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September 13, 2013

Mr. Ara K. Manoogian

Dear Mr. Manoogian:

Thank you for contacting me regarding your concern about the situation in Syria, and particularly the possibility of American military action against the Syrian regime. I appreciate hearing from you and welcome your input. I share your profound concern about the tragic loss of life in that civil war and the heartfelt desire that a diplomatic solution be found to end the violence and prevent any further use of chemical weapons. America must resist being drawn into another costly war and pursue a negotiated resolution of the conflict. The possibility of just such a diplomatic resolution has now emerged and I believe we must seize the opportunity.

Over the past few weeks, the United States and the international community have been considering how to respond to the Syrian military's latest and most horrific use of chemical weapons against its own people – an attack on August 21 that killed about 1400 including over 400 children. The evidence of this attack comes from our own intelligence sources and that of many other nations, respected NGOs, widespread and contemporaneous social media reports and video, and now, blood, hair and tissue samples.

Like many Americans, after the Intelligence Community's tragically flawed analysis of the Iraqi WMD program, I greet all intelligence analyses of a hostile nation's possession or use of such weapons with a strong degree of skepticism. Within a few days, I expect that the UN inspectors will release their report documenting the most recent chemical attack, and although their mandate does not permit them to ascribe responsibility, all available evidence points to the Assad regime. Extremist elements of the opposition have perpetrated their own share of atrocities, including suicide bombings, rapes and summary executions, but there is no indication that the opposition has the capacity to launch a widespread and simultaneous chemical attack of the nature committed on August 21, or that they could fabricate the massive number of contemporaneous witness accounts.

The problem has been how to respond, and I believe that a diplomatic solution is the best course of action – one that is the most likely to lead to the dismantling of the Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles and the infrastructure to manufacture, store, and prepare them. A diplomatic solution permitting the destruction of these weapons would prevent them from falling into the hands of Al Qaeda, Al Nusra, Hezbollah or other extremist groups that may use them against us or our allies. I also advocate a diplomatic course because I am keenly aware of the perilous position of Syria's minority populations, especially Syrian Christians and recent reports in the press have told of attacks on Christian villages by rebel forces. The more the fighting drags on, the greater the danger for these vulnerable minorities, whose very survival may hinge on a negotiated end to the fighting.

Given these concerns, I am encouraged by the recent development of a potential diplomatic solution – a proposal put forward first by Secretary Kerry and fleshed out by Russia, under which the Syrian regime

would give up their stockpiles of chemical weapons. The Russian proposal may be merely a delaying tactic, or an attempt to sow division in the international community in an effort to fend off a military strike. Nevertheless, it would be wise for the U.S. to pursue this option with great vigor. In a recent meeting with Secretary Kerry, Ambassador Rice, Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey, I urged the Administration to make every effort to seize this opportunity to place Syria's stockpiles under UN control and pointed out that only this path holds the promise of permanently placing these weapons out of use -- something a military strike cannot accomplish.

Many have pointed out the difficulty of a UN action to inventory, control, and destroy these stockpiles in the middle of a civil war, but this is not a justification for failing to follow the most promising path put forward thus far. And as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently pointed out, it may also lead to broader discussions about a negotiated end to the entire conflict. This must be the overarching aim; chemical weapons have killed over a thousand civilians and are among the most horrific and indiscriminate agents of warfare, but the conflict itself has claimed over 100,000 lives and displaced millions. Accordingly, we must pursue a diplomatic solution that secures and destroys the chemical weapons, negotiates an end to the war and to the regime, and provides for a better future for the Syrian people, including religious minorities.

As we pursue a negotiated end to the violence, there is far more we can do to support the millions of Syrian refugees. As a member of the Appropriations committee that funds our international diplomatic efforts, I have been pushing for greater humanitarian support of these displaced persons. I also spearheaded a bipartisan letter to the Secretary of Homeland Security (now joined by over seventy of my House colleagues) on behalf of the families of thousands of Syrian refugees who live here in the United States urging that these refugees be granted humanitarian parole so that they can be reunited with their loved ones in the U.S. The refugees already have approved immigration petitions and should be immediately reunited with their families, many of whom live in our community. These are just a few of the things I believe the United States can do now to alleviate the suffering while we pursue a negotiated end to the war.

Thank you again for writing, calling and visiting to share your thoughts on Syria. Issues involving war and peace are the most important we face as a nation, and I have benefited greatly from hearing your feedback. Please be assured that I will keep your views in mind in the weeks and months to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam B. Schiff", with a stylized, flowing script.

ADAM B. SCHIFF
Member of Congress