

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Crisis in Syria: Implications for Homeland Security***

September 10, 2013 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Crisis in Syria: Implications for Homeland Security”:

“I agreed not to object to the Chairman’s motion to seek unanimous consent to convene this hearing without the required seven-day notice. I agreed to this unusual request because of the subject matter of this hearing and the need for this panel to fulfill its unique jurisdictional mission in assuring that the American people know about the potential homeland security implications of United States military intervention in Syria.

But before we discuss the homeland security implications, we should begin with the basic facts. The current civil war in Syria began three years ago as a popular uprising against the Assad regime. The popular uprising has devolved into an armed rebellion and may now be considered a civil war. In the last three years, over 100,000 Syrians have been killed; more than 2 million people have fled Syria, and 4 million have been forced to flee from their homes but remain in Syria.

The United States has provided approximately \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance. Also, in the last three years, Israel has used missiles to attack the Assad regime on three separate occasions; the Syrian government has used chemical weapons in small-scale attacks on several occasions; Iran and Hezbollah have lent their support to the Assad regime and the opposition forces have grown to include Al Qaeda affiliates or associates. Longstanding religious and regional divisions fuel this complicated conflict.

Neither the United Nations nor our traditional allies have agreed to use military force to intervene.

As these facts demonstrate, the situation in Syria is tragic. Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that this House will have a robust debate about whether the United States should pursue military action in Syria.

However, in this Committee, we must try to provide an understanding of the possible homeland security implications of military action because understanding the potential “blow back” is as important as understanding the current situation on the ground. And while this undertaking may be somewhat speculative, we must attempt to provide some insight on the potential threats.

First, there is some concern that a military attack against Syria may spur retaliatory actions by Iran and Hezbollah against the United States, U.S. embassies or U.S. interests abroad. Second, there is concern that Syria or its allies may engage in retaliatory attacks against U.S. allies in the region, including Israel, Turkey and Jordan. Because about 15-25% of the opposition forces are associated with an affiliate of Al Qaeda, there is some concern that a strike that weakens Assad may ultimately benefit Al Qaeda. Each of these scenarios is possible but none is self-executing or immediate.

At this point, we know that the most likely effect on homeland security is the action that has already occurred. Mr. Chairman, the risk of cyber attacks may be heightened in the wake of U.S military action in Syria. It has been widely reported that the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a hacking group loyal to the Assad regime has launched cyber attacks that have disrupted the websites of U.S. media and Internet companies. In a few cases, those attacks completely disabled major media enterprises, including The New York Times. We have been told that this group does not have the capacity to launch attacks capable of disrupting critical infrastructure, but we all know, capacity can change.

So Mr. Chairman, as we consider action in Syria, I think this Congress should consider the actions necessary to protect our citizens from the most likely near-term repercussion of military intervention in Syria—a massive cyber attack. This Committee has made several attempts to safeguard the cyber environment. Yet, our efforts have been rejected by my colleagues on the other side of the aisle. Mr. Chairman, I urge you to once again attempt to move your leadership to assure that a meaningful cyber security bill can come to the House floor. In the face of the risk of retaliation from the SEA, we must resolve our known cyber security vulnerabilities.”

#

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>