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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Well, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. Welcome to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. I'm Tamara Cofman Wittes, the director of the Center, and I'm very pleased to see you all early on a Monday morning. I hope you got some coffee in the back.

We're here to discuss, I think, a very difficult policy challenge for the United States, for the Middle East, and indeed for the world as a whole. And we're launching a publication today, copies of which I think are available outside, called *Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change.* We put this together essentially because Syria is beginning to look in many ways more and more like that problem from hell that Samantha Power described in 2002. Mass atrocities and abuses of power by a government, division amongst major powers in the international community that stymies efforts for response through international institutions, and significant risks involved both in potential interventions and risks involved in inaction as well, in such a complex way and complex manner as to make it very difficult to calculate the cost and benefits of different potential policy responses.

But at a humanitarian level, at a human level, the situation in Syria today is intolerable. So it's incumbent upon us to seriously examine what the potential paths for response are and to try and assess in as clear eyed a manner as we can the risks and benefits of different types of action. And that's what this Middle East memo is designed to do. We brought together four of our top scholars -- Dan Byman, Mike Doran, Ken Pollack, and Salman Shaikh -- to examine different elements of the potential international response to the situation in Syria, and we have all four of them here today. Three in this room, one in Doha -- Salman, at our Brookings Doha Center with an audience there as well. This is yet another event where we're able to use modern technology to bring

together audiences in the region and audiences in Washington, scholars in the region and scholars in Washington, to develop a richer conversation and really try to find a common approach to tough issues. So, I'm delighted that Salman and the Brookings Doha audience are with us. We're going to give them a chance to ask questions as well.

Let me introduce each of them very briefly. I think they're probably known to all of you. Dan Byman, I'm proud to say, is the director of research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. Ken Pollack, sitting to his left, was my predecessor as director of the Saban Center and is now back to full-time writing, which we all look forward to, as a senior fellow here in the Center. Mike Doran is our Roger Hertog senior fellow at the Saban Center. And Salman Shaikh is the director of our Brookings Doha Center.

What we're going to do today is, I'm going to turn over the microphone to Dan Byman who is going to give you an overview of the project and of some of the issues that are raised in this discussion of options, and then the other three will each lay out some of the arguments regarding the option that they delved into in this short paper, and then we'll open it up for some questions and comments.

So, Dan. The floor is yours.

MR. BYMAN: Good morning, and thank you very much for joining us here today.

As Tamara mentioned, this paper really emerged out of a sense of both frustration with the lack of progress of current policy, but also the sense of glibness of much of the discussion of policy alternatives. And what we're trying to do in this paper is weigh the efficacy of different options as well as asses their strengths and weaknesses.

The beginning assumption of this paper is that the goal is for Assad to go, and so one thing we did not look at is whether the current regime survival is

something that the United States should actually accept as a policy goal. It may become one by default if all the alternatives are too difficult, but we're looking at Assad going on the assumption not only is it the Administration's policy, but that this is a nasty regime in a variety of ways. It's one that is counter to U.S. interests in terms of its alliances with Iran, in terms of its support for terrorism, in terms of its hostility towards U.S. policy, towards the peace process, towards Iraq.

But at the same time as the United States wants this regime to go, it doesn't want Syria to become a failed state, and so the key to successful policy is more than just Assad and his cronies leaving power. It's that Syria remain intact and not go into an all-out civil war path, in which it seems to be moving. So when we look at the policies, we're looking at whether they'll work, whether they'll work at acceptable cost, and then the strengths and weaknesses of each option.

The paper looks at six different approaches. One is very much a diplomatic approach, trying to remove the regime and gain humanitarian benefits via diplomacy. A second is a more coercive approach using not only diplomacy and isolation, but also economic sanctions to weaken and ideally remove the regime. Third, we look at arming the Syrian opposition to overthrow the regime. Fourth is the beginning of several armed options for the United States, one of which is a Libya-like air campaign. A fifth option is direct invasion of Syria with U.S. forces, and last is a NATO effort largely led by Turkey to oust Assad.

All four of us worked on these options, all four of us didn't agree on everything. The project had a good back-and-forth among us, but in the end because I think the authors weighed different goals and different risks differently, we may have different individual preferences but the whole point of the memo was not to endorse one option but was to simply suggest the advantages and different disadvantages of each,

and we feel that there's a fair amount of agreement on those advantages and disadvantages.

I'm going to briefly describe each option and identify a strength or weakness or two. The paper is far more detailed on this, but I just want to kind of raise this for general discussion before the other authors get to more details.

First on diplomacy. The advantage of diplomacy is it's relatively low-cost, it's not something that necessarily involves heavy U.S. equities, and it allows the United States to retain a certain moral high ground that comes with the avoiding force and keeping a peaceful approach.

A risk or disadvantage is that even under the most optimistic scenarios, if a diplomatic approach is succeeding it's largely about the removal of one person, Bashar al-Assad, and not the removal of a regime, a power set, a group of cronies. In addition, I think fairly obviously there are real questions over whether this has any chance. Russia has been extremely critical or hostile to aggressive diplomatic efforts, and even if Russia were onboard this is a regime that has shown it will not go easily or lightly.

A second option we look at is coercion with sanctions and diplomatic isolation. In my view, at least, this is really current U.S. policy and this is more aggressive than a diplomatic approach, but it's still relatively low-cost for the United States. Again, the regime shows no sign of cracking, and Russia is giving it diplomatic support and top cover, and the Iranians have provided some military aid and certainly economic aid to try and keep the regime afloat and to resist outside pressure.

There's a risk with coercion of hollowing out the Syrian state. That as the economy collapses, as the country in general becomes divided, that the state itself becomes weaker and weaker and that even under an optimistic scenario five years down, that whoever picks up the pieces is picking up a fractured or failed state rather than an intact

one.

A third option we look at is arming the Syrian opposition to overthrow the regime. It's very attractive to try to help people who are fighting a very just fight, in my view, and it's also appealing to level the playing field. Also, if you're focusing only on the Syrian opposition the risk to Americans is almost nonexistent. Americans are not involved in the fighting. But the military gap is extremely large, and it's not simply a question of giving the opposition a relatively small number of rocket-propelled grenades or weapons in order to level the playing field. There's a big gap, and it's not easily filled.

Also, the opposition is divided. It's divided politically, its military effort is divided, and it requires more than arms to make it effective in the field. Also, if you arm the opposition, you incur an obligation. Certainly perhaps to some degree a moral obligation, which in U.S. history the United States has at times honored, at times decided to ignore, but also a political one. That when you attach yourself to a group or cause it's harder to back away from it, should things not go well.

And this has led people to think of a fourth option, which is a Libya-like operation. An air campaign that gives the opposition more muscle and helps it out in a military sense -- and again not quite as much as just working with the opposition, but again this is relatively low-cost. This can be done largely through standoff. There is some risk to U.S. pilots, depending on how you do the operation, but relatively low.

Like all military options, this depends heavily on allies in the region for basing and access, in particular, but this is a much more involved operation than simply working with the opposition. It requires diverting scarce air assets, and it in general is a much heavier cost.

A fifth option is simply invading Syria with U.S. forces, toppling the regime directly. Let me be clear, none of the authors advocate this at the current time but

it's something we felt was appropriate to raise in the context of this paper because events may change, circumstances may change that leave this option to be on the table.

The biggest advantage of this option is, it works. I think we could say that if the United States committed itself seriously to this it could remove Assad and his regime in a fundamental and very decisive way. But this is a considerable military task. This is not something to be done lightly. The Syrian armed forces are not the most formidable in the world, but they're much more serious than the Libyans. And I think for me, people more importantly -- the United States would own Syria after the fall of Assad. That this would not simply be something the United States would go in and walk away from.

Even if all the lessons of Iraq were learned, even if whether in terms of preventing insurgency, doing reconstruction right, doing political rebuilding, it's still an extremely costly and difficult endeavor and one that in times of budget weakness -- and that's true among allies as well -- would be, I think, quite difficult to enact.

The last option is what we call the Goldilocks option in the paper, which is really having allies do this. A NATO operation led primarily by Turkey, and in a way others are doing the work. In part this is because if you look at regional states like Turkey, they have more interest. They have a lot of assets they can bring to the table, a very formidable military. So far, there's no will among allies to do this. This is something that can be wished upon from Washington, perhaps, but not something the allies have shown an eagerness to do.

Financially, this would require much more than simply the Turks or limited NATO involvement. It would require a fairly extensive financial commitment, both during the operations and afterward. But also, the allies might get stuck. There are a variety of scenarios we could see where things would not work out as planned, and if

people go down this road there's at least a possibility that the United States might be called on to do more.

These are the options we came up with in this paper that we thought were appropriate to consider, both because they're either shaping U.S. policy today or could be things that shape U.S. policy in the future. And again, I'll stress that we're not advocating one but we're really trying to lay out the advantages and disadvantages.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Dan, thanks. Before we go on, let me note for those of you who are standing in the back, I see at least six seats up front and maybe a few more over there. So come on down and have a seat. And secondly, I want to note that this paper, it is available outside, as I said. It's also on our website. So if you prefer to save the trees, you can get it electronically.

At this point I'm going to turn it over to Salman in Doha. And Salman, you and many of us were watching closely Kofi Annan's visit to Damascus last week, and you know I think the question we have to ask ourselves at this point, given the level of violence, given the deterioration of the situation on the ground, is it too late for diplomacy? What can diplomacy really accomplish at this point?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, thank you. Well, many people have said that Kofi Annan is on mission impossible. He's a very skilled diplomat who has achieved noticeable successes as well as failures in the past, and this was the guy who could perhaps forge the elusive international consensus that hasn't yet taken shape over the past year.

Now, I think Annan himself is acutely aware that he faces a ticking clock and a rising body count, which would have a corrosive impact on his own diplomatic efforts. In fact, just after he briefed the council after coming back from the region,

including Damascus, he was clear that if he feels that this is a waste of time he would then have to call it out, and they would have to pursue perhaps -- take other appropriate actions. But clearly, this is not a conclusion he's yet made.

He's presented, I think, to Assad -- you mentioned a visit to Damascus -- a six-point plan. I think the main elements of which are ending the violence, opening up a humanitarian effort which includes perhaps to our humanitarian cease-fires and some form of aid corridors, a monitoring mission -- not quite clear whether we're talking about a UN mission as well, which could even be peacekeeping as the Qataris have suggested, or something more limited but certainly much more capable than the Arab League monitoring mission that preceded it. Some confidence-building measures, which include the release of prisoners at an appropriate time -- again, which was in the original agreement between the Arab League and the Syrian government. And then, the start of a political process which would be aided by Assad designating a representative to discuss this with the opposition.

All of this, of course, leaves right now more questions than answers. What will happen, for example, if we don't achieve an end to the violence? And of course, since Annan left Damascus, even, we've seen an escalation, some would say. Will he be pursuing more coercive diplomacy? Can he turn the Russians, in particular?

Now, we've heard some noises over the weekend from Foreign Minister Lavrov, where he's come out again strongly in favor for Annan's mission, and that Assad should quickly without delay support that. But is that enough?

And then of course, the biggest question of all in relation to our own particular memo is, what is it that we're trying to achieve through these diplomatic efforts, in any case? Will there be a political process which will lead to a Yemen-style transition away from Assad and his regime, in the long run, to a different set of leaders who will be

responsible for the transition?

These are still questions which are left unanswered. What I will say is that Annan, I think, thinks that he's in this for the longer-run, that he's got perhaps not months and months but he's certainly got a period of time here in which to try and forge this consensus. And of course, if he's able to do so this would be the best outcome.

The chances, though, in my view -- and let me just say in discussions with colleagues and discussing the options I've traveled, I think the chances that we lay out in the memo itself, the chances of an exclusively diplomatic solution are growing dimmer by the day.

MS. WITTES: Salman, thank you. We'll come back to Doha when we get to the discussion part of our session, but for now let me turn to Mike Doran. Mike, looking across the options that Dan laid out, that the four of you have debated in this paper, you see options that are very likely to be effective, but at a very high cost, like a military invasion. And then you see options that are less likely to be effective but the cost is much more tolerable, like sanctions.

What do you think is the -- if the policy goal is defined as the removal of Bashar al-Assad, how bad is the risk of failure? And what cost should the United States or other international actors be willing to pay to avoid that?

MR. DORAN: Thanks. I agree with Salman that the chance of diplomacy working is -- of Annan style diplomacy working is minimal. In fact, I think there's no chance and I think there's no chance of a solution whereby Assad will leave and somebody from within the regime will step forward and reform. Because of the nature of the regime, the regime is the family. Asking Assad to leave is basically asking the family to leave. The opposition won't accept anything other than the family leaving, and once the family leaves then the regime falls apart.

So where that leads you to, inevitably, is regime change. Our policy, I think, right now is rather ambiguous in that respect in that the President last August, I believe, said that Assad should step aside. But there isn't a lot of muscle behind our policy that's actually going to make him step aside, and when we support efforts like Kofi Annan's, I think what we're actually doing inadvertently and unintentionally is throwing him a lifeline, because we're holding open this possibility that we can get the result that we say we want through a process which, if we look at it closely, we see is never actually going to achieve that result. But it prevents us from making the hard decisions, and it buys him time to kill the people and to retake the areas that the opposition has wrested from the state.

Salman asked the key question which is, what's the point of all this to begin with? From my own point of view, aside from the humanitarian issues the number one question is Iran. The Middle East right now has kind of a kaleidoscopic characteristic in all of the different countries and you can -- when trying to put together a kind of clear understanding of what U.S. interests are, you can get lost in a lot of discussions, you know, in Egypt about Islamists and Muslim Brothers. In Syria, about the different components of the opposition, and so forth. But from my point of view, there ought to be at the very top tier of all of our discussions a question of, is it good for us or Iran? And clearly, wresting Syria away from the Iranian alliance system is the single greatest blow we could strike to Iran right now, at the least cost.

If Assad remains in power, it's going to be a victory for the Iranians over the Americans. If Assad remains in power and that's followed by an announcement that the Iranians have a nuclear weapon, it's going to be a major victory against the United States. If you listen to the Iranian propaganda right now, they are broadcasting constantly that the United States is on the run, that any association with the United States

is going to be detrimental to you in the new order that's going to arise, and so on and so forth. We can say that, well, that's nonsense, the Iranians are on their back feet, they're being pressured everywhere. But clearly the very fact that we're having this discussion shows that that's not exactly true. They still have a lot of cards to play, and we're not at all confident that we're going to succeed there.

So, I think in answer to your question, the risk that we face in Syria is twofold. A, it's a humanitarian risk. There is almost no way that the Assad regime is going to take control of Syria again the way it had control. Doesn't mean it's going to fall, but there's going to be a kind of civil war there for years to come, and if we do nothing then we're just prolonging the violence. And then secondly, there's the strategic issue, which I actually call the primary issue for the United States. The strategic issue with regard to Iran. If we don't take this opportunity and we don't topple them, it's a victory for Iran.

MS. WITTES: Mike, thanks. I think those are two good reasons why we have to think past where we are now, even though some of the options we may look at -- certainly in the eyes of an American public that by all accounts is weary of international military engagement -- we're going to have to deal with that public opinion, and yet we have to seriously look at these options.

And so with that, I want to turn it to Ken. Ken, as a scholar who focuses on these coercive options and, you know, having looked at what we did in the Balkans, what we did in Afghanistan, what we did in Libya. There's always a debate wherein the military officials say, this is too hard, it's too costly, the ground is very complicated, there's a lot of risk here, and yet we went forward and did it anyway. When you look at the outcomes in those cases and you look at the situation in Syria, is Syria that much harder than some of these other cases? Should that deter us or is there a path forward?

MR. POLLACK: Thank you, Tamara. Yeah, this is the essential question. We've not done Syria, but Syria can look to many people like many different places. Of course, we all think analogically and we all tend to kind of fit which analogy we're predisposed to into Syria, because it does look like a whole variety of different countries. It's easy to look at Syria and say, well you know, it's a weak country in the Middle East and it's a lot of desert, it looks like Libya. Or if you like, there's a lot of mountains there and this is a really nasty regime and they're dug in pretty hard. Looks like the Taliban or maybe it looks like Kosovo and the Serbians. As I said, you can take your pick.

And of course the truth is that it looks a little like all of these places but not entirely like any of them. And I think that's where we have to start with the different military analogies, is that Syria will be sui generis, but it's also going to look like some of these other previous instances of uses of military force, and we've got to try to learn from them and recognize where they are likely to apply and where they aren't.

Before I turn to the three military options that we actually did consider, let me just very briefly mention two that we did not consider because they're still out there. One is a naval blockade of Syria, and the other is a true no-fly zone over Syria. I will say that we did not consider them for two reasons. First, they're not decisive in and of themselves. They won't get rid of Assad, and we were actually looking for options that could at least even in theory produce the fall of the regime by themselves. Neither of these two options have that going for them.

Secondarily, the reason that they're not decisive in and of themselves is because they are really adjuncts to some other policy option. They could be very useful adjuncts to a policy of arming the Syrian opposition or very useful adjuncts to a policy of using air power to help the Syrian opposition. They would obviously be critical as part of

an invasion, whether it be led by the United States or by NATO, but that's their role. They are adjuncts; they are compliments to another policy. They're part of what Dan talked about in terms of kind of closing the gap, but they don't close the gap by themselves. And again, if you'd like to talk about them in the Q&A, glad to do so.

But let me turn now to the three options that we did look at. The first one, of course, is what we did in Libya. That's the obvious one. And let's be very blunt about this. The American people are not looking to fight another land war in Asia, to quote *The Princess Bride.* At this point in time, people are looking for less of a ground commitment in the Middle East, not more of one. What we did in Libya seems to offer the perfect solution, that we can employ air power to help the indigenous ground power furnished by the Libyan opposition -- again exactly as we did in Libya or even harkening back to our earlier experience in Afghanistan. And to be very blunt about this, I think that there are a lot of people who are hopeful that this will allow us to fight a nice, clean air war from 10,000 feet and not get our boots and our hands dirty on the ground in the cities and mountain strongholds of Syria, where the real nasty fighting will be. And maybe even eliminate the need -- as it so far has in Libya -- for us to get involved and do a big, messy Iraq-style, Afghan-style national reconstruction of the country.

And again, there's some reason to believe this may be true. America's air forces are obviously extremely powerful. The Syrian military is hardly a juggernaut and there is reason to hope that the application of U.S. air power might succeed in closing that gap that Dan talked about, but we have to be very careful about Syria and the comparisons with Libya and Afghanistan.

Just very briefly, there are two big differences between what happened in Libya and Afghanistan with Syria. The first one is an issue of geography. Very simply put, in Libya and Afghanistan you had well-defined front lines. In Libya it was perfect.

The fighting took place within about 30 kilometers of the coastal road. All the fighting went back and forth on that coastal road. The good guys were in the East; the bad guys were in the West, except for the well-defined city of Misrata. As I said, it was pretty much limited to that coastal road and we could just pretty much pull up the old air-ground plans from World War II and apply those and just change typhoon to tornado in every case. Very simple operation.

Same thing pretty much in Afghanistan. The Taliban had its lines; the Northern Alliance had its lines, that was a very important element. In Syria, we don't have that. In Syria, it looks much more like Iraq or like Kosovo before that. The regime's forces are already deeply intermingled with the population center, we don't have that clean separation of forces. It will be much harder for that reason to apply air power the way that we did in both Afghanistan and Libya.

And secondarily, in both Afghanistan and Libya the regime forces were very weak and their commitment was somewhat suspect. In the case of Syria, what we have seen so far is that the regime has a military which is certainly more disciplined, somewhat more capable -- I don't want to make the Syrians out to be the Wehrmacht. They are absolutely not, but certainly more capable than Qaddafi's forces, and certainly more capable than the Taliban's forces, and what we have seen from them so far is a greater willingness to accept bloodshed, to kill their own people, to accept hardship, to be able to go after their adversaries.

It's worth remembering that we thought about using this approach in Iraq. A lot of people were talking about arming Ahmed Shalabi's INC and sending them in under U.S. airpower, and we chose not to do that for very good reason. You'll remember that in Kosovo we tried this with the Kosovo Liberation Army and it failed, okay? We did distressingly little damage to the Serbian army, again largely because the terrain was bad

and they were already intermingled with the Kosovar population. That made it much harder to target them, and at the end of the day we were forced to actually build up to a ground invasion, which was certainly one of if not the most important elements in convincing Slobodan Milosevic and the evidence suggests that the air strikes alone were not going to cause Milosevic to change his mind.

So, we can look at the air option and say what might work, but we also have to be very cautious. It may not work. That's why we also need -- and why we talked about in this memo -- the importance of thinking about an invasion. As Dan has already said, none of us think an invasion is a good idea. It's important to make that clear. But the more that we think about some of these options, the more that the specter of an invasion can loom its ugly head, okay? It's easy to slide from one option to another and it's easy once we've committed ourselves to one of these military options to find ourselves being pulled in the direction of an invasion even though we started down this path trying not to embark on an invasion.

Again, it's worth keeping the experience of Kosovo in mind. The whole point of the Kosovo operation was to use airpower so that we wouldn't have to go in on the ground, and after 78 days what the Clinton Administration found was that the air campaign wasn't doing the job by itself and they were being forced to build up for an invasion and to think very, very hard and very, very seriously about employing it so that they wouldn't have to face the prospect of defeat. You wind up with a Hobson's choice. You can either be defeated and walk away or double-down and invade.

With an invasion, look. It's pretty simple. I would go farther than Dan. The military operation is going to be easy, okay? The Syrian military is nothing. They are smaller, they are weaker, they are less experienced than the Iraqis, we will take them down much more easily.

Another piece of good news, if I can call it that, about invading Syria is that we've actually now learned a whole lot about how to do these kinds of things, in particular how to do post-conflict reconstruction, because we've conveniently now made very single mistake that it's capable of making when you're doing post-conflict reconstruction, particularly in Iraq and those mistakes we missed in Iraq we managed to cover in Afghanistan. And now of course, we have a lot of troops and people who know how to do post-conflict reconstruction. So, that's the good news.

The bad news is, we're going to have to do post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. Even if Syria doesn't have Iraq's oil wealth, even if it is not as intrinsically important as Iraq for that reason, let's not forget Syria borders a lot of countries that are very important to the United States: Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon. We cannot afford to simply kick in the door, collapse the regime, and walk away. Syria is very much like Iraq in the sense that it will very quickly become a failed state and the scene of civil war, which will spill over into all of these other countries that we care so much about.

If we're going to invade Syria, we're going to have to rebuild the country. That is going to mean an Iraq-style and probably an Iraq-sized commitment. Again, I don't want to go into too many details, but glad to talk about it in the Q&A, but let's just be very careful here. I need to say this a little bit loudly and a little bit slowly because people don't seem to have listened closely enough when I said this back in 2002 and 2003. It is going to take 200- to 300,000 troops to stabilize Syria for at least 6 months, and possibly quite a bit longer if things go wrong in Syria. That is going to mean 200- to $300 billion for each of those periods of time, for each year that we have to do that. And again, if things go really well, the costs could come down. But this is not a simple or cheap operation, and if we try to do it that way we'll wind up with an Iraq situation.

That's why a lot of people are thinking about, well, is there another way

to do it? Is there a way that we get the benefits of the invasion, the certainty of ousting the regime but without the cost? That brings us to our last option, which is the NATO option.

Now here, Dan is certainly right that the whole point of this is to see if we can alleviate some of the costs on the United States by distributing them better among our allies. And you know, here there's reason to believe that we could. The Turks could furnish a lot of ground forces, they could take up a lot of the burden that American ground forces played in Iraq. In addition, we might be able to get financial support from the Europeans, from the Gulf Arab states to take up some of the financial burden that the United States paid in Iraq. Ideally, we could have a much bigger UN commitment and the UN has some real capabilities to help with post-conflict reconstruction.

All of these things could be very helpful, and if we are going to go down this path it makes this kind of a NATO-style -- what we did, in effect, in Bosnia in 1995 -- the best probably option for doing this. But also, let's not kid ourselves that this is going to be easy. While in some ways it looks great, the Turks put up most of the ground forces, the Gulf Arabs and maybe Europe put up most of the money, the UN takes care of most post-conflict reconstruction, don't kid yourselves that we're going to be able to sit out of it. What we have seen is that if the United States does not provide command and control, does not provide leadership, does not provide key combat elements, including ground troops, it isn't going to happen.

Beyond that, everything that I just said is going to be really hard to get. The Turks don't want to invade and occupy Syria. Now, as things go along and the worse it gets, maybe the Turks will come around, but they are not there yet and they are digging in their feet and they are absolutely uninterested in doing so right now.

You may have noticed that we've got a little economic crisis going on and

you may have heard that the Europeans, too, have their own economic problems, so they're maybe not going to be willing to pony up huge amounts of money for this. The Gulf Arabs certainly have it, but we've never seen them be willing to put up this kind of money before, at least not since the Gulf War.

And let's also not forget that the Russians are going to allow this to happen over their dead bodies. So while this may look wonderful, it may look like exactly the solution to all of our problems, all of this is going to take a very, very big effort to bring it all about.

MS. WITTES: Ken, thank you. You know, I think putting together these presentations -- you heard at the outset from Dan that there's a risk that the longer this crisis continues, the more pressure is applied to the Syrian regime through sanctions and so on, the more a likelihood there is that the state will hollow out and could collapse and produce an outcome that might be worse than having Assad in power.

You just heard from Ken that that type of outcome, which could be -- in other words, a prescription worse than the disease -- could also be the result of a military intervention. And so in addition to looking at cost as a metric, we also have to look at the likelihood of a prescription that's worse than the disease.

With that let me ask you, Dan. You noted that a lot of these options are not stand-alone options, but in some ways you could imagine a policy that would combine elements of these different options. Are there ways to look at these elements that would reduce the likelihood of those negative outcomes?

MR. BYMAN: Yes and no. If you think of these options, you could in some ways see them as steps on an escalation ladder where you begin diplomatically, you add economic pressure, you add limited military pressure, more extensive military pressure, until you're with all-out invasion. And the ideal, of course, is to try to get as

much as you can and pay as little cost and take as few risks as possible.

But as you start to go down the road in terms of cost and commitment, it becomes harder to walk away. There's a question of possible failure at almost every stage of this, unless you're talking about all-out invasion. So as you add more to the mix, as you add different policy instruments and different levels of U.S. prestige and commitment, it becomes harder to say, you know what? It didn't work, we're just going to focus on other things rather than escalate. And that actually becomes politically difficult, that becomes diplomatically difficult.

There are a few things, though, that I think every option would benefit from. One obvious one is diplomatically. You want to go from something like the Friends of Syria to an additional contact group. A small group of key countries -- you could quibble about which ones should be involved, but to me obviously you'd want the Turks involved, you'd want the Saudi's involved, you'd want a number of the most important local actors as well as the United States. So, you could be working with the same groups on the ground so you could be speaking with the same voice so you're not working across purposes.

Also, no matter what you do Turkey is going to be at the center of this. If your goal is coercive pressure, if your goal is diplomatic, if your goal is military, you have to work with Ankara. Right now, Turkey and the United States are not in the same place, and that to me has to be a priority.

Also, the opposition isn't ready. If magically Assad fell today, you know -- against all my expectations -- it's unclear what would happen in Syria tomorrow. The opposition, despite a year, does not seem to have come together politically. Despite really, I'll say, heroic and enormous sacrifices of people on the ground you still don't see cohesion between different parts of Syria. You don't see that interaction back and forth

between the internal and external, and so you need the opposition to come together and that's, again, easy to say from Washington, right? You don't just wave a magic wand and make this happen. But as you start to work more with the opposition, get to know them better, as you start to use things like diplomatic recognition, as you start to use money and arms, all these things can be carrots that are trying to push the opposition in a certain direction.

And again, to go back to this idea of a contact group. It's necessary that the United States and its allies are promoting the same forces within the opposition. And this, ideally, means that a more competent, a more pro-Western opposition leadership comes to the fore and, over time, this is to be vital for the future of Syria.

I'll add on this question of kind of combining options that often when you do this, you risk taking on the disadvantages of both. That when you combine diplomacy with efforts to work with the Syrian opposition, sometimes you're hoping to get a lot for a little, but instead you get a little for a lot. That sometimes you weaken the option, but at times take on the risks.

One thing that I should have said in my remarks that I'll stop on. Not choosing an option is choosing. Not choosing an option is a way of saying we're going to let the situation run its course and stay with the status quo. And in a way, that seems to be the path the United States is on, which is a willingness to put a certain level of pressure but not to escalate. That's perfectly legitimate as a policy choice, in my view, as long as it's a choice. As long as it's something that's done as a deliberate decision on the risks we're going to take and the limits to the costs we're willing to incur, rather than policy by default.

MS. WITTES: Dan, thanks. I think that's an excellent point on which to open up our discussion. Salman, I see that you have a full house out in Doha. We've got

a full house here. I'm going to let you kick off the questioning with your audience out there.

MR. SHAIKH: Who would like to ask a question, please? If you could just say your name and any background, and then ask the question.

MR. ABDULLAH: Yassir Abdullah, I'm working for the minister of municipality and urban planning. In the discussion there were four options, basically, mentioned. I was kind of wondering why the fifth options of a covert operation against the regime was not discussed?

MS. WITTES: Okay. Why didn't we discuss the option of a covert operation to oust Assad. Dan, do you want to take that on?

MR. BYMAN: Sure. That's something that we discussed in part of our paper a little bit, at least. What we talked about, coercing the regime. There is a hope that there could be efforts within Syria to try to undermine regime cohesion, to try to turn the leads against the regime. There are a couple, I would say, weaknesses on this.

First of all, I should begin by saying -- I'll use the word "covert" really to mean intelligence operations. This would not be covert in any normal sense of that word. This would be on the front pages of the *Washington Post* and every regional newspaper. But sure, there could be efforts to try to work internally with the regime, but so far this regime at the elite level appears relatively cohesive. So, might individual commanders be broken off? Sure. Might there be ways to try to create divisions in the elite? Perhaps, to a degree. But the pressures in Syria are so intense and the regime, unfortunately, is quite good at counterintelligence, that in my judgment I think this could contribute in small ways to other policies, but by itself would not be decisive.

MS. WITTES: Ken?

MR. POLLACK: If I could just add, Tamara? You know, 30 years ago

the late Russell Baker coined the wonderful term "overt covert operations." He was talking about Nicaragua, and it was clear that the United States was supplying the Contras. We were doing it covertly, but everyone knew we were doing it. We were talking about doing it. And I think that's certainly what Dan is talking about.

The option that we do talk about in the paper -- which I think falls into this realm as well -- is the arming of the Syrian opposition, which would certainly be an overt covert operation. We wouldn't necessarily put it in the overt part of the U.S. budget, but everyone would know we were doing it. There, as Dan's already mentioned, we see this as a very live option. I think that if the U.S. does continue to move down the path of greater involvement in Syria, this is going to be the first thing that the U.S. Government tries.

And again, as Dan's already suggested, this is a very interesting option because it really is about how much can the United States, using training and weaponry, try to build up the indigenous capacity of the different Syrian opposition forces and hope to close that gap between the opposition and the Syrian military.

The one point that I will add to that is that, you know, again I think this is a very interesting option. It is one that has worked, to a certain extent, in other places around the world. But what we need to recognize about it is that it's one that doesn't work quickly. It's not a quick fix to the problems of Syria; it is not a quick answer to the prayers of the Syrian people. The Afghan Mujahideen are the best example of a scenario where the United States did exactly that and it worked, and it worked absolutely brilliantly and it took 10 years to work.

MS. WITTES: Mike, two-finger?

MR. DORAN: Just a quick observation. I agree with my colleagues that the overt covert or covert can be part of any one of the different scenarios.

An interesting question is, why isn't it part of our current scenario? Why isn't it a part of our current policy? And I think there's a strange sociology at work right now in Washington, whereby what everybody is debating in Washington within the Administration is the military options that Ken discussed. So that there is a very real fear of this slippery slope. That if we make a greater commitment right now and if we adopt a serious covert policy, that's going to begin the slippery slide to sending American troops into Syria. And so, you get strange things, like senior military commanders coming out and saying that the opposition is weak, that Assad might hold on. The Secretary of State mentioned the possibility of strengthening al-Qaeda in Syria, thereby inadvertently associating the opposition with al-Qaeda, and so on, which reinforced the propaganda of the regime. Et cetera, et cetera.

So, I think one of the things that we might want to try to do is really separate out these options and say, there are interim options before putting boots on the ground that are worth considering, A. And B, this is a political fight first and foremost. This is an insurgency. What we're trying to do is strengthen an insurgency on the ground in Syria, and when our senior commanders come out and say that the Syrian opposition is divided -- something that everybody knows. But when we say that, that's a political statement, which has the effect of demoralizing the Syrian opposition, strengthening the propaganda of the regime, and basically undermining the case that we say we're for.

MS. WITTES: Good point, Mike. I want to commend Abdullah not only for an excellent question which sparked, I think, a very lively discussion, but also for being a model questioner. Identifying himself and asking a clear and concise question. So, I hope you'll all take that as an example.

And with that, let me go to a question here in Washington, please. Do we have a microphone? Just wait for the mic.

SPEAKER: Thank you, Tami. I'm a visiting fellow at the James Martin Center for Non-Proliferation Studies. Thank you for your presentations.

Just one more difference again between Libya and Syria, which is quite major. We knew what the Libyan leader had in terms of WMD programs, and he gave up most of it -- and we knew what he had. The Syrians are not members of the CWC, so we don't exactly know what they have but we suspect that they have some of the nastiest germs and toxins that this planet has ever known.

Does the chemical option basically complicate things even further? And does that, I don't know, deter intervention and other options? Because we know that this Administration's top concern is the safety and control of the chemical weapons.

Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Ken?

MR. POLLACK: Yeah, I think it's a very important question, and obviously when you've got a regime that has extensive weapons of mass destruction capabilities it needs to play a role in your calculus. You know, we can point to something like 1991, the Gulf War, where Saddam Hussein didn't use it, but let's remember that the United States never marched on Baghdad in 1991. And there's a lot of debate right now about what Saddam was thinking. I think the evidence suggests he didn't use it in Kuwait because he didn't think he needed it. But if we had marched on Baghdad, the situation might have been very different.

Again, there's always another side to the story, which is that at the end of the day you've got Alawites mixed up with the Sunni population as well, and that leads to questions about whether the regime would actually use it on population centers where they could kill Alawis. In addition, it leads this question of could the regime rule over a populace after it has used chemical warfare? As you point out, that's just one of these

great unknowns. We won't know the answer to that.

The last point I'll make about that is, again, looking at another analogous situation. Saddam Hussein, as best we understand it, wanted his people to believe that he had chemical warfare agents to the very end because he wanted them to fear his willingness to use them on his own population. And that this mystique, that this myth that he had chemical warfare agents remained, in his mind, an important element of his control, which suggested that he might well have used them. I think you're absolutely right. As we think about these different military options and what we're going to do, I think we have to think very hard about under what circumstances might this regime try to use them, and under what circumstances will they be able to use them, and how do we as we go down this path ensure that they are least able to use them. And if they do so, that they harm the fewest people.

MS. WITTES: Dan.

MR. BYMAN: To briefly add, there is another side to the chemical weapons issue as well, which is the failure to do anything about what's happening in Syria also raises risks that the chemical arsenals as well as the man-portable surface-to-air arsenals and so on will simply be scattered. And there is concern that this could end up in the hands of terrorist groups, of local insurgent groups.

What happened in Libya is what people are very concerned about, where as the regime arsenals got opened up some went to what we'd call legitimate opposition figures and some went to the highest bidder. And with Syria, with more sophisticated arsenals, with more extensive ones, as the country moves from low-level war to all-out war to failed state, that concern should be on the list.

Now maybe that progression won't happen, but to me that should be in the back of the mind as well. So both the most pro-active military effort should think

about this as well as the most passive inactive approach should think about this.

MS. WITTES: Thanks, Dan. Salman, we'll turn it back to you for another question from Doha.

MR. SHAIKH: Sure. The gentleman there.

MR. SOBRE: Hi, my name is Bilal Sobre. My question is, isn't framing very important? The situation in Libya was clear. There were the Libyan people trying to get, you know, rid of the ruler and have a democratic system. In Syria, it's framed as part of a game between the United States and Iran, between Sunnis and Shias. Obviously the Saudi Arabians are not interested in democracy in Syria, et cetera.

If the focus is put back on the people of Syria and their, you know, struggle for freedom and actually framed in that way and maybe a deal can be reached with Iran, maybe other things can be pacified, and that can actually become a genuine success factor as opposed to having a regional problem, you know, a regional eruption.

Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. It's an excellent point, particularly as we stare down the complications involved in these military options. We have to ask ourselves the question of how we can make diplomacy more effective. And is it possible that the way we're framing the issue and, you know, the clear self-interests of some of the countries involved -- which are legitimate -- but perhaps we need to reframe the focus on human rights and humanitarian issues, Salman, in order to bring around some of the international actors we need for effective diplomacy?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, let me say up front. If diplomacy does fail and we don't have an international consensus on how to stop this and to move to a transition beyond Assad, this is going to have consequences. You know, it's going to have consequences for how the international system and the major players deal with each

other, the bricks, and how they behave with regards to the United States, for example. What will it do for R2P and the consensus that was reached in 2005 with regards to that, and what that means for other crises?

But I have to say already, in terms of framing this we are already in the midst of a very bitter and deep regional conflict when it comes to Syria. Syria is the fault line now, where we have at least two or three countries and at least two non-state actors supporting the Assad regime. As Mike said, we have Iran. We have Russia supplying arms. To a certain degree, we still have the Chinese in terms of diplomatic cover, and we have Hezbollah and the Sadarists. So on one side, we have this group. On the other side, we are now after a year seeing the entrance, I believe, of the major Gulf states with real material help.

What I've heard over and over again from Syrians over the last few weeks is that this is what we're fighting against and what we get from the West is sympathy and tears, nothing much more in terms of material support. And so, let's not kid ourselves. We are in the midst already of a very deep regional and potentially international conflict with very wide-ranging impact. The question then we have is: what do we do about it? What does the United States do about it?

In my view, the United States has been watching a game of football where it sometimes comes on with a wet towel to assist the players, but no more than that. A glass of water won't do now. It is, in my firm view, the time for the U.S. to lead in this respect, and there are ways and means.

And I would say just up front, we talk about the Syrian people. First and foremost, I believe, the Syrian people have the right to defend themselves. They have the right to be able to communicate with each other, especially when they are being divided in the way that they are.

And yes, this is one of the options, and I think probably one of the most realistic and urgent options right now which -- don't take it from me -- which we're hearing increasingly from tribal leaders, from activists, as well as independent sheiks on the ground. What they're saying is that we are ready now to take the fight, and it's very significant that we have this kind of group, which basically comprises a national block which is ready to take the fight to the regime. But right now, they've got very little material support.

MS. WITTES: Salman, thanks. You mentioned R2P, the responsibility to protect, as an international consensus forged in the post-Cold War era that's called into question by this crisis. And looking at the inability of our international institutions to come to sufficient consensus, does this erode R2P? Does it erode the broader agreements on human rights and humanitarian intervention that have been forged in the wake of the Cold War?

MR. SHAIKH: Well, certainly it poses a very serious challenge to them. What if this continues, the massacres that are taking place, and the international community is not able to forge a consensus even to halt the violence? Remember, we've been discussing now another resolution draft for a number of weeks and we can't even agree on halting the violence. Now, let's hope that Kofi Annan is able to bring that about.

On the other side, the sort of international consensus that was forged on R2P is under threat if we do have unilateral military action by, let's say, a coalition of the willing, or the United States in particular. But these are hard choices to make.

One thing I would note is that the last resort, the sixth option, military intervention, from my understanding can only be implemented under an international mandate. So, under UN authorization. And so, this looks like something which is more and more difficult to achieve.

I know there are different interpretations of it, but this is what I've heard over and over again. And interestingly, this is what I've heard from Kofi Annan's team.

MS. WITTES: Thank you, Salman. Yes, ma'am.

MS. HATASI: Thank you. Hello? Yes, thank you, ma'am. My name is Farah Hatasi; I'm with Homs with the National Syrian Women's Association and National Syrian Block. Hi, Salman. It's good to see you again.

Just a quick comment and then the question. You know, I understand, we all understand. We've been very, very frustrated the last year to see these kinds of inactions as an option for the U.S. policy here. And we understand that keeping the status quo right now is the -- at least very costly -- you know, it's a very low-cost for the U.S. on the short-term. However, eventually in the long-run the high cost for the U.S. will be extremely, extremely becoming more and more effective for the U.S. not to engage and take the leadership role in what's going on in Syria.

We see -- you know, I understand you're talking about the differences, not the division. We always try to be very careful about using certain terms when approaching what's going on in Syria when dealing or analyzing the situation about the Syrian revolution. I first of all -- certain terms about arming the opposition. It's not the -- the oppositions are the political groups who are representing the rebels on the ground. There are differences, but there is no division between all political Syrian opposition. There are certain differences about certain issues, how do deal with the foreign intervention, about certain issues inside Syria, but these are differences, points of views, and that's after 40 years of 1 party, 1 rule. It's very healthy to have these differences, but the opposition and the political opposition are not divided.

And most important, the military commanders on the ground in Syria are absolutely not divided. They are united; they are working under certain command

controls inside Syria. When we see this --

MS. WITTES: All right. Is there a question?

SPEAKER: Yeah. You know, just like after these 20 days of bombing Baba Amr, the Syrian Free Army were operating in small places, other places to ease the pressure on homes and Baba Amr.

I just would like to, you know, take it further about the Iranian question. We all know that all roads lead to Tehran, and we all know that it is an Iranian issue. It is the threat of a regional conflict, that really what makes probably the U.S. policy -- and I want to tell you we're seeing signs of losing a big credibility inside Syria when looking to the U.S. position. It was really, as you mentioned, about Secretary Clinton linking what's going on like it's going to benefit al-Qaeda or benefit Hamas. That reflects very negatively inside Syria, inside the rebels. So we don't want to lose that credibility. The Syrian people, specifically those rebels and the people on the ground, they are looking for the U.S. to help them and take the leadership.

What is really the Iranian element? This is my point here. What is really that thin line, that very, very, think line that connects the Syrian conflict with this, the Iranian and regional conflict, that we cannot until now be able to overcome and take a decisive decision that it is about time to interfere in Syria?

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Let me start with Salman here, if I may, and then come back to you, Mike. I think, you know, as Salman noted, Syria is becoming a regional fault line. In fact, by his description we've already got a proxy war-taking place on the ground, and if that in fact is the case then that demands that those with an interest choose a side. So, there's a clear line of argument there.

Salman, I would be interested to know if you can give us a little insight into the perspectives of some of the regional actors on the issue that Farah raised, and

then we can bring it back for a U.S. perspective from Mike here in D.C.

MR. SHAIKH: Yes, of course. Well, it is of course in the case of Saudi Arabia I think very much seen now as a strategic battle and as something which has to be counted with regards to the Iranians.

I think the other Gulf states would be less forward in that respect, but certainly you're probably now seeing -- and of course you've heard increasing conjecture about certain Gulf states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia really entering into the ground, into the theater with regards to armament and stuff.

I don't think this is hollow talk now. I think we will likely see perhaps tens of millions of dollars of support which will be provided to the theater inside Syria. The question is, will it be done in an organized way? Will it help forge a certain unity inside Syria, those who are fighting against the regime? Or will it lead to further fragmentation?

This is a very big and live question right now, which is made to us by Syrians. Again, the Syrians that we have been speaking to over here have said that if this is done in an uncontrolled fashion it may well undermine some of the long-lasting social structures inside Syria and give an opportunity to others who would want to sew chaos or take advantage of the situation inside Syria.

So, this is where I think those of us who are talking about the necessity of the United States to lead, where the United States can actually be helpful in helping to organize and help support those particular efforts, in partnership with other key countries in the region such as the Gulf states and Turkey and Jordan, in particular.

MS. WITTES: So, in other words if the choice would be to try ad strike a blow against Iran in the Syrian arena there's a risk in doing that that we might create divisions within the society that could lead us to another outcome we're trying to avoid, which is see breakouts.

MR. SHAIKH: Well, let me just say -- yeah, Tami, the situation is already drifting into disintegration. I mean, there is, you know, a civil war of sorts taking place and it can become further sectarianized.

So just watching, it's not going to help here. Talking about whether we arm or not is not going to help because it's already going on.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Mike.

MR. DORAN: I totally agree with everything Salman just said.

We are the indispensable player here. A lot of us have said that nobody in the region really wants to do anything. I'm not convinced of that. I was convinced of that until about a week ago. A friend of mine sent me an e-mail that told me he'd heard a strong rumor that Turkey actually -- Davutoglu recently raised with the United States the possibility of humanitarian corridors and Turkey intervening in order to establish humanitarian corridors, and he was shut down by the United States.

Now, that's a rumor but I have since checked it out with a number of other people and it's a very strong rumor. Even if it's false, I think it's a case that nobody in the region is capable of orchestrating all of the players who are interested in seeing a change in Syria, other than the United States. We are the only player that can do that, and we're the only -- and without us it won't happen and without us what will happen will be very disorganized and you'll have lots of different actors working against each other.

So, I just can't agree more with everything that Salman just said.

MS. WITTES: Thanks. Okay, another question from Doha?

MR. SHAIKH: Yes, please. Sorry, the mic is just -- yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Hello, Justin Alexander. Do you have a sense of the time scale that's available before a decision has to be made? How long can the U.S. and the international community continue dithering while people are being killed in Syria

before a decision is made?

We've had a year so far, do we have another year? Do we have much less than that? What sense do you have? And does it vary according to the different options?

MS. WITTES: Dan, do you want to start there?

MR. BYMAN: Sure. This is a great question, and the honest answer of course is we don't know. If you had asked me a year ago, would the situation in Syria still be at an impasse where you have the opposition unable to topple the regime but the regime unable to suppress the opposition, I would have thought that one way or another the regime would have cracked by now. Or, that the regime would have triumphed through brute force.

Certainly, the last month has been a very negative on in my view, not only in terms of the loss of life, but I think that the Syrian regime has regained some confidence as well. But, this is by no means a done deal. This situation could drag on for quite some time.

So, in terms of averting the humanitarian catastrophe, that is escalating to me. The casualty rates and the suffering seems to be growing significantly in recent weeks. However, in terms of a decisive moment in terms of one side triumphing over the other, to me that's still very much up in the air.

The elements that involve working with the Syrian opposition and building it into a fighting force, which is to me the most alive possible policy change going on right now -- that's a very long-term option. You don't create an army overnight in terms of arming, training, organizing. That takes some time, even if all goes exceptionally well.

If you add to that use of limited airpower, that can be done more quickly.

But even then, this is not a short-term issue. So to me, some of the policy changes people are talking about are not ones that are going to save the people on the outskirts of Damascus today that are being fired upon by the regime.

However to me, if you're going to be thinking at least six months, nine months out, you want to start to get those wheels moving today because you can't simply turn these things on or off.

MS. WITTES: Ken?

MR. POLLACK: Just to add to that point. You know, to the extent that the United States either wants to help the Syrian people for moral reasons or wants to take advantage of the situation and the weakness of the Syrian regime for strategic reasons and move down this path of greater involvement in Syria, both of which I think are fully justified, the situation that Dan is pointing to is a very important one.

For me, some of the most important press reports that we've seen -- and it's obviously impossible to know just how representative they are, but they do strike me as being a pattern -- is some of the comments that we've begun to hear from Syrians in places like Homs and Idlib saying how long are we simply going to be forced to die for a cause and the world is doing nothing? How long can the world stand by?

It's that kind of despair that could ultimately lead Syrians who would like very much, who would like perhaps desperately to see their regime overthrown, to decide that they simply have no choice. If their choice is to simply die for their cause or go on living for another day, they may decide to go on living for another day.

As Dan pointed out, it's impossible to know the dynamics of these kind of situations, and I think that the Syrian opposition has survived and been able to hold its ground for much longer than many people believed when this all began. But when you start to hear people in places like Homs and Idlib saying the world is standing by and

we're dying for no purpose, that's exactly the kind of thing that could lead to an eventual collapse of the opposition, and that's certainly what the regime is banking on.

And it's why -- you know, you asked the question, Justin, how long can the U.S. dither? Well, we can dither forever. We have a remarkable capacity for dithering. But if you're asking the question of how long can this Syrian opposition and the Syrian people continue to resist, that's an unknowable question but we're beginning to see signs that perhaps it won't go on forever.

It's why I go back to Dan's point. If we are thinking about doing this -- and I could justify it for both moral and strategic reasons -- we ought to be thinking about doing it fast. And as Dan and I have both said at some length, it's an option that will take a long time to bear fruit, but that initial psychological impact is very important. Saying to the Syrian people, we're coming, we've not forgotten you, we're going to help you could be the difference in causing them to fold or to continue to struggle on to allow that larger impact to take its course over time and give them the supplies and the momentum and the skills that they may need.

MS. WITTES: Mike, briefly.

MR. DORAN: Just to add on to what Ken said. I think in our discussions here there's an emphasis on the military aspects, but for me the political is the most important here, really. Because we are now at the one-year mark of this movement in Syria, which has been taking place largely -- which has been organized largely by unarmed civilians.

So, the question is how do we strengthen that -- not just how do we strengthen that, but also is it possible that we could have victory outside of the military realm? And I think that there is a possibility of that. In the sense that if the regime were to lose Aleppo, I think that that would be a huge blow to the regime.

So if we put emphasis on not getting defections from the military but getting defections from the economic elite in Aleppo and we put in place programs to achieve that goal, it could have a massive impact better than any kind of military victory we could have on the ground. But I don't think we've even begun to frame the problem in that respect.

MS. WITTES: Salman, anything to add to that?

MR. SHAIKH: Yeah, I would actually like to combine the two. I mean, I think Mike is absolutely right. You know, we've even got some people from the audience who are from Aleppo. They'll tell you that the situation is dire for the regime there. It is all about, now, you know having the courage and finding the right moment in which to make a decisive move against the regime. And already, in the Northern parts of Aleppo, that area is lost, 30 kilometers from the border with Turkey.

But going back to the military option, I don't think we've done anywhere near enough analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the regime, a regime which is basically surviving with only one approach, which is the security solution. Which is, by using its crack troops, it's using the fourth division, it's using the revolutionary guard, it's using Shabiha thugs and others, and what you hear certainly -- maybe it's overblown talk -- what you hear from people who are involved or linked to the opposition military effort is that if they just had some of the resources in order to counter some of that, they would be able to do much better.

And there is something which is happening, which is that the Free Syrian Army -- I think as Farah said -- is actually, some of it, is starting to get its act together on the ground. You're having military commanders now who go in and out of Turkey who are now being placed specifically with particular units, and that is an ongoing process which is now taking place. In addition, as I mentioned, the tribes are ready to combine with this effort.

So there is, I believe -- if there was more support given here, I think there is much more harm that the opposition could do to the Syrian security forces than has currently been the case.

And I should also point out, in terms of defections. I was told that in the minds of many Syrian soldiers, they've already defected. It's just they're waiting for a time. Also, we've had 9 or 10 Sunni officers, generals, who have defected over the last few months. That pace is increasing, and we're told it could go into tens. It could be up to 100. Again, they're looking for the right opportunity to do so and the right kind of organization and support in order to make it worthwhile.

MS. WITTES: Okay. We've got about 15 minutes left in our discussion, and a lot of people with hands raised both here and in Doha. So what I'm going to do is, take pairs. We'll take two questions here in Washington and then two in Doha, and then we'll come back to our very, very thoughtful panel.

I'm going to ask you questioners to please be very disciplined so that we can get through as many good questions as possible. We'll start with Garrett and Amel here in Washington. Right here in the front row.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks. Garrett Mitchell, and I write *The Mitchell Report*. Quickly, while this discussion has been going on we've had your paper to the President and he's made a policy choice and has come back --

SPEAKER: Now we know you're lying, Garrett. (Laughter)

MR. MITCHELL: -- and he's come back and asked that instead of your role as policy analysts, if you'd now help him with the most difficult part, which is if you need to be Presidential speech writers and it is your job to outline the principle humanitarian, political, and strategic reasons why policy option number six is the one that he's chosen.

MS. WITTES: Okay. And Amel.

MS. MOUDELILI: Amel Moudelili. I think this question is mostly for Salman because he's been talking about Kofi Annan's mission.

You know, I hear from everybody from here, from Europe, from around the world that they support Kofi Annan's mission. But reading about what Syrians are saying and the Iranians, I'm not sure what the mandate of Kofi Annan is. Salman, do people know what that mandate is? Is there a consensus? I mean, do people know why he's there, what he's doing? Or everybody is talking about his own mandate. I mean, the Syrians see him as only the UN representative while everybody says he's the Arab UN representative. What is the mandate of Mr. Annan? Is he going to succeed if there is no consensus over his mandate to being with?

MS. WITTES: Amel, thanks. Panel, take mental notes. We'll go for a couple of questions in Doha and then we'll ask you to comment.

MR. SHAIKH: Dr. Zachary, brief.

SPEAKER: I want to refer to the bigheaded actor in the conflict, Israel. I think the strategy adopted by the U.S. is no strategy. To extend the period of conflict in an attrition war, that we can reach a weary country, regardless who is the winner. I think this is in the favor of Israel in the long-term.

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you.

MS. WITTES: The role of Israel?

MR. SHAIKH: That's right, the role of Israel and U.S. inaction, explained.

MS. BILLINGS: Hi, Susie Billings. I'm a private businessperson here in Qatar.

The question I had is you mentioned you believe the U.S. is an indispensable player, but currently I don't believe the Syrian situation has at all captured

the hearts or minds of the American people because the killing is not the level that it was in Rwanda. How much do you think that the U.S. is hampered in the fact that this is a Presidential election year? And second part of that is, how different do you think would the action be if there were a change of Administration after November or next January?

MS. WITTES: Okay. So, actually nice circling back around to the point Garrett Mitchell started with. How do you make the domestic political case for military intervention in Syria? Mike or Ken, either? Mike, you want to take that on?

MR. DORAN: Yeah, sure. I think I'd like to answer all of the questions with one simple observation. I don't think that the Administration right now has developed its Syria strategy on the basis of an appreciation of anything that's going on in the Middle East. I think it's basically an election strategy, and the President is going to go to the polls in November on a theme of having extricated the United States from the Middle East, and he doesn't want anything that is going to get in the way of the extrication theme. I think that is the overwhelming impetus behind the policy, as it currently exists.

The Israelis, I think, don't have any problem in seeing Assad toppled at this point, so I don't think they're a factor in that in the least. The American people have no desire to get involved in Syria; I think that's clear. There are, as we've laid out in the paper, lots of interim options between where we are now and putting boots on the ground. I think it would be very easy for the Administration to show to the American people the advantages of doing so, and to elicit greater sympathy from the American people for the humanitarian suffering and the sacrifices of the people in Syria on the ground. But I have seen no indication that the Administration is moving in that direction.

MR. POLLACK: Also, you know, just to build on Mike's point. I think that -- and Garrett, this is an answer to your question as well as the last question -- I'd like to

see the United States go out and effectively build a case based on three different pillars, the first of which is the moral one. My guess is that actually, the 8- to 10,000 figure is actually just a fraction of the number of people killed, because people have been using very, very tough standards before they actually say, yes, this person is dead. But the reports are out there suggesting that the number is actually quite a bit higher. So, the numbers are getting high. I think this is a clear humanitarian situation where you've got a people trying desperately to rise up and throw off a tyrannically government, which I think leads you to your second point.

Which is, if we've learned anything from the Arab Spring it is that to back Arab regimes, to back authoritarian regimes, slaughtering their own people to keep them in check is in no one's best interest, including the United States. That was a lesson that we had mis-learned for 50 years, and it is now time to recognize just how mistaken we were. That was the point of Libya, that was the point of what we've been trying to do with Egypt and Tunisia, and all of these other countries. You can throw in Iraq as well.

And finally, the strategic one which is, Syria is in a state of civil war. That civil war is likely to worsen over time, and we've seen civil wars before. They breed terrorism, they breed refugees, they breed all of the ills of the world. They can cause civil wars in other states, they can metastasize into regional wars, and Syria is too important a country and too important a part of the world to simply stand by and allow it to descend further into civil war. And for all of these reasons, the United States needs to get more involved.

I will say that for me, I would like to see this lead first to a policy of arming and aiding the Syrian opposition. I think that that is morally completely justified. In fact for me, it goes back to 1991 when the United States called on the Iraqi people to rise up and did nothing and saw 50- to 100,000 of them slaughtered by Saddam Hussein.

That was a horrible mistake, both morally and strategically.

And then to come back to your specific point about option six, I think you're right. Option six -- you may have forgotten -- that's the NATO intervention. The NATO Arab League intervention. I think that the President can go out to the people -- this President in particular can go out to the American people and say, look. This is a situation that is going to call for a much greater effort, probably, than just arming these people. Airpower may not do it alone, but the United States cannot take this on alone. That is the point of Barack Obama's presidency. He should be reaching out to the international community to say, we all must take on this problem

MS. WITTES: And Dan, actually as I recall you actually have some discussion in this memo of a potential Israeli role. Do you want to talk about that a bit?

MR. BYMAN: Sure. The debate in Israel right now looks at Syria as -- from an Israeli point of view as a very troubled issue. On the one hand, Bashar al-Assad and his father before him were seen as enemies and fought wars, supported terrorism, and in general were extremely hostile actors.

On the other hand, Israel -- and I would say, any state in the region -- doesn't want a failed state on its border. As Ken just said, failed states can breed a whole host of ills that make, you know, the enmity of the past regime seem relatively minor in comparison. So, there is a discussion but I think Israel in the end came out realizing what I think is relatively obvious, that the choice is not necessarily between the old status quo and a failed state, but might be between different kinds of failed states that might result -- even if the current regime doesn't stay in. And in fact, removing Bashar al-Assad and doing so quickly may reduce the chances of a failed state.

Then you get to the question which we discuss in the memo, somewhat. Is, can Israel play a role in all this? And in the memo we talk briefly about Israel's military

assets and intelligence presence, and some of the potentials there. But a lot of what we focus on in the memo is that what I think Israel is doing right now, which is trying to keep a relatively low profile. On the Israeli role, we know diplomatically would not be welcome in the region, especially openly, and also this is something that many among the Syrian opposition actively do not want.

So, there are potential benefits to an Israeli role, but there are also considerable costs, and the memo evaluates those.

MS. WITTES: Okay, and then we have the question about Kofi Annan's mission, Salman.

MR. SHAIKH: Yes, Tami. I think it's a very good question. I think the point of reference is really the original November 2nd agreement between the Arab League and Assad, and then as explained by the loose five points that were recently agreed between the Arab League and Lavrov, which is about, you know, halting the violence and the other kind of things that I laid out earlier.

But of course, Kofi Annan does not have a United Nations Security Council resolution behind him. He doesn't have, on paper, a binding document which he can wave, particularly in Damascus. So this, I think is certainly something which is intrinsically, perhaps, a long-term weakness in terms of supporting his efforts.

I think his efforts will remain, I guess, strong as long as the key powers support them. If the Russians and the United States, China, as well as the Gulf states and other regional players such as Turkey continue to support his efforts, I think he'll continue to have time, despite the fact that we'll see the number of people unfortunately being killed rising and rising. But once we start to see some reticence on the behalf of some of those states, I think then the mission might well be in some trouble.

Tami, can I just take one more minute just to address the humanitarian

and maybe the political aspect linked to the U.S.? On the humanitarian side, you know, the Arab Red Crescent is now talking about potentially half a million refugees in Turkey if this crisis continues, and already we've seen much larger sort of in-flows. And this will, obviously, have an impact on a fellow NATO ally and perhaps also upset the delicate balance in that particular area if we start to look at these kinds of numbers, especially if a place like Aleppo starts to empty out.

And then, I'd actually -- on the political and with regard to the U.S. lead, I'd like to just actually quote one of the most important tribal leaders that I've come across. Let me quote what he just said to us just a few days ago here in Doha. He said, Ford's visit to Hama was welcome, but his welcome was conditional. It opens potentially the U.S. involvement and assistance to the Syrian people opens a new chapter with the Arab and Muslim world, and expunges a previous memory. We would have direct friendly relations with the people; it will create a permanent strategic relation, not artificial ones that overcome the mistakes of the past by supporting despots and dictators. He underscored supporting Syria now and the Syrian people as a strategic opportunity for the United States, and one where they are noting it hasn't stepped up to the plate. And he pointed out that, yes, they are burning Russian and Chinese flags and they will continue to do so, but I asked him, could that ever happen to the United States? He said, well, don't take for granted that it won't happen in the future.

MS. WITTES: Salman, thank you. We have come to the end of our time, so let me just ask the panelists here in Washington if you have any parting shots before we close. Mike.

MR. DORAN: I'll just -- about Ambassador Ford. Ambassador Ford went to Hama and stopped the killing for a few days, and then he left and then they came in and they smashed it even harder because they wanted to make an example. The

Assad regime wanted to make an example that the United States wasn't going to come to anybody's aid and wasn't going to help anyone, and we had no answer to that. I think that that should be bothering all of us.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Anything else. Ken, Dan?

MR. BYMAN: Briefly and to go on Mike's point. A number of the options we look at have advantages, but when you get to things like arming the Syrian opposition -- which in other contexts I've come out in favor of, to be clear -- there's a good chance this won't work. You know, we need to recognize that, and as we go down this road -- if we go down this road -- if it doesn't work we need to think of what will happen then? Does this mean the United States is going to go for a more aggressive Libya-type option, or does it mean walking away from people that we've worked with, supported, bolstered, and now watch get slaughtered?

The regime -- we're seeing this as a longer-term option. The regime will not. The regime will see it as a reason to step up violence in the short-term, and we need to recognize that a number of the options we have had advantages, but they also have risks if they fail, and make decisions about what we'll do should that happen.

MS. WITTES: Dan, thank you. Let me say that I am incredibly impressed by the really penetrating questions, both from our audience in Doha and here in Washington. There were many, many more questions than we could possibly get to in the time that we were allotted.

I want to thank you for participating, and I really want to thank these four gentlemen for giving us clear-eyed evaluation of the risks and benefits of various options that should help enrich our policy discussion, as it has today. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. SHAIKH: Thank you very much. I don't know if anyone has any more comments. Thank you.

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