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The Regional Implications of an Iranian Nuclear Deal

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. As I write this testimony, I am reading reports of the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and the military maneuver of ISIS forces toward Baghdad. The Iraqi Security Forces in Ninewah have collapsed, and it is not clear where—or if—they will be able to stop the ISIS advance. ISIS is simultaneously conducting offensive operations against the rival al Qaeda affiliate in eastern Syria, where it continues to control and govern significant territory. Sectarian conflict in the region continues to expand and deepen, along with al Qaeda safe-havens and capabilities.

What does this have to do with the topic of today's hearing, you might be wondering. The answer is: everything. Iran is a belligerent in this regional sectarian war and its regional activities will be shaped to a considerable degree by the approach it adopts to this conflict. We can only reflect on the implications of a possible nuclear weapons deal for the region in this context.

The national security policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is designed to prevail in the war Tehran believes the United States and Israel are waging against it. Supreme Leader Khamenei declared in March that international sanctions on Iran became “an all-out war” against Iran in 2011. He denied that sanctions have anything to do with Iran's nuclear program: “One day, their excuse is the nuclear issue and another day, it is the issue of the enrichment. One day, it is human rights and another day, it is other such issues. Sanctions existed against us before the nuclear issue was brought up and they will continue to exist...even if the nuclear issue and these negotiations are resolved.” He sees American enmity in everything: “From the beginning the enemy has made extensive efforts, and the more we advance, the clearer their work becomes. They use thousands of TV networks, radio programs, and the internet to curse the Islamic Republic.” He even blames us for al Qaeda: “Today Takfiri groups are working against Islam and Shi'as in certain regions and carrying out evil acts, but they are not the main enemies. The main enemy is the one who provokes them and provides them with money.” Even the supposedly reformist Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani declared in 2010: “Radical Islamic groups such as al Qaeda and the Taliban are the creatures of the espionage service of the United States and the West.”

These are not isolated statements. The Iranian national security leadership regularly repeats and expands on them. Tehran has evolved a national security strategy around the concept of “soft war” that seeks to defeat the supposedly subtle and complex efforts of the US and Israel to destroy Iran with everything from smart missiles to internet pornography. This strategy sees any American influence in the Middle East as anathema and a mortal threat, and its goal is the complete expulsion of the US, the destruction of Israel, and the creation of a Persian hegemony. The Islamic Republic sees itself as the revolutionary vanguard that will overturn the current immoral, unjust, and infidel world-order in favor of its preferred religious-ideological vision.

Iran seeks to be not merely a great-power rival to the US, but a force to destroy the US-dominated (from Tehran's perspective) world system.

The nuclear issue is at the core of America's current policy concern with Iran, but it is at the periphery of Iran's strategic calculus. The rational explanation for Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability is the desire to be able to deter an American or Israeli attack on Iran once and for all. That is a defensive objective whose primary aim is to enable other operations to achieve Iran's goals throughout the region. Iran's nuclear program is meant to be a strategic enabler, not a strategy unto itself.

What would happen, then, if Iran actually abandoned that program? The international sanctions regime would be unwound, large amounts of money and human capital would flow into Iran, the regime would be able to stabilize itself internally and would have enormously greater resources with which to pursue its regional goals. A nuclear agreement would advance the regional interests of the US only if it led to a fundamental change in the nature of Iran's attitudes toward and relationship with the US and its allies.

Such a shift seems most unlikely, however. The entire ideological foundation of the current Iranian regime rests as much on anti-Americanism as it does on anti-Zionism (without much distinction between the two). One could imagine a nuclear deal in which Iran yields almost all of its enrichment capability in exchange for full sanctions relief, but the tone of the agreement would be like the tone of US-Russian relations after the signing of the SALT treaty in 1972. There might well follow a period of détente, but there is no reason to imagine a wholesale change in the fundamental thinking, strategy, and approach of the Islamic Republic. The history of arms treaties amply demonstrates the degree to which the spirit of cooperation in which they are negotiated can be separated from an overall atmosphere of hostility.

But even a total reversal of Tehran's attitudes toward the US would not be enough to bring Iran into alignment with US interests in the region. I began this testimony speaking about Iraq because Iran's strategy there and in Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and throughout the region has shown the enormous damage the Islamic Republic does to regional stability through the methods by which it pursues its aims. Iran relies mainly on sub-state Shi'a militant groups combined with overt bribes to individuals and regimes to shape the strategies and policies of its neighbors.

Lebanese Hezbollah, its primary regional proxy, participates in the Lebanese government but maintains its own large armed force—which it sent into Syria at Tehran's behest in support of Assad. Iranian strategy in Lebanon has consistently sought to prevent the Lebanese government from gaining control over Hezbollah—and thereby over much of southern Lebanon—even after Hezbollah became part of the government.

Iranian strategy in Iraq has turned heavily on supporting and sustaining multiple competing Shi'a militia groups, political factions, and suborned individuals. This strategy has consistently

hindered efforts to form a coherent Iraqi state. The militias themselves became a major driver of sectarian conflict from shortly after the U.S. invasion, in fact, and are responsible in no small way for the regional sectarian war we now face.

Tehran has pursued a similar approach in Yemen, co-opting the quasi-Shi'a al Houthis in the northwest, training, arming, and funding them as they have established a de facto independent mini-state between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Iran simultaneously has been providing assistance to Sunni separatists in southern Yemen, contributing to the collapse of that state.

And Iranian strategy in Syria has been to back Assad in the conduct of a sectarian bloodletting of remarkable viciousness. That viciousness has powerfully fueled the regional sectarian war and become a magnet, rallying cry, and now training and logistical base for Sunni extremists from around the world.

It is not just that the Islamic Republic is anti-American. The Islamic Republic is a polarizing sectarian force whose main methods of pursuing its goals destroy order, stability, and politics. It will seek to manage the escalating crisis through these methods and will instead make it worse. A nuclear deal will only give Tehran more resources with which to pursue its mistaken and misshapen strategy.

A nuclear agreement that verifiably eliminated Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons capability would of course be desirable, although I do not believe that it is achievable. Certainly Tehran has not put anything on the table thus far that comes even close to meeting this standard. The Iranian penchant for pursuing secret nuclear and weaponization programs and admitting to them only after the U.S. finds them does not bode well for full transparency, particularly considering the Iranian conviction that the International Atomic Energy Agency is an espionage network for the West. There is also the question of how to ensure continued Iranian adherence to any agreement in the absence of sanctions. Sanctions have been absolutely essential in bringing the Supreme Leader to the negotiating table at all. Once lifted, they will not be easily or quickly restored. Without the credible threat of the rapid restoration of crippling sanctions, pressure on Tehran to abide by any agreement will be considerably less than the pressure that has been required to bring Iran to the table. Even a deal could only work, then, if the Iranians really undergo a fundamental change of heart on the nuclear issue—something for which there is no evidence whatever to suggest.

Any deal comes with the risk of miscalculation and betrayal—the risk that Iran might after all retain the ability to field a nuclear arsenal. We are all focused on that risk. But a deal would also come with another risk—the risk that the US would persuade itself that solving one problem solves all. In this case, on the contrary, solving one problem may very well make others a lot worse. But deal or no deal, the US can only hope to advance (or defend) its interests in the Middle East through our own active engagement. Perhaps we must now speak of re-engagement after the determined retreats of the past five years.

This is not a brief for military regime change in Iran, for re-invading Iraq, or for any specific policy. It is certainly not an argument for pursuing purely military responses to regional problems and the Iranian threat. We must instead use the moment of reflection afforded by this hearing to consider how to develop a strategy that competes with Iran while fighting al Qaeda—all the while avoiding the trap of imagining that the one can be an effective ally against the other.

The basic outlines of such a strategy are clear. The urgency of the situations in Iraq and Syria demands active American involvement in those conflicts, not necessarily through the deployment of US combat troops, but certainly through the deployment of advisers, support elements, enablers (including air power), and intelligence to assist the majorities in both countries who seek to reject both al Qaeda and Iranian domination. Hezbollah's invasion of Syria has exacerbated rifts within Lebanon and opened the possibility of driving a wedge between Hezbollah and other parts of Lebanese society. Aggressive diplomacy and well-targeted assistance could help weaken Hezbollah's control over its vital base, forcing it to refocus on Lebanon and away from supporting Assad. The US must also work seriously—and not through speeches—to regain the confidence of our Arab allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey. America's retreat from the region has increased the costs of implementing such a strategy, but we must keep in mind that things are not going terribly well for Iran either, despite the current euphoria in Tehran. A strategy that combines continued sanctions with meaningful efforts to displace and disrupt Iran's proxies and Iran's strategies in the region is essential to creating any prospect of long-term change in Tehran's attitudes and of regional stability.

I thank the committee for raising this important issue and for the opportunity to present my views.