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Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism
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Defense for the Middle East
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rosen, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this critical moment for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

It is a critical moment because it presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help reshape the Middle East in ways that will bring more peace and prosperity, and less conflict and violence to those who live in the region, and will bring significant benefit to the interests of the United States. In every moment of opportunity, there is also risk, including the risk of missing the mark and losing the window to achieve the greatest possible gains. So I thank you for this timely hearing that I hope can shed some light on the best path forward.

The huge opportunity flows from the steady progress in the region toward greater integration from 2020 to 2023, then the tragedy of Hamas' vicious terrorist attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, and then the response of various actors in the war that followed.

In the nearly 21 months since the attacks, a combination of Israeli and U.S. military power has dealt blow after blow to the Iranian-aligned Axis of Resistance: Hamas, which began the war; Hezbollah, which entered the war on October 8; the Houthis in Yemen; Shia militia groups in Iraq and Syria; and, ultimately Iran itself. Along the way, Iran's key regional partner, the Assad regime in Syria, crumbled when neither its Iranian, Russian, nor Hezbollah allies were able to rescue it. All told, Iran is at its weakest point in decades.

The scale of the Iranian miscalculation is immense. First, Iran encouraged their chief proxy, Hezbollah, to engage in a war of attrition with Israel. At a moment of Israel's choosing, in a series of dramatic attacks, Israel decimated Hezbollah's strategic weapons, leadership, and fighters, which left the organization unable to carry out the mission for which it was built — to serve as a deterrent or second strike capability to protect Iran from Israeli or American attack. Hezbollah's collapse also produced a dramatic change in the policy of the Lebanese government, which may result in the terror group's disarmament and marginalization.

Second, Iran twice abandoned its longstanding caution, wherein it sought to avoid direct confrontation with Israel or the United States and to fight asymmetrically and via proxies. On April 13 and October 1 of last year, Iran launched two massive, overt, state-on-state acts of war against Israel — hundreds of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. Israel's air and missile

defense, buttressed by U.S. support, and in April, by an international coalition, largely defeated these attacks. But these events are critical context to the events last month when Israel and the United States conducted strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. That war did not begin on June 13, 2025. It began 14 months earlier.

I believe the military confrontation with Iran that unfolded over 12 days in June was necessary and inevitable. President Trump was right to seek a diplomatic deal with Iran, and right to demand that Iran give up its uranium enrichment capability — which enables them to produce the material needed to produce nuclear weapons. It was never likely that Iran would agree to those terms, and certainly not without a credible military threat.

I supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action when it was signed in 2015 as the best available way to buy the most time on the Iranian nuclear program. I opposed the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA without a better plan in 2018, which cost us some of that time. But those positions ten and seven years ago were not relevant to the situation we faced in 2025. The fact is that Iran was far too close for comfort to producing a nuclear weapon, and it had to be stopped.

Three things had changed. First, the IAEA documented that Iran possessed over 400 kg of 60 percent enriched uranium, enough for 10 bombs, with the ability to enrich it to 90 percent (weapons grade) within days. Second, Iranian nuclear scientists over the previous year had engaged in various activities and research that would significantly shorten the time for them to build a weapon — a separate process from enrichment — if and when they got the order from their leadership to do so. And third, Iran's decision to attack Israel directly twice last year fundamentally changed the calculus of what they were willing to do and what they could do. If any one of the ballistic missiles that reached Israel were tipped with a nuclear warhead, we would be in a different world. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has long called for Israel's destruction, was dangerously close to having the ability to carry it out.

The Israeli campaign, fueled by deep intelligence penetration of the Iranian system, did significant damage to Iranian nuclear facilities, air defenses, its ballistic missile production and launching capabilities, and high value targets in the Iranian military, IRGC, and nuclear program. Operation Midnight Hammer ordered by President Trump against Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan, using unique U.S. capabilities, caused additional grave damage to those sites. President Trump's initial comment that their nuclear sites were "totally obliterated" preceded the technical collection of a battle damage assessment, which takes weeks, and implied, probably inaccurately, that their nuclear program is completely out of business. But based on my understanding of the munitions used and the success of their deployment, those sites will not be usable for enrichment

or uranium conversion for a significant period of time — time we can perhaps extend through a range of means.

None of this means the threats posed by Iran and its proxies are eliminated. They may be down but not out. Iran likely retains its highly enriched uranium stockpile, although it may or may not have current access to it, and it could have the ability and motivation to try to sprint to enrich it to weapons grade and build a crude nuclear device. A much-degraded Hamas continues to fight Israel in Gaza, and Hezbollah has not given up hopes of rearming. The Houthis — which the Biden Administration struck in a series of deliberate and self-defense engagements over months, and the Trump Administration struck in an intense campaign over weeks — retain capability to attack Israel and to disrupt shipping in the Red Sea, which they have recently resumed doing with deadly results.

But the gains produced by military power over the last 21 months are significant. Now we need to use all the tools at our disposal, not just military tools, to consolidate those gains.

In a moment, I will pivot to the main focus of this hearing, which is the diplomatic path forward. But, following my service at the Department of Defense in the last year of the Biden Administration, I would be remiss if I did not emphasize that there will remain a critical need to maintain a robust U.S. military capability in the region in the period ahead, and that doing so enhances our ability to seize diplomatic opportunities.

Briefly, Israel's military dominance in the region is undisputed, with air superiority from the Mediterranean to Tehran. Not every problem in the region is a nail that should be addressed with a military hammer. But that capability can work in tandem with a steady U.S. posture to deter our adversaries, who, as mentioned, continue to pose threats — whether Iran's reconstitution of its nuclear program, its threat to shut down shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, or Houthi aggression. A sustained U.S. presence also provides reassurance to our friends that we will not abandon the field. These friends include Egypt and Jordan, in whom we invest with military assistance, and Gulf states, which host many of our forces and which President Trump visited and secured further investments in our military partnerships. Our partnerships also help ensure these countries will not turn to Russia or China as security partners.

Perhaps most important is the role of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). With Israel's integration into CENTCOM in 2021, and the deep trust and interoperability built up by CENTCOM and the Israel Defense Forces over these past 21 months, we have an extraordinary combined ability to deter and respond to threats. Beyond cooperation with Israel, CENTCOM serves as the convener and integrator of U.S. military partners across the region. Thanks to our unique capabilities, enduring presence, and CENTCOM's exceptional leadership, U.S. partners

in the Middle East look to us to shape the security environment and coordinate responses to key threats, strengthen their capabilities, conduct bilateral and multilateral exercises, convene high-level strategic exchanges, improve interoperability, and continue to build out an Integrated Air and Missile Defense architecture.

Turning to the diplomatic opportunities, we should keep our eyes on these mutually reinforcing strategic objectives of: 1) bringing this period of regional conflict to a close and transitioning to a period of sustained stability; 2) expanding the circle of regional integration that was broadened by the Abraham Accords; 3) deterring and defanging the threats to the United States and our allies and partners posed by Iran, and preventing a resurgence of Iran's regional influence through its terrorist proxies; and, 4) building a more sustainable regional order led by a network of U.S. partners including Israel and Arab states, with the United States as an active participant but at a scale that also enables adequate attention to critical interests in other regions.

With the remainder of my time, I would like to propose a number of key initiatives in support of these objectives.

First, help achieve a permanent end to the war in Gaza, with a fully developed day-after plan that releases all hostages, protects Israel's security, removes Hamas from power, provides relief for Palestinian civilians, and enables regionally-supported reconstruction for Palestinians who want to live in peace with Israel.

Our other goals of expanding regional integration cannot get off the ground until the Gaza war ends. A 60-day ceasefire would bring much-needed relief, but it must transition into the end of the war without a return to fighting. That will require Israel agreeing to certain terms, but also intense pressure on Hamas brought by Qatar and other international actors. That is the first key to getting Arab states involved with the next phase of reconstruction.

At the moment, the risk is that we will slide into the only alternative: a full-scale Israeli occupation of Gaza, with more dead hostages, more dead Palestinian civilians, more dead Israeli soldiers, no positive involvement by Arab states, and deepening isolation of Israel. In the immediate period, which we all hope will soon see a ceasefire, the United States should:

- Withdraw President Trump's misguided Gaza Riviera proposal, which has emboldened the most extreme members of the Israeli cabinet to press for full occupation, the massing of Palestinian civilians in a camp along the Egyptian border, and the removal of much of the Palestinian population from Gaza. Those Gazans who wish to leave should, of course, have the freedom to do so, and many countries should be encouraged to receive them. But the mass evacuation of hundreds of thousands or more to a handful of receiving states is not going to

happen. If it were done involuntarily, it would be a violation of international humanitarian law and constitute ethnic cleansing. These ideas are widely rejected across the region, will discourage Arab states from helping stabilize Gaza, and even delegitimize more reasonable efforts to help individual Palestinians who wish to relocate to do so.

- Enable a vastly improved mechanism to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians in Gaza. There is a legitimate problem of Hamas hijacking aid provided through international organizations and using it for themselves and for political power. Hamas bears much responsibility for the hunger crisis in Gaza. But the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) alternative is vastly insufficient, and has been deeply flawed and dangerous in its design, leading to far too many deaths of civilians attempting to access it, many caused by IDF fire. Getting aid directly into the hands of Palestinian civilians and prevent its hijacking to Hamas's benefit is a worthy goal, and the only solution is to flood the zone with so much aid that it is easy to access and loses its market value. With hunger becoming more widespread across Gaza, Israel should be enabling international organizations and GHF to distribute aid across the entirety of Gaza, not limited to a handful of distribution points.
- Press Israel to revise their targeting protocols to minimize civilian casualties. Hamas leaders and fighters remain legitimate targets, and the challenge of their using civilians as human shields remains. But the civilian toll of many recent strikes has been too high, and Israel has admitted to numerous recent mistakes.

Regarding day-after planning, the United States should:

- Make clear that the terms for the permanent end of the war require the release of all Israeli hostages and the departure from Gaza of a critical mass of Hamas leaders and fighters, with the support of Arab states, for exile in distant locations, sufficient to ensure Hamas is completely removed from power. Arab states should be encouraged to speak in unison and join Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' call for Hamas to leave Gaza. A U.N. Security Council resolution could follow. The United States should organize plans for this departure, drawing on the 1982 evacuation of the PLO from Beirut.
- Organize an Interim Security Mission for Gaza (ISMG), with U.S. leadership based outside Gaza, enabling troops from Arab states such as Egypt, the UAE, and Morocco, and possibly non-Arab states such as Indonesia, to secure humanitarian aid delivery, border crossings, and basic law and order. The ISMG would enable the gradual introduction of Palestinian Authority Security Forces, which should be trained for this mission under the supervision of the Office of the Security Coordinator in Jerusalem under the continued leadership of a U.S. 3-star general or flag officer.

- Work with Arab states on the installation of improved leadership of the Palestinian Authority and the establishment of Gaza leadership linked to the PA and supported by Arab states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with help in governance, training, and education, and reconstruction funded by a range of Arab and international states. Arab states will only play this role, however, if they see it linked to the establishment of a future Palestinian state. So it will be necessary to find the proper expression of this vision, even if the timelines will be longer and the dimensions different than those envisioned in previous peace efforts.
- Articulate strong opposition to any Israeli moves toward annexation in the West Bank, and urge Israeli and Palestinian security forces to act to prevent violence by their own sides, as instability in the West Bank could damage prospects for stability in Gaza and harm prospects for regional integration. I commend U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee for his recent highlighting of the importance of Israel holding extremist Israelis who commit violent acts to account.

Second, work toward the continuation and expansion of the normalization and integration process marked by the Abraham Accords, which has stalled but not receded during the war. Specifically, the United States should:

- Prioritize discussions with Saudi Arabia on the timing, conditions, and mechanism of normalization with Israel. Nothing would do more to reshape the politics of the region than normalized relations between the most influential Arab and Muslim state and Israel. The Saudis seek expanded security cooperation with the United States, which we should be prepared to grant, provided the Kingdom meets U.S. needs that protect our interests in the region and regarding competition with China, including strict limits on Saudi-Chinese military cooperation. We should be mindful that Saudi officials have consistently made clear that a requirement for them to normalize relations with Israel is the establishment of a pathway to a Palestinian state — a bar that may be impossible for the current Israeli government to clear — and they are sensitive to extensive Israeli operations and holding of territory in Syria and Lebanon. Continued work on the framework of this triangular deal can take place even if its ultimate fulfillment may be more likely in 2027 than this year.
- Prepare to resume the work of the Negev Forum as soon as possible after the war ends. This standing group of Israel, the United States, and four Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco) includes six working groups and a structure for multilateral projects aimed at bringing the benefits of regional integration to their citizens. As early as possible, a Negev Forum ministerial should be held, with additional invitees such as Jordan, Mauritania, and

Indonesia, and activity should resume in the working groups. The Atlantic Council's N7 Initiative, which I led in 2022-2023, is poised to support the Negev Forum as it has in the past.

- Appoint and confirm the Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords that Congress created in the NDAA for FY2024. The appointment of a high-profile envoy in this role will communicate the United States' seriousness about expanding these agreements, and provide important buttressing to the work of Special Envoy for the Middle East Steve Witkoff.
- Elevate the work of the House and Senate Abraham Accords Caucuses, which is essential to add the expertise and jurisdictional focus of their diverse members and to convey the bipartisan commitment to expanding regional integration.
- Continue work toward a non-belligerency agreement between Israel and Syria that reaffirms the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, supports connections between Israeli and Syrian Druze communities, and allows for limited economic, environmental, water, and health cooperation, without the need to address the final status of the Golan Heights. A return of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), enhanced by visits and supervision from CENTCOM representatives, can help stabilize the border region. President Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Syria is a gamble, but the right gamble, to give the greatest possibility for stabilization of Syria after years of brutal rule and civil war and preventing Iran from exploiting chaos to reestablish a foothold. But the government in Damascus must be held accountable, including for its treatment of minorities and establishment of inclusive governance. Israeli strikes on central government facilities in Damascus are destabilizing and have already become a dangerous factor in Syrian domestic politics; they must be avoided. Finally, it is critical that the United States not withdraw all its forces from Northeast Syria until adequate preparations are in place for proper sustainment of counter-ISIS operations, supervision of ISIS detention centers, and peaceful integration of Syrian Kurdish factions into national institutions.

Third, capitalize on the severe damage to the Iranian nuclear program and the weakening of the Iranian-led axis to secure a long-term improvement in the regional security environment. The United States should:

- Seek renewed negotiations with Iran to sustain the gains of the military strikes on its nuclear program and prevent the program's reconstitution.
- Insist on full access for IAEA inspectors, the location and removal of Iran's HEU stockpile, and an assurance of zero enrichment going forward. Separate negotiations will also need to commence on meaningful limits on Iran's ballistic missile inventory

- Maintain pressure on Iran toward those ends, by coordinating with UK, French, German, and EU officials on the leverage of, and if necessary the implementation of, JCPOA snapback sanctions, and by devoting additional attention and resources to scaling back Iranian oil exports to China.
- Make clear that additional military strikes by Israel or the United States are possible if Iran seeks to move, hide, or reconstitute elements of its nuclear program, or if it refuses to give access to IAEA inspectors or exits the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Congress should be properly consulted before any such strikes. While the United States maintains escalation dominance, we must nevertheless remain vigilant to deter and defend against potential Iranian or Iranian-sponsored attacks on U.S. bases and personnel or asymmetric attacks on American, Israeli, or Jewish targets anywhere. Iran should be on notice that any attempt to harm current or former U.S. officials will bring an automatic kinetic response, and the United States should coordinate with allies on a common set of diplomatic and economic penalties that would be triggered by hostage taking.
- Prepare for the possibility of internally-driven regime change. It should not be a policy goal of the United States, nor a project to be achieved by military means. But we must recognize that the regime and its ideology remain the main fuel of destabilization across the region, and are deeply unpopular among the Iranian people due to the regime's brutality and corruption. We should provide appropriate support to the Iranian people, much as we did for anti-Communist movements in countries under Soviet domination during the Cold War. Our efforts should include enhancing Iranian citizens' ability to communicate via internet access and to receive accurate information, publicly condemning repression by the regime, sanctioning regime officials responsible for abuses, and highlighting regime corruption that harms the Iranian people. We should develop now a plan to support a transition so we are not caught flat-footed if the Iranian people take matters into their hands, including organizing reconstruction funding from international donors, preparing to unwind U.S. and international sanctions with targets and incentives for the new authorities, planning to provide support for post-conflict transition and institution-building, and coordination with responsible elements of the Iranian diaspora.
- Continue to support and pressure the Lebanese government and Lebanese Armed Forces in the disarmament of Hezbollah and establishing state institutions as the sole legitimate possessors of the means of force.
- Develop a whole-of-government approach to combatting and weakening the Houthis, drawing on diplomatic, political, economic, public messaging, intelligence, and military tools, in coordination with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others.

- Negotiate with Iraqi authorities to secure a sustained, limited U.S. military posture to support counter-ISIS missions, with full self-defense authorities and capabilities. Our presence in Iraq helps the Iraqi Security Forces succeed in this ongoing effort, provides reassurance to our Kurdish partners, and enables us to balance Iranian influence in Iraq.

Finally, as the war winds down, work should begin now on negotiating the next U.S.-Israel military assistance MOU.

The current MOU expires in 2028, which means it would be best to have a new MOU in place within a year or so, to ensure no delay in necessary acquisitions. A new MOU should ensure that the United States upholds its legal obligation and national interest to ensure Israel's qualitative military edge, be grounded in planning for the threats of the next two decades, and provide sufficient funds to rebuild, sustain, and upgrade Israel's air defense inventory, which has been stretched in multiple defensive engagements. I should note that it is entirely legitimate and appropriate in the context of MOU negotiations and our enduring close security partnership with Israel for the United States to raise questions and concerns about the need for Israel to minimize civilian casualties in its operations and the obligation to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians in need.

This is a hefty list of objectives and priorities to pursue to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East. It takes significant resources to carry out foreign policy initiatives at this scale: personnel with a range of diplomatic experience and expertise; functional and adequately resourced foreign assistance programs in key countries; international broadcasting; and more. If it is left to just a few high-level officials with access to the president, much of the implementation work will not get done. Meanwhile, China is deepening its activity and influence in all these areas everywhere the United States pulls back.

I am deeply concerned that the Trump Administration's drastic cuts to personnel at the Department of State, including experts in nuclear diplomacy, sanctions enforcement, and counterterrorism, the elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the decimation of our international broadcasting capabilities, are leaving us ill-prepared and under-resourced to properly seize the opportunities before us. It will be a terrible own-goal if our own lack of preparation and denial of tools in our own toolkit prevent us from being effective in executing on the long list of priorities we must pursue, thereby providing an advantage to our competitors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.