of what we are looking for at this point, I think, again, we've been pretty clear and the president was clear last week about what we believe the Syrian government must do. They must stop the violence against peaceful protesters. They must allow people to exercise their basic political rights. They must release political prisoners and detainees and stop these mass arrests. They need to allow human rights monitors to have access to Syria and to cities like Dara'a to investigate the abuses that have taken place.

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And as the president said, one way or another, a democratic transition needs to take place. Without taking those steps, I think it's clear that President Assad and the government in Syria will continue to be challenged from within the country and from outside. So far the regime has ignored these calls. What we've done so far is worked independently and with our international partners to escalate pressure on the government, to move in the right direction, to take these necessary steps and to clarify not only for the government as a whole but for individuals within that government the choices that are confronting them right now.

President Obama signed two executive orders imposing sanctions on individuals and entities who were responsible for human rights violations. That's in addition to the broader sanctions regime that we've long had on Syria in response to its international sponsorship of terrorism and its other very unconstructive behavior in the region. The executive orders include, as you know, sanctions against President Assad, senior officials of the government, leaders of the internal security forces and the military. And also we've sanctioned Iranian organizations like the IRGC Qods Force, who have been involved in supporting the Syrian government in repressing its citizens.

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I think that we've been able to take those steps in a decisive manner, in a way that has encouraged others in the international community to follow on with their own sanctions, and that has jointly given the international community additional tools to try and hold the Syrian government accountable for its human rights abuses and to try and, as I said, sharpen the choices. And so we were very pleased to see the European Union go forward with an additional set of sanctions over the weekend.

We've also worked with our international partners at the U.N. Human Rights Council to hold a special session on Syria which resulted in what I thought was a very strong resolution and something that we worked on closely with Syrian human rights activists and with the global community of human rights organizations. And that resolution included a follow-up mechanism for an investigation by the high commissioner for human rights.

Now, so far, the Syrian government hasn't allowed the high commissioner to send that team into Syria, but we're continuing to press for that. And I think, you know, as I said, the longer this goes on, the greater the risks for Syria, for the region; the greater the concern in the international community. And I think that, you know, we'll be continuing to work together with others who share these concerns to kind of escalate the pressure over time and to look at what additional measures we can take.

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But you know, I think one way or another, change is coming. And it's very important for us – all of us, therefore – to focus on how that's going to happen because how it happens, as I think you heard from Ammar and Murhaf, is as important – in fact, in some ways at this point, more important – than when.

Change is inevitable. And how it happens will be crucial for the future of Syria, for the future of the region. And as the U.S. government, concerned as we are about having a strong foundation for lasting stability in the region and seeing democratic change as a necessary element of getting there, we want to make sure that this happens in the best way possible.

Thanks.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you. So Paul, everybody seems to agree that this is not a question of if; it's a question of how and when. I'd like you to comment, maybe, on the regional implications of the fall of the Syrian regime. Would the fall of the Syrian regime hurt or help regional stability? What about Lebanon? What about the relationship with Hezbollah, and how that will affect –

Is a new regime likely to assume a position against Hezbollah, as Ammar said, or do you see a continuation of the relationship? What about the relationship with Iran – all the regional implications that will, you know, emerge from the fall of the Syrian regime – (laughter).

MR. SALEM: Thank you, Marwan. (Laughter.)

MR. MUASHER: And in five minutes, please.

MR. SALEM: Well, I also think it's not a question of if, but when and how, but also what. And that is a question – in other words, what's going to happen? Is it a transition? A transition to what?

Also, Syria, unlike the other countries who've gone through the Arab Spring, the Arab revolution, possibly has much more regional impact. You know, what happened in Egypt was tremendously important for Egyptians, had some impact on Israel, did not change the regional alliance structure and the regional balance of power; same in Tunisia, even same in Libya.

Syria obviously could be a game-changer for the entire Middle East, given its relations with Iran and Hezbollah and other things. So it is tremendously important regionally.

Secondly, given the nature, perhaps, of the Levant and the interconnectedness of sectarian and ethnic tensions, there is also more of a concern that some kind of implosion or explosion in Syria could have more effects on the immediate neighborhood. So obviously, this is something that is, you know, being followed very closely by all the countries surrounding Syria, and in its immediate environment.

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One thing I'd say is that, you know, there is speculation about the scenarios. It's – there is a consensus perhaps by most that a return to the status quo ante is not possible. I might single out Saudi Arabia as perhaps hoping that they could cling on to some kind – (chuckles) – of status quo ante, but I'll get to that in a moment.

However, a return to status quo ante is obviously not possible; the scenarios moving forward are not clear. And there are different hoped-for scenarios by different players. Obviously, what Ammar put forward is the ideal scenario, is the democratic thing that many people – certainly, the populations of the region would like to see.

But some of the concerns are as follows: One scenario that is possible – and maybe Murhaf hinted at it – is that the regime could hang on for a period of time. Iran has hung on for two years; Algeria is still, you know, dealing with issues in a different way. There is a concern given the violence and the willingness to use violence that this could go on for many months, maybe a year, maybe a year and a half, or two. That is one scenario that players in the region are wondering about.

A second scenario that was also hinted at is that there could be – let me put it differently – there are still some, like in Turkey, and even the last statement of Obama –one last chance. There's very little hope that that last chance will be taken, but there is a tiny window there –of a few weeks – that certainly the Turks are eager to see up to fruition. That is still theoretically a possibility, a scenario in which Bashar finally does something as he was speaking that he was – I think it's terribly unlikely.

[00:44:50]

A third scenario, I think hinted at by Ammar, is what happened in Egypt and Tunisia – that if the revolt expands to such a degree that it's so obvious that the regime, you know, has to do something, there could essentially be a kind of an internal coup; some general, some people from the Alawi community, and Sunnis and so on could say, to save the regime, we have to do something – get rid of so and so, and so and so, and offer a new deal, promise elections.

In hence, in that scenario, the regime would sort of save itself, but would promise and maybe undertake some significant reforms à la Egypt, à la Tunisia. I think that's completely unpredictable, but that is something that is a possibility, as I think Ammar hinted at.

A fourth scenario is a scenario, sort of, of revolution –that the regime doesn't do anything, and it's just a confrontation between a massive revolution and a very determined regime. Now first of all, many people in the region are also watching the Syrian population. It is the case that so far – and it's only been eight weeks, so this is very early – but there are very courageous protestors on the one hand but the bulk of the population, the big cities, unlike in Egypt, has not yet made its move. Now, are they afraid? Are they waiting? I mean, Ammar and Murhaf would know much more about that. But that tipping point, which would be utterly decisive – if that happened, then it's really all over.

[00:46:40]

If the rebellion becomes a complete revolution, then I think that leads to two other possibilities: either this will lead into a drawn-out, utterly destructive civil war – it's a powerful regime backed by a powerful community and has allies, and there are fears, I know from some of my Syrian friends, that that could happen.

Syria on one side has Iraq, which went into a bitter civil war, and has Lebanon which went into a bitter civil war. So there is fear of that even in the region that, you know, Syria could disintegrate into Sunni, Alawi, Christian, Kurdish, Arab, and that Syria might not be put together again for a long time.

The other option in the revolution scenario is a sort of a quick victory of the Sunni majority, of the opposition, and you know, within months or something the beginning or establishment of a new regime in Damascus. So really, the

region is faced with a baffling array of possibilities. And this is only eight weeks old, so – (chuckles) – obviously things are moving very, very quickly.

Let me just note a few things: On the Turkish side, Turkey probably has the most influence on Syria, given its control of water and other things. Turkey obviously had built very good relations with the Assad regime, and Syria was sort of the gateway for Turkey to entering in the Arab markets, and you know, the Arab east as well as Iraq. So Syria was very important. Erdoğan and Bashar's relationship was very warm and very, very positive.

[00:48:27]

Turkey's policy had been built on no problems with anybody. And that "zero-problems" policy has collapsed in the wake of Libya, and now in the wake of Syria. There, you have to take a stand.

Now, Turkey has been moving gradually towards a position of pressing Bashar Assad to institute reforms, but again, with a window similar to the Obama – maybe a slightly larger window than the Obama administration because Turkey, too, faces elections; a large Sunni population cannot tolerate massacres of Sunni people on its border, and does not want chaos, and would like reform to take place.

So Turkey, I would say, is very, very concerned about the situation in Syria; would very much prefer top-down reform; is very fearful that chaos in Syria would impact the Kurdish issue, would ruin any idea of Turkey exporting to Syria and through Syria, exporting to other parts of the Arab world. But also, if something dramatic happened in Syria, Turkey would have to support it. So it's also a fast-moving position.

Saudi Arabia, although it's had unhappy relationships on and off with Syria, curiously enough perhaps is the most supportive during this period. Possibly that's because Saudi Arabia is appreciative of Syria's support on the crackdown in Bahrain; and so it's a tit-for-tat – you let us crack down in Bahrain, you cover us on that.

And Syria went out on a limb against Iran and against Hezbollah's position to cover GCC on the Bahrain crackdown. In exchange, Saudi Arabia will look the other way, as it were, and has sent top-level envoys from Bahrain and from the Emirates to sort of express support, while talking about theoretically the need for reform. So the GCC position is still very weighty and still very important.

[00:50:23]

In addition, Saudi Arabia, I think, is very concerned that the Arab Spring does not spring over the Suez Canal – that it stays – (chuckles) – in North Africa and doesn't make it to the Levant because obviously, Saudi Arabia and the GCC doesn't want to deal with its own internal governance issues, and certainly would like to stop this wave of democratization.

However, if push comes to shove in Syria – in other words, if the bulk of the population rises up and it really becomes a choice, you know, that it's no longer viable to try to support the regime and hope for some kind of deal – then Saudi Arabia, like Turkey, would have to side with the Sunni community and would flip. But that is not the case so far. I mean, obviously, Iran is very supportive of the regime. It's curious to see Saudi Arabia and Iran both very friendly – somewhat friendly to Syria at this point.

Egypt – I think Mr. Rabinovich has indicated the switch of Hamas from Syria to Egypt, and that is a significant loss of influence and loss of cards by Syria on that issue.

Iran, obviously, is terribly concerned; Hezbollah is terribly concerned: If the Syrian regime is lost, Iran effectively loses its access to Syria, and through Syria loses its access to Lebanon. And Hezbollah loses access to the Israeli border, to Palestine, to the whole Arab-Israeli conflict. This would be the biggest blow to Iranian regional policy in the Middle East probably for a couple of decades. It would still obviously have tremendous influence in Iraq, and it would still be a major regional power, but that whole game that it played through Syria, Lebanon and Hamas and the Palestinians with Israel and the U.S. and so on – that would be lost. So that is a very dramatic risk, a very dramatic possibility for Iran.

[00:52:24]

Coming to Lebanon, Hezbollah obviously is very, very concerned. There is rumors that Hezbollah is assisting and advising Syrian forces in Syria as how to manage this situation. Hezbollah media – it's very sort of funny to watch the Manar TV station because they're very excited about revolutions in Egypt, and they know the coverage is, the heroic revolutionaries in Tunisia have brought down the evil dictator, and in Egypt, the great sacrifices of the great people – and in Syria, the agents of Zionism and imperialism – (laughter) – it's like in the same sentence. So they're certainly very, very concerned.

But you know, like everybody else, they are faced with these multiple scenarios. In many of the scenarios, even though the Syrian regime in most the scenarios will be much weaker and much more embattled, it could still – either the regime could hang on for a year or more, or there could be an internal coup which maintains sort of the regional posture but changes the internal situation sort of à la Egypt, à la Tunisia.

[00:53:37]

So Hezbollah is also faced with questions, you know. It's not clear what the outcome in Syria will be. One of the outcomes is civil war in which there would be different considerations. But certainly, this is the biggest threat to Hezbollah, since the 2006 war, certainly. And it's a very, very big threat.

If Syria switches – and as Ammar and others know – if the opposition, the Sunni and the Sunni communities takes over power, you know, completely, there will be a complete switch, and there will be much – I would say revenge, or whatever. But I mean, Hezbollah is a target. It's spoken about quite openly. And Hezbollah would be completely isolated if there was a complete switch in Damascus.

Now in Lebanon, some of the questions are, if Hezbollah feels cornered, will they preemptively expand their influence in Beirut and over the government in order to protect themselves, which is a possibility? Or will they lie low, you know, be more – and negotiate and try to – a soft landing for themselves?

The hints coming out of them right now are threatening – that, you know, don't think that we're weak, and don't think that we can't do things if Syria grows weaker. But very hard to predict, hard to say.

Finally, a couple of words about Lebanon – Lebanon obviously has lived in the Syrian shadow since the late '60s, very much affected by what might go on. For the immediate future, the crisis in Syria has completely suspended any government-formation process in Lebanon until the situation is clarified. Both March 8 and March 14, the two major coalitions, are not clear –does this help them? Does this hurt them? What is the balance of power?

[00:55:27]

Najib Mikati, the prime minister-designate, is taking his time. He feels that he's in a pretty comfortable position; March 8 is not in a comfortable position. So he's taking his time as well. Interestingly, March 14 has not been vocal about the situation in Syria possibly because the GCC and Saudi Arabia are giving Syria so far a soft pass. And hence, you do not see the loud, you know, statements which you might have heard a couple of years ago from March 14 vis-à-vis Syria.

The biggest fear for Lebanon, probably, would be the risk of civil war in Syria. Lebanon has lived through a civil war. Lebanon and Syria are very closely connected. There are great fears that if things just go completely south in Syria, that Lebanon would have a hard time maintaining its stability.

And I will just end with that.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Paul. These are five very interesting presentations, and they've posed at least in my mind several dozen questions. (Laughter.) But I don't want to monopolize the discussion since I'm also aware of time. So let us open it up and take maybe a group of questions each time.

Please identify yourself, and be as short as you can. Please, sir.

[00:56:46]

Q: Daniel Serwer from Johns Hopkins-SAIS. There are two elements have been missing in the protests so far, at least missing in part – one is the split in the security forces; the other is the mass of the middle class, let us say. Could you address both of those, and the prospects for seeing them in the future?

MR. ABDULHAMID: Marwan, since I have to leave, could I answer that? Really sorry about that. But actually, I just want to address this question because it's really very important. And we get asked a lot about this.

I think I've hinted as to the split in the security or the army level. We already saw some defections at the lower ends of the army – some troops, some officers really have defected. And they even clashed with the divisions loyal to Bashar al-Assad and Maher al-Assad. This situation happened in Dara'a, but it was quickly contained within a few days. And most of these troops basically are assumed to have been killed; some of then ran away and disappeared into the local population.

[00:57:56]

And now, we're seeing, it seems to me, a split also in the governorate of Idlib, or the province of Idlib. Some army troops also have joined the protestors. And they try to shield them against the security officers. But so far, we haven't really seen anything substantive; we haven't really seen major defections on part of the army generals.

And I believe that, as I've said in my remarks in the beginning, that we are not going to see this until there is a clear perception by the army generals and, you know, top Ba'ath party officials that the international community really means business in Syria.

I get the message here clearly because I'm based in Washington, D.C., and I agree with what Tamara said. I believe that this administration, when they give Bashar a choice between leads democratic transition or sort of get out of the way, they really mean, get out of the way either way, with some dignity or without dignity.

[00:58:59]

And so in a sense, they are pressing for complete change and overhaul of the system. But that message is not reaching-- it's still vague by the standards of the Syrian army generals. There is too much at stake, and as I said, their culture is imbued with a lot of suspicion vis-à-vis America. So unless there is a clear message, unless there is, Bashar, get out of the way, you know, forget about the either/or, just get out of the way, they are not going to understand it. And I don't think any splits will be happening.

So our hope in the opposition is that if we can form a transitional council, which is – you know, we have a conference coming up in Turkey; we are trying to do that. And it's not going to be easy, really. But if you form a transitional council that perhaps can get endorsed by the protest movement inside Syria, that might actually help the international community, help this administration, help the EU sort of formulate a clear message towards Syria because they can see at least the interim alternative taking shape. And this is basically the best we can do. The real alternative will have to be voted by the Syrian people, hopefully through a democratic process.

[01:00:15]

As far as the Sunni elite or the commercial elite or the middle class, actually in Damascus itself, the middle class has been protesting. I'm not only talking about Midan or some of the districts in Damascus that have actually taken a part in the protest movement. But most of the middle class in Damascus have really been driven into the periphery. So all of these suburbs around Damascus that have been protesting and getting besieged by tanks are really – the Damascene are made up, for the most part, you know, of the Damascene middle class that has been driven out of the internal city because of the high price of housing, because of the economic conditions had become too, you know, difficult for them to hang on to that central location. They've been driven out of the Damascus itself into the periphery.

And Damascus – the population of Damascus is really very diverse at this stage. So it's very difficult to get something going between all of these different groups that are living inside Damascus. But for the most part, if you want to look at the Damascene middle class, the Damascene middle class have joined the revolution since almost the early days of the revolution.

Aleppo – I think the security is tight, the closeness to the Turkey border meant that Aleppine society have really over the past couple of years, you know, seen a lot of economic revival. They've benefitted a lot from the relationship with Turkey. So they have a lot at stake. And I think the middle class is more comfortable in Aleppo than elsewhere in Syria. But still, around Aleppo itself, you can see a lot of communities joining the protest movement.

[01:02:01]

It's really, I think, a matter of time anyway. It's a matter of logistics. In Damascus and Aleppo, we have about a hundred thousand security officers in each city. So – and because of the size of the city, when you have the protest movement in one mosque or two mosques and there are only 300 or 400 people getting together, they immediately get besieged by 2,000 security officers. So it's very difficult to coalesce and to create a Tahrir-like moment.

But it's a question of logistics rather than intention. I think we are going to go at one point and see sort of a bigger demonstration in Damascus and Aleppo. It's only a matter of time.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you very much, Ammar.

Q: Sam Lewis, a retired diplomat of sorts. I'd just like to thank the panel. All of you've done a terrific job, I think, of illuminating different aspects of the problem. And Marwan's questions were very sharp, as always.

There's one subject that hasn't been mentioned, though, and I am really curious about it. That's the Alawite leadership family community and what their stake is in these various scenarios. And is there an intra-Alawite factor that ought to be taken into account as you analyze the scenarios?

[01:03:23]

MR. MUASHER: Let's take a couple of more. Yes, Rafi.

Q: Rafi Danziger with AIPAC. And my questions are addressed to Murhaf and to Paul.

To Murhaf, I think that in the past, the Syrian regime has been quite consistent in fighting to the last Lebanese soldier or the last Palestinian soldier but not to the last Syrian soldier. And so do you think that it's likely that they will try to push Hezbollah very hard to start a war against Israel?

And to Paul, if this happens, do you think Hezbollah would actually do it, on one hand strengthening the possibility of the Syrian regime to survive; but on the other hand, of course, taking a very big risk for itself?

MR. MUASHER: One more. Ted.

Q: Ted Kattouf, former ambassador to Syria. After 90 – after Desert Storm, it was widely believed that it was inevitable that Saddam Hussein would fall and be overthrown by his own people. George H.W. Bush famously encouraged uprisings among the Kurds and the Shia, et cetera. And Saddam didn't fall. We had to go into Iraq and depose him in 2003.

[01:04:47]

So – moreover, the Syrians took in about a million Iraqi refugees. And I've heard the stories, particularly from minorities of what they were subjected to after Saddam was deposed.

So my question would be – and perhaps for Murhaf more than anyone – isn't it possible that Bashar, having played the sectarian card, will have convinced his community and some other minority communities, particularly the Christians, that they're better off with him than without him, particularly when there's nobody who really speaks for the opposition and can truly reassure them?

MR. MUASHER: Okay. Let's take this group of questions. So who wants to –

MR. JOUEJATI: May I take the last question first?

MR. MUASHER: Please.

MR. JOUEJATI: The sectarian issue, you're absolutely right. And I think this is precisely what is happening as we speak, is that the regime has an interest in persuading minorities that should the regime collapse, that there would be a civil war and that they would be the victims of it, given that they are minorities.

[01:05:57]

I would go further than this. I think the regime – there are some reports that the regime has begun to arm Alawi villages. And the regime is doing its very best to scare Syrian Christians.

And I would go even further than this. In the next phase, if we see explosions take place in churches, I would not be surprised if this was of the regime's making. So, very much the Assad regime is stoking the flames of sectarianism. And that is their justification for remaining power, of either you will have stability or after us you will have chaos and sectarian warfare. And Paul alluded to this, in that the Syrians have seen what went on in Iraq during the civil war and have seen what went on in Lebanon and are mortified at the absence of stability.

That leads me to Ambassador Lewis' question. The Alawis, of course, are not a monolith. The Alawis, as any group, are not of one opinion. There are many Alawis who are against the Assad regime. I am thinking of the faction, for example, of Salah Jadid, that had been overthrown by Hafez al-Assad. And others – one of the leaders of the Syrian opposition today, Aref Dalila, is himself an Alawi.

And there are those, of course, whose destinies, they perceive, are tied to the Assad family. So again, within the Alawi community itself, there is not necessarily a unity. Although, I would venture to say that most Alawis are probably behind the regime. Now, this is one of the weak points of the opposition in that thus far, the opposition that has been – again, has done a remarkable job on the ground of mobilizing people against the regime – I don't think has done enough to allay the fears of the Syrian Christian community or of the Alawi community. And if they were able to do that, that would lead to bigger things in terms of their revolt. Then Damascus would not be as immune as it been yet. If you have the Syrian Christians that are on the side of the revolution, then, as Paul said if Damascus and Aleppo join into the fray, then it is truly the end of the regime.

[01:08:34]

May I here very briefly tackle the middle-class question, in that again, the middle class is not a monolith, especially in Damascus? You do have a public sector bureaucracy that is the basic constituency of the Assad regime. The bureaucracy has an interest in the perpetuation of the status quo. Why? Because they derive privileges and interests from it.

This is not to say that all of the middle class is with the Assad regime. You have the merchant class, of course, that is with the Bashar al-Assad regime, but here we have to look at the generational factors as well. And you will have many merchants who want the stability of the regime, and you have their children who are out on the street calling for the collapse of the regime.

Finally, will this push the Assad regime to have Hezbollah do something against Israel? Maybe. Probably. But let me preempt Paul by saying that Hezbollah is not crazy enough or, here – pun intended – is not suicidal enough – (laughter) – to necessarily do the bidding of the Assad regime.

[01:09:46]

MR. MUASHER: Itamar, you wanted – you wanted to say something?

MR. RABINOVICH: Yeah. I want to respond to Ambassador Lewis' question. Clearly, one of the more interesting, intriguing aspects of events in Syria has been the coming of the sectarian genie out of the bottle. As a rule, Syrians and other Arabs have been sensitive for many years to Western or Israeli, quote, "Middle East experts," looking for these sectarian regime because we all are Arabs. And by looking at Druze, Alawites, Christians, Shias and so on and so forth, you are trying to divide us, applying a divide-and-rule policy that they

French were notorious for and has been an uncomfortable feeling among Syrians and Arabs that outsiders, particularly when dealing with this issue.

Also in the last years of Hafez al-Assad's regime and during the Bashar regime, the issue seemed to have subsided for quite some time. Undoubtedly, Hafez al-Assad had achieved a certain legitimacy as an Arab leader. And some of what Bashar al-Assad said in the – in the famous – or infamous Wall Street Journal interview, where they explained why what's happening in Egypt could not happen in Syria because we are standing up to America and Israel, had some merit to it, because obviously Hafez al-Assad was an Arab hero to many.

And this, plus the marriages and alliances with parts of the Sunni bourgeoisie have created the sense or illusion for quite a few years that this was less of an issue now than it had been earlier. This has ended. It was brought out from both sides. Let's say from the Sunni side the firebrand who became so well-known through Al-Jazeera, has spoken openly against the Alawites in Syria. And by the way, Al-Jazeera, unlike other cases, has been against the Syrian regime in this instance.

[01:12:23]

And secondly, elements in the regime have been playing it up, if I go back to the Rami Makhlouf interview, he speaks about it quite openly, which would not have been the case a few years ago.

Now, nobody really knows how the inner councils of the Alawite community work. They are tribes, there are federations, there are factions. I don't think that there is a secret cabal that meets somewhere and makes decisions on behalf of the community, but there is, let's call it, a sense of the community.

And I fully agree with Paul Salem, the prospect of an internal coup is one of the more likely scenarios. When enough Alawites reach a conclusion that Bashar al-Assad has become too dangerous for them, they may opt for somebody who is better suited to deal with the crisis, at least for a while. But definitely the – call it the sectarian – you know, there's a word in Arabic called – (in Arabic) – which is untranslatable. The closest is actually the Irish case where being Catholic or Protestant is not just a question of your religious affiliation, but is a proper national and an ethnic affiliation.

[01:13:53]

So sectarianism, in this sense of the term, is definitely out. And I think the fear in the neighboring countries, be it Lebanon or being Iraq or being Turkey that this could spread and have a devastating effect on their own societies is a legitimate one.

MR. MUASHAR: Paul.

MR. SALEM: Yeah, just a couple of comments. I mean, the Christians in Syria are already very, very scared, but they will not be very decisive in what goes on. It's really the Sunni community's decision, as it were. And many have already made that decision. Others are still on the fence. The bulk of the Alawite community certainly supports the regime, but that doesn't mean that there could be consideration of what to do to sort of save the regime.

The regime threatens the consequences of civil war but cannot win a civil war. They know they will lose a civil war. But they know that the threat of civil war certainly scares the minorities, but the minorities are not that significant.

But it also scares many of the Sunni elites, middle class and so on, as in Aleppo and otherwise. They don't want their country to be like Basra and Baghdad and Beirut during their civil wars.

[01:15:05]

So the real question is between Sunni and Alawi, effectively. And within the Alawi community, they're still sticking with the regime because the regime is still managing; it's managing poorly. Things are getting worse, perhaps, by the week. But as I mentioned earlier, if the Sunni community acts more decisively and it becomes clear that, indeed, they are on the brink of civil war, and they know that they will lose a civil war, then you might see the acts internally that we saw previously.

When troubles began in Syria, my first concern was war across the Lebanese-Israeli border because I do think Syria would want something of that to take place. What we saw on May 15 was the biggest incident since the 2006 war, and it was a very dramatic event which broke the unwritten rules of engagement that Hezbollah had played by and Syria had played by for years. So already, that's an indication of a different approach.

I don't think Hezbollah itself would have preemptively said – and I agree – they would not risk a full war with Israel. But Syria also has enough agents, enough influence in Lebanon to lob some rockets, to do some things to squeeze Hezbollah. You know, what happened on the border last week was a form of brinksmanship, which could happen again and could lead to unintended consequences.

I do think the Syrian regime would welcome much more tension along the Israeli-Lebanese border, and possibly on the Golan because that would immediately change the narrative, and they would hope for some impact on that.

MR. MUASHER: Adnan.

[01:16:49]

Q: My name is Adnan Abu-Odeh; I am from the ICG. I have a short comment on what Ambassador Rabinovich said in his first statement. I guess that what you refer to as the several hundred Palestinians who crossed the borders a few days ago, I think that was orchestrated with the regime contrary to what you have said. It was to discredit what Rami Makhlouf said, rather than to confirm what Rami Makhlouf has said.

And I have a short question to Paul: I noticed that you have touched on the impact of what's happening in Syria on all countries surrounding Syria, except Jordan – (laughter). Would you please comment on that? (Chuckles.)

MR. MUASHER: OK. Please.

Q: Thank you. Paul, one more potential scenario I could squeeze in there –

MR. SALEM: Great; let me write it down.

Q: – in that list of scenarios. And it's perhaps more long-term for the future of Syria. Before we get into democracy, we're going to go through a process of democratization, which is inherently fraught with peril. And the system is not ready for mass participation. You don't have political parties, and the institutions are almost non-existent.

If you end up with – and this is where Syrian nationalism is going to come to the fore – if you end up with a group of Syrian nationalists who are even more radical than the Assads – because you remember, the Assads came as a correctionist movement, as a revolution from above – what are the likelihood of that scenario, and is that even worse than the Assad regime in terms of foreign policy choices?

[01:18:43]

MR. MUASHER: The woman right in the back.

Q: Thanks. Michele Kelemen with National Public Radio. I have a question for Tamara: Why not sharpen the language, as Ammar suggested? What are the dangers of doing that? And why not go to the U.N. and force the Russians to shield Assad, if that's what they want to do? I mean, it just seems like a thousand people then – the international community's response has been very weak so far.

MR. MUASHER: And Marina.

Q: Marina Ottaway with the Carnegie Endowment. I'd like to go back to the issue of the protest because it seems to me that that will determine what is going to affect the calculus of the various communities, the unfolding of the different scenario.

And one thing that is very difficult to understand from Washington is, to what extent did this pattern of the protest, which is so different from what we saw in Egypt or Tunisia – there is no center; it's popping up all over the place, relatively small protests all over – how much is it the result of a deliberate tactic? We are not going to do the big, you know, the Tahrir because in the case of Syria it could turn into Tiananmen Square and be crushed that way. Or how much is it a demonstration of weakness and lack of coordination, lack of an overall movement that cannot come together? Thanks.

MR. MUASHAR: Let's start with you, Tamara.

MS. WITTES: (Chuckles.) OK. I'll just take Michele's question briefly and then we can get back to this really interesting analysis of the politics on the ground.

But Michele, why not sharpen the language? I think we did sharpen the language, and I think that we are continuing to assess every day. But more important than what we say is what we can do and what we are doing.

And that gets to your second question. From our perspective, we have been working closely with others in the international community, particularly European nations, to do what we can to sharpen our actions internationally. And I think we are very ready to consider additional steps and hopeful that we can get enough consensus to move forward.

MR. MUASHAR: Itamar? No? Murhaf.

MR. JOUEJATI: On the question of more radical vis-à-vis Israel, and in terms of foreign policy than the Assads, you know, the type of revolt, of uprising in Syria today, does not suggest that it is led by radical Islamists. And at any rate, Islam in Syria is not a radical thing. The Muslim Brotherhood of today I think are quite different from the Muslim Brotherhood of the 1980s. And if we take Sadreddine Bayanouni at his word and the general trend of the Muslim Brotherhood, I think that Syria in the future, if there is going to be any government that includes the

Muslim Brotherhood – and there might surely be – then Syria would fall within the context of the Arab Peace Initiative; Syria would not go beyond that.

[01:22:07]

There are going to be extremists in Syria who will always call for not only the liberation of the Golan, but the destruction of Israel. But these are truly, I think, a minority. And the Assad regime again is making this a boogeyman towards the West and Israel in particular of if we leave, then you are going to have people even more radical than us, which leads me to Dr. Abu-Odeh's remark about Rami Makhlouf. I think Rami Makhlouf's interview with what's happened on the Golan is very consistent. He was promising instability to the Israelis. And a few days later you have hundreds of Palestinians that have crossed the fence. And this was certainly a message from the regime, because no Syrian citizen or anybody else can cross the Muhabart checkpoint before getting to the Golan Heights, let alone hundreds of people in buses screaming and shouting.

About the uprising, it is spread out. I think this is tactical. I think it is evidence of amazing coordination and strength, not weakness. And what is particularly interesting is whenever the army, which would have a particular town in a siege like Dara'a, whenever they withdraw, then you have again an uprising and they are forcing them to come back. And so I think this is designed to weaken the army and to weaken the morale of the army. But that they are able to talk to the street and have the street respond across Syria I think is evidence of a lot of strength.

[01:23:57]

MR. SALEM: Well, a few comments. I mean, on that – what happened with the Palestinians on the borders, I mean, yes, certainly there was an obvious element of Syria and Hezbollah coordinating this. But we also need to know that there is something going on in the Palestinian community after the Arab uprisings that they themselves and many Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria, at the camps and so on, have been organizing and wanting to do something and not the situation lie as it has for decades. So I think Syria and Hezbollah took advantage of that momentum and facilitated. But there is something going on in the Palestinian community which might later erupt on the West Bank or elsewhere. That was part of what happened on May 15.

The Muslim Brotherhood, you know, obviously stands to be a major player in Syria, if and when it goes through some violent or nonviolent transition. There are delegations from the Muslim Brotherhood already going around trying to reassure Christians and others that if we come to power, don't worry. You know, that message is being communicated.

Also, Turkey and the Justice and Development Party is certainly –has hosted the Muslim Brotherhood, hosted the opposition, much to – in defiance of – obviously of Syria. And Syria's reacting in a very hostile manner to what the AKP is doing there.

[01:25:20]

And clearly Turkey feels that if there is a transition – now, they're trying to convince Bashar al-Assad to bring in the Muslim Brotherhood and to include them and then keep the regime in power but change internally. The Turks are encouraging the Muslim Brotherhood to be moderate and to reach out to other communities and to be democratic players, if and when that takes place. That also could be Turkey's strategy to project power in Syria and in the Arab world and possibly in Egypt by being a main player with the new Muslim Brotherhood that emerges.

I think the dynamic in the cities and the suburbs of the cities, as well as the rural areas – and I think that's – you know, there's the downtown cities, there's the poor suburbs and then there's the regions – and it is something, you know, very important to watch. I think maybe part of it is coordination and part of it also reflects socioeconomic and political and security realities that certainly the desperation socioeconomically is in the rural areas, which are enormous in Syria, and in the suburbs. And the downtowns areas and the more central areas are more well-off, and I think that is a reality.

The fear factor, the wall of fear, for many in Syria has not yet been broken. Some have broken it, others haven't. Unlike in Egypt where it was broken quickly and totally and it became clear that the army was not going to shoot at civilians so people could go down in the millions, this has not happened in Syria. So this dynamic is still very much in play. And we're in a situation where it's not clear who's going to make the first move. I mean, as Ammar indicated, many in Syria are saying to the outside world, you know, take a stand then we will move, or take a stand and then something will happen. And of course, many in the outside world are looking as things happen in Egypt: The Egyptians moved first and then the world followed.

[01:27:14]

So we're at this moment of who takes the risk; you know, who moves? And it's not clear who is going to make that move. The Syrians have also been very aware of what's happened in Libya, both the fact that, you know, Libya entered – has entered a civil war that's been very destructive. They don't want that there. They also see that despite the sanctions and the no-fly zone, Gadhafi is still there –in part of the country, but he's still there. And then the Sadat example – perhaps he could be there for months or years. There's no clear end game in Libya. If Libya is resolved, I think that will give a big boost to Syria, both for Syrians as well as the international community which will no longer be so worried about Libya; will have a bit more time and energy to focus elsewhere.

I agree with Murhaf that I don't think there is a Syrian ultranationalist or, I don't think that's a scenario. I think it's a very internal issue, and the issue of the opposition to Israel I think most people recognize has been used as a fig leaf. And I don't think that's a possibility really at this point.

MR. MUASHAR: OK. Yes, please.

[01:28:20]

Q: Thank you. Dori Enderle, National Defense University. My question is for Tamara. We were all disappointed to see the Lebanese security forces on the border disregard international norms and responsibilities by forcing refugees back into Syria even as Syrian troops were there to threaten those refugees. Is there a lot of concern within the U.S. government over this episode?

MR. MUASHAR: OK.

Yes, please, in the back.

Q: Hi, Mona Yacoubian, U.S. Institute of Peace. I have three short questions.

The first is for Murhaf,, what is your perspective or what perspective do you think the Syrian opposition would take vis-à-vis a stronger statement from the United States? What are the pluses and minuses of that?

[01:29:12]

For Paul, could you elaborate a little bit more on the ways in which Assad could stir trouble inside Lebanon? For example, do you foresee the possibility of a resumption of assassinations and bombings?

And finally, for Ambassador Rabinovich, in Israel is there – could you foresee a scenario where military strategists may view Hezbollah as being on the defensive and perhaps sense an opportunity to, in fact, precipitate something from the Israeli side?

MR. MUASHAR: OK. Yes, please.

Q: Hi. Ali Moussa (ph), Project on Middle East Democracy. My question is for Ms. Wittes. A few weeks ago, you appeared before the House, and you defended the work, the continued mission of Ambassador Ford in Syria, describing his coordination efforts between humanitarian victims and organizations. I'd like to know, in the weeks since, has intensified U.S. rhetoric and measures compromised that mission whatsoever? Thank you.

MR. MUASHAR: Yes, please. And that will be the last question, so we'll give the final –

Q: I love getting the last question. (Laughter.) I'm from National Defense University. And I want to ask about the other "I" countries; in other words, when Iraq was in such chaos – and some will say it still is, but that's not – that's not the issue – everyone was involved in meddling in Iraq, and still is to some extent; Syria, not the least. Some consider Iraq an arm of Iran. I don't.

But there are some people – question is, is there any evidence of Iraq, or Iran through Iraq, trying to meddle in one side or the other? Because I could see where the Iraqis would be against the Assad regime – it's natural to be against anything that's Assad – or to be trying to work to bolster it, strengthen it in its struggle.

MR. MUASHAR: Who wants to take the first shot? Shall we start with you again, Tamara?

MS. WITTES: OK, sure.

On the question about the Syrian-Lebanese border, I mean, look, all countries have obligations under international law not to return refugees to places where they face a likely scenario of persecution or violence, and that's a universal standard. But I think that what we see in those events is the Syrian military using force against civilians in towns along the border. And that's an example precisely of what I was talking about before, is that the choices the Syrian government has made in how its responded to these peaceful protests is generating instability and is generated threats. And I think that's what's important to focus on.

In terms of Ambassador Ford – and thanks for the question – you know, Ammar made the point in his opening remarks that in some ways, the last couple of years have put Bashar Assad and the Syrian government under more of a microscope amongst their own people, because without the excuse of isolation and estrangement, they were under more pressure to deliver. And I thought that was a very interested insight.

[01:32:39]

Ambassador Ford said at his confirmation hearing that straight talk would be his primary mission, and that has been the case every day he's been in Damascus engaging at senior levels with the Syrian government, delivering our messages directly to the top, which is absolutely essential in situations like this so that there is no misunderstanding about our position or about what we're looking for the Syrian government to do.

He and the embassy are also engaged in reporting and providing information of course to us about what's happening. And given that the Syrian government continues to bar international media coverage of the events inside the country, that's an extremely important function, and doing what we can, along with others in the international community, to press the Syrian government to release those who were detained, including, unfortunately, a number of American citizens who have been detained in the course of these events. So we continue to believe that Ambassador Ford is an incredible asset to the work that we're trying to do.

[01:33:45]

MR. RABINOVICH. Yeah, the question about Israel, quote, unquote, "taking advantage" of the situation in order to attack Hezbollah, I don't think so; it would be foolhardy for two reasons. One has already been mentioned by way of speculation with the Syrians, and I would also add the Iranians, trying to create a diversion by using Hezbollah to heat up the border. Why should Israel do their bidding? That doesn't make any sense from an Israeli point of view.

And secondly, we well remember Lebanon 2006. And if Hezbollah sits on an arsenal of dozens of thousands of missiles and rockets, if there are no easy or quick victories or even if one were to overcome or put aside the first argument, it brings you to the – to the second point: in an effort to deal to do away with Hezbollah, we'd end up with a rain of rockets and missiles on Israel; it would be self-defeating. I don't think this is a real prospect.

MR. JOUEJATI: With regard to the question on a stronger U.S. statement, well, this is public knowledge. I have heard leaders of the Syrian revolution from the underground speak to the foreign press through satellite telephone, very much supportive of the statement of President Obama; very, very happy that it was done. If it were a bit stronger, that is, not to leave the choice of leading the reforms that are not going to take place, but simply of please get out of the way, that would have been very, very nice.

But here, the strength of the statement should really be calibrated, because too strong of a statement would be the kiss of death for Syrian democrats. Remember, for example, in the days of the Bush administration – (chuckles) – the Syrian democratic movement had to take several steps back as a result of the Bush administration and how it was counterproductive to them; so stronger statement certainly, but, again, well-calibrated and nicely worded.

[01:36:05]

With regard to the question on Iraq, you know, Iran does not need Iraq, I think, to intervene in what is happening in Syria, because Iran is already there. And I am of the view that there are trainers and equipment from Iran and so on. But having said that, having said that, we have to remember that Maliki had been himself a refugee in Syria for a long time and owes a debt to Syria both him and the Iskiri (ph) people. But he is also one that was very frustrated with Syria as a result of the facilitation of the jihadists into Iraq.

Having said that also, the Shias within the Iraqi government probably would not want to see an Assad regime toppled, because that would – because Iraq would be contiguous then to a Sunni-ruled country. And so, again, we'll have to make the calculation the balance of what the Iraqis would want. But again, Iran is in Syria and will not need its Iraqi allies in order to do this and that in Syria.

[01:37:12]

MR. MUASHAR: Itamar wanted to –

MR. RABINOVICH: I forgot to respond to Professor Jeffrey's (question before. I think we've spoken around this issue before, but it can be stated explicitly. We may see a return to the period discussed in Patrick Seale's classic book, "The Struggle for Syria" in 1945-1958, where you had a very weak Syrian state, and everybody in the neighborhood was intervening in Syrian affairs and Syria was a stage on which regional politics were played. Soin one of the scenarios that Paul Salem described to us before, sort of a lingering, weak Syria, this definitely could be – we could witness a repetition to the '45-'58 period, definitely.

MS. MUASHAR: Paul.

MR. SALEM: I mean, could Syria stir trouble in Lebanon? certainly it could – and not only Lebanon and there's – you know, newspapers close to the regime that have threatened Turkey, that they can use the Kurdish card as they used previously to stir up Kurdish trouble there. They're threatened to use the Alawi connections to stir up Alawi trouble in Turkey. So there's also a tug of tension between Turkey and Syria which might get much more acute.

In Lebanon, yeah, I think there is the possibility that if they feel that they're going down, they will take others down with them and leave things somewhat aflame. However, in Lebanon, there are a couple of considerations. First of all, they already brought down the Saad Hariri-led March 14 government, and they were hoping to form a friendly government. So their allies have been feeling like winners in Lebanon. So I don't think Syria would want to spoil that. They were trying to push for the formation of a friendly government.

[01:39:10]

One party, I think, has strengthened its position and is sort of counterbalancing that and feels quite secure about that, so I don't think that's going to happen. Hence the risk in Lebanon might be more of a Hezbollah pre-emptive move more than assassinations and chaos. I think also Syria –the relationship with Saudi Arabia is still only the good relationship that they have. Hence they have to keep that in mind in dealing with issues in Lebanon.

I agree with Murhaf on the Iraq-Iran issue. I have nothing to add on that.

MR. MUASHAR: Thank you very much. I hope you agree with me that this has been a very interesting session on Syria, and I hope you give – (applause) – join me in giving a round of applause. Thank you all again.

(END)