

Testimony of

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On

**The Iran-Syria Nexus and Its Implications for the
Middle East**

Before the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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Thank you, Madam Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the Iran-Syria nexus and its implications for the broader Middle East.

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein a decade ago, there has been no greater threat to international peace and security in the Middle East, and perhaps worldwide, than the regime in Tehran. Both as the central banker for, and leading state sponsor of, international terrorism, and through its relentless pursuit of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (“WMD”) and their delivery systems, Iran poses a direct threat to key American interests, friends and allies in the region and globally. The ayatollahs are pursuing geographic hegemony over the other oil-producing states of the Middle East, religious and ideological pre-eminence within the Islamic world, and a larger role on the global stage directly contrary to fundamental American interests in virtually every aspect.

In the region, Iran has established an arc of dominance that extends from its own territory through the al-Maliki regime in Iraq, and includes the Assad family/Ba’ath Party regime in Syria and terrorist Hezbollah in Lebanon. Tehran’s program of at subversion targets Bahrain and other Arab states across the Gulf, as well as providing money, weapons and other support for terrorist Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In the recent past, Iran has engaged in, among other things, arming, financing, training, and in some cases leading terrorists who attacked U.S. and other coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as making extensive efforts to influence the internal politics of those two countries, among others.

Iran is an equal-opportunity state sponsor of terrorism, aiding Shia terrorists in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Sunni Hamas in Gaza and Taliban in Afghanistan. The regime’s mullahs are fully willing and capable of behaving opportunistically even with sworn enemies in their region and religion to be able to oppose the United States and its allies more effectively. They are ruthless opponents whom we underestimate at our peril. And many are doing just that with their naïve assessments of Iran’s new President, Hassan Rouhani.

In the nuclear-weapons field, Tehran has for twenty years been pursuing the objective of securing deliverable nuclear capabilities, and today it is perilously close to achieving that goal. Iran is systematically building a broad and deep nuclear and ballistic-missile infrastructure, not racing simply to fabricate one or two nuclear devices. It has succeeded in making progress across the entire nuclear-fuel cycle despite economic sanctions, and it has successfully launched several earth satellites.

Tehran may well have facilities and capabilities that our intelligence has missed or underestimated. Iran and North Korea, for example, have cooperated extensively for at least fifteen years on their respective ballistic missile programs. There is every reason to believe that they cooperate as well in the nuclear field, which would have, among other things, a very material effect in underestimating how close Iran is in achieving its nuclear ambitions. The Al-Kibar reactor under construction by North Korea, destroyed by Israeli bombing in September, 2007, was very likely an example of just such cooperation.

Accordingly, viewed in light of Iran’s regional and ideological objectives, the civil war in Syria is about much more than simply whether the Assad regime remains in power or not. For

Iran, the loss of influence in Syria represented by Assad's fall would be a serious geostrategic setback. Simply as a matter of logistics and operations, replacing Assad with a Sunni regime in Damascus would separate Hezbollah from its major sources of supply and vital transit routes for weapons, personnel and money, and jeopardize Hezbollah's continuing viability in Lebanon.

Moreover, there are substantial reasons to believe that Syria has long partnered with Iran in numerous highly sensitive efforts, most notably the nuclear reactor destroyed in 2007. Madam Chairman, you will recall that ten years ago, I testified before your committee on Syrian WMD programs, including Syria's palpable interest in nuclear weapons. You also chaired a separate, classified session where I presented a detailed assessment of WMD activities in Syria, a testimony that many in the bureaucracy fought hard to block because they disputed the evidence about Syrian WMD efforts. Ten years later, I stand by that testimony. I understand that this Committee holds the sole remaining copy of this classified hearing.

Some, including then-Senator Joseph Biden, objected to my analysis at that time, on the ground that Syria did not have the financial resources to sustain its own nuclear-weapons program. Obviously, as we now know, someone was funding construction of that nuclear reactor in Syria, and it almost certainly did not involve North Korea providing its designs and workers *pro bono*. The obvious answer to any financial shortfall by Syria, if that was the case, would be for Iran to assume the costs, which Iran would have considerable incentive to do.

In short, the Al-Kibar reactor could well have been the business of a three-way joint venture among Iran, Syria and North Korea, inuring to the benefit of all three in different ways:

- hard-currency earnings for Pyongyang and possibly access to spent fuel from the reactor for reprocessing to extract plutonium;
- a clandestine nuclear reactor for Tehran and possibly additional projects on both the front and back ends of the nuclear-fuel cycle, all hidden from international surveillance; and
- participation in a rapidly progressing nuclear weapons program for Damascus.

Such a relationship would also have clearly enhanced the already large Iranian role in Syrian defense and security matters, thus tightening Iran's hold over the Assad regime.

We have much more to learn on this subject, including what other nuclear-related activities beyond the reactor might have been underway (or still are). Syria's continued, indeed adamant refusal to allow any but the most cursory inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency ("IAEA") support the hypothesis that more was going on, although we remain in the dark as to exactly what might be involved. For example, the intelligence community assessed that the al-Kibar reactor was close to start-up in 2007, which makes it likely that Syria had already constructed or purchased uranium fuel rods. If so, where did those fuel rods come from, and where are they today?

Confronted, therefore, two years ago with a spontaneous, indigenous challenge to the Assad regime in Syria, Iran reacted predictably, making it clear that it was prepared to shed a lot of Syrian blood to keep the regime in power. Aid in material forms, and including participation

by officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and others, and now the open, unambiguous presence in Syria of Hezbollah fighters, makes it clear that Iran has not wavered in the slightest in supporting Assad.

Similarly, Russia has been steadfast in providing support for the Ba'ath Party dictatorship, hoping thereby to maintain in power its one sure ally in the Arab world, as well as access to the Tartus naval facility, which could well play a vital role in an expanded, more-aggressive Russian naval posture across the Mediterranean Sea and throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Russia's interests in Syria do not entirely coincide with Iran's, but they converge sufficiently to make them the most important "friends of Assad's Syria."

Those who believed that Russia could be a partner in easing Assad out of power, including the Obama Administration, therefore, never fully understood or appreciated these vital interests of Russia and Iran. Even after Russia and China cast double vetoes against proposed Security Council sanctions resolutions on three separate occasions, the Obama Administration's rhetoric continued to stress its reliance on cooperation with Russia to resolve the Syrian conflict. Accordingly, having seen the United States waste over two years in diplomacy with Russia doomed to failure, we must now unfortunately conclude that the chaos in Syria today may be beyond the point where outside intervention at any realistic level can make a material difference. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey's recent statements on U.S. military options underline precisely this point.

Had the United States acted decisively to aid the Syrian opposition much earlier, there is at least a theoretical possibility that we could have made a difference. But taking on Assad even at the outset ineluctably meant taking on Iran, and it seems clear that the Obama Administration was unwilling to do anything that would jeopardize its long-sought objective of negotiations with Iran over its nuclear-weapons program. Since I believe that diplomatic efforts with Iran are, at best, a waste of time, the loss of the prospect of negotiations should not have been troubling.

For well or ill, however, all of these potential historical scenarios are now unavailable to us. We see Iran making steady, seemingly inexorable progress toward obtaining deliverable nuclear weapons. And because of the growing size of its nuclear establishment, when the day comes that Iran announces it is a nuclear-weapons state, it will not do so with a handful of nuclear weapons in its arsenal, but with scores or even hundreds. And the chaos in Syria only grows worse, with the United Nations now estimating the death toll of two-plus years of fighting to exceed 100,000. America's range of options is accordingly much diminished, and far less attractive.

So what should United States policy be? I offer the following recommendations:

1. We should overtly and covertly support regime change in Iran, by politically supporting the Iranian opposition and providing it material assistance. Negotiations with Tehran will never dissuade the mullahs from their path toward nuclear weapons, nor will sanctions work in time to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state. Indeed, viewed objectively, continued emphasis on these policy options simply works to Tehran's advantage, by prolonging the time available to it to make progress on its weapons program, and by postponing the inevitable day of reckoning to a time when it will be most advantageous for the theocratic

fascists in Iran. Hassan Rouhani demonstrated his ability to pursue precisely this kind of strategy as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator in 2003-2005, later boasting openly about how he and the regime deceived European Union ("EU") diplomats and the United States.

Theoretically, sanctions massively applied, universally adhered to, and strictly enforced ten years or so ago, might have made a difference. But no longer. Ironically, even the incremental, piecemeal sanctions against Iran have devastated its middle class, one of the primary sources of opposition to the regime. And in any case, as the Treasury Department announced last week, the Obama Administration is actually easing U.S. sanctions under the misguided view that so doing will facilitate Iranian concessions. Both the White House and the EU are apparently signaling behind the scenes to Iran that there is a prospect for still further easing if the longed-for negotiations make "progress." Moreover, recent press reports indicate that European courts are opening large potential loopholes in EU sanctions, in particular weakening the constraints against Iranian financial institutions.

Nonetheless, the mullahs' regime is highly unpopular inside Iran, and had we been at work to overthrow it for the last ten years, we might well be in a very different place today. Supporting the Iranian opposition does not imply military action by the United States of any sort. We are not talking about another war in the Middle East. We are instead simply recognizing that, given material support and time, Iranians themselves can bring this theocracy down.

2. We should support an Israeli decision to attack Iran's nuclear weapons program.

While regime change may be the preferred option, the highest U.S. interest is preventing Iran's nuclear weapons program from achieving its objective, and time is not on our side. The Obama Administration says repeatedly that "all options are on the table" regarding the Iranian program, no one seriously believes today that President Obama will ever approve the use of military force. Certainly, neither Iran nor Israel believes it.

That is why the spotlight is on Israel, which must almost certainly make a decision in the very near future whether it will take pre-emptive military action against this hostile nuclear-weapons program, as it has done twice before in its history. Otherwise, the already likely outcome that Iran will indeed get nuclear weapons will become essentially a reality. If Israel does strike, we should provide it political, military, and intelligence support before, during and after the attack, and be prepared to defend Israel at the UN and elsewhere for what will be a thoroughly legitimate exercise of Israel's inherent right to self-defense.

3. In Syria, the United States should provide political and non-lethal material support to opposition leaders and groups only on at least two explicit conditions: (1) that they commit not to engaging in a bloodbath against the Alawite, Druze and Christian populations in Syria if the Assad regime falls, and that they should respect the rights of all of Syria's religious and ethnic communities; and (2) that they commit to turning over to the United States or international organizations acceptable to the United States all of their WMD programs, components and assets, and make available all knowledgeable scientists, technicians, military personnel and others to assist in tracking the connections of these programs internationally.

4. The United States should provide humanitarian assistance to refugees from Syria and displaced persons within the country, but it should not provide military assistance to the Syrian

opposition. Whatever the theoretical arguments for arming the opposition, or providing direct U.S. involvement two years ago, those options have been lost forever. The Syrian opposition today is fragmented and unreliable, and even if we could find leaders whom we trusted, there is no guarantee that they can maintain control over whatever weapons we might provide, and keep them out of terrorist hands.

5. The United States should take all necessary steps to prevent Syria's chemical weapons assets and other WMD from escaping the country and falling into the hands of al Qaeda or other terrorist groups. Keeping Syria's WMD capabilities from falling into the wrong hands for potential use worldwide is the clearest, most-important interest the United States and its allies now have in the Syrian conflict. Dealing with Syria's stockpiles of chemical agents, precursors and weaponized materials is extremely dangerous, but the risk of these materials falling into the hands of terrorists or weapons traffickers is even worse.

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There are many other lessons we should learn about the Iran-Syria nexus, not least of which involve our understanding of the Putin regime in Moscow, the direction of Russian foreign policy, and why the Obama Administration's "reset button" hasn't worked. But these and many other issues can await another hearing.

For now, Madam Chairman, I would be happy to answer any questions you and other Members of the Subcommittee may have.