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U.S. officials discuss military option in Syria



The debate over the U.S. policy toward Syria became heated Thursday in a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing. Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, and officials from U.S. agencies fielded questions from senators regarding an enhanced American role in the conflict.

“When it comes to the work of the congress, I’m not sure anyone has done enough. I think we all could be doing more,” said Senator Robert Casey. For both senators and the testifying officials, this “more” became hotly contested, as they disagreed about the path to take forward with regards to Syria.

Military options

“In my own view, the time has come to consider in some form, military aid to the opposition,” said Committee Chairman Robert Menendez. “We need to put our finger on the scales to make the tipping point.”

Senator Bob Corker said that military aid might still be a poor choice. “I’m concerned that we can overestimate value and underestimate the difficulty of military intervention,” he said.

The testifying officials agreed that assistance to Syrians must be increased, but should continue to be “non-lethal.”

“We are helping the opposition prepare for a Syria without Assad by laying the foundation for a democratic transition that protects the rights of all Syrian people regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or gender,” said Elizabeth Jones, assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs.

Ambassador Ford said that U.S. intervention should be focused on aiding “negotiated settlements” and the political development of the moderate opposition’s view of a new Syria.

“We for our part, are giving them a chance to develop that vision... we need to weigh in on those who support tolerance,” he said.

Senator John McCain disagreed completely, calling for restricting airspace to more effectively weaken Assad. He pointed sharp questions toward Ford, at one point raising his voice to the ambassador. “Negotiated settlements come when someone believes they cannot win,” he said. “You think that non-lethal assistance will somehow accelerate Assad’s departure?”

Quantifying American assistance The U.S. is the largest bilateral humanitarian donor to Syria, and has already given \$385 million in aid. Secretary of State John Kerry recently announced a new package of \$63 million to “counter extremists, weigh in on part of moderates, and help the Syrian opposition coalition move ahead to attract support,” Ford said.

Menendez said that although the U.S. isn’t thriving economically, it “could dramatically increase that number to help Syrian people... an increase in aid could signal to other nations that this is not business as usual.”

Recognizing possible repercussions

Some of the senators expressed concerns that the lack of strong U.S. presence could fuel anti-American sentiments abroad. Senator Ron Johnson said he was worried about a “growing hostility” and a perception that “America can help and we’re not.”

Officials are, for this reason, working to make U.S. aid more visible to the Syrians. “In U.N. camps, the U.S. is now listed as one of the primary donors... we’re usually unnamed,” Jones said. This is part of a larger effort to create stronger ties with the opposition coalition, which U.S. Ambassador Ford said has been very responsive to U.S. support.

In his recent travel experiences, he said that members of the opposition in Aleppo expressed gratitude for U.S. efforts. “Do they want us to do more? Yes. But are they appreciative? Yes.”

McCain again disagreed vehemently with Ford about the U.S. perceptions in Syria and the sentiments of the opposition. He referenced his own experiences with opposition forces. “They’re angry and bitter at the United States of America for not helping them,” he said. “If I put myself in their shoes, I’d feel the same way.”