

**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee,
Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia**

***“IRAN’S STRATEGIC ASPIRATIONS AND
THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST”***

A Statement by

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Mr. Chairman: I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify once again before the Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

A funny thing has happened in the Middle East: virtually all of the government opposition to the United States has gone away. After almost a half-century of Cold War battles to protect oil fields, deny Soviet access to warm-water ports, and commit hundreds of billions of dollars in aid, the number of Middle Eastern states hostile to United States can be counted on one hand, with several fingers left over. South Yemen merged into North Yemen in 1990, Saddam fell in 2003, Libya came in from the cold in 2004, and on they went. The only countries with truly adversarial relations with the United States are Syria and Iran, with Iran being the more consequential of the two.

This remaining opposition is not trivial. Indeed, the Iranians' return on their regional investments is breathtaking compared to the U.S. return on a far greater investment over the last five years. Relying on skillful diplomacy, artful proxies and strategic discipline, Iran has used its regional efforts to consolidate its rule at home and confound U.S.-led efforts to isolate it. At the same time, the states that are closest to the United States are hedging their relationships with us.

For the most part, Iran's regional allies are movements rather than states, and in a region in which states dominate the politics within their own borders, that would seem to be a losing strategy. Yet, Iran has been able skillfully to play the hand it is dealt. While it would be hard for Iran's allies to topple U.S. allies in the Middle East, Iran can take comfort not only in these allies' growing power, but more importantly, in the ways in which they insulate Iran from U.S. and international pressure.

You have asked me to concentrate on responses to Iran's numerous foreign policy efforts in the Levant. It is worth pointing out at the outset that the consistent thread running through Iran's efforts in this area is opposition to Israel. One could well argue

that Iran has no business caring about Israel. Iran is a largely Shiite Persian nation rather than a Sunni Arab one. Jerusalem has been far more central to Sunni thinking than Shia, and before the Iranian revolution, hostility to Israel had been largely an Arab issue rather than a Persian or pan-Muslim one. In my judgment, the government of Iran uses its hostility to Israel strategically, as a way to open doors for a Shiite, Farsi-speaking power in the Sunni Arab heartland. By advertising its hostility to Israel—and supporting those who attack Israel—the Iranian government seeks to demonstrate to the disaffected throughout the region that it is more courageous and more true to their sentiments than their own governments. Iran is trying to obfuscate the fact that it is a foreign government with its own aspirations to regional dominance by portraying itself as an influential regional force agitating against the status quo, and a fearless rejectionist that dares to speak truth to power when other regional states cower under U.S. protection.

Opposition to the status quo is the core of Iranian strategy in the Levant. Israel is just one manifestation of that status quo, the other manifestations of which are regional weakness in the face of extra-regional powers, authoritarian governance, and economic malaise. Ironically, strong U.S. ties to regional governments—a U.S. policy success that has been nurtured over more than a half century—makes the United States complicit in the failure of these states and creates the dissatisfaction on which Iranian propaganda feeds.

Iran has played the game of Arab dissatisfaction far more skillfully than the United States. The U.S.-led effort to promote democracy in the region, which seemed robust just a few years ago, is in shambles. Arab publics never trusted U.S. intentions, governments carefully stoked nationalist sensitivities, conservative voices quickly drowned out liberal ones, and the United States found that a global emphasis on fighting terrorism quickly forced them into the arms of the local intelligence services who were

most responsible for implementing anti-democratic measures. Cleverly, Iran has tried not so much to build a new order as to discredit the existing one, and it has met with some success.

I would like to talk about Iran's strategies in the Levant, starting with Iran's most important state ally, Syria. Iran and Syria are, by some measures, improbable allies. Syria is a revolutionary secular regime, and Iran is a revolutionary Islamic one. Syria sees itself as the heart of the Arab world, a world that suffered through centuries of conflict with imperial Persia. Both regimes are highly ideological, yet their ideologies have little overlap.

Where they do overlap is in their opposition to the United States and to U.S. power and influence in the region. These two countries are drawn together in part because the United States opposes them using a variety of measures: bilateral sanctions, international pressure, and the occasional repositioning of troops to remind each of the reach of U.S. power. But they are also drawn together because they each seek to influence many of the same non-state actors in the Levant, from the Shia plurality in Lebanon to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian Authority. In general, it seems that Iran is the more senior partner but also the more distant one; seen another way, Iran seems somewhat more strategic in its search for regional allies, while Syria seems more urgently and narrowly focused on protecting its interests in Lebanon.

Still, in my judgment Syria and Iran are bedfellows but not soul-mates. Syria is the principal bridge through which Iran projects power into the Levant and a vital land link to Hezbollah. Most of Hezbollah's weapons are reportedly transshipped through Syria, and Syria provides a pro-Iranian base in the Arab heartland that Iran seeks to further its own campaign of regional influence. For its own part, Iran is Syria's only regional ally and an escape valve for pressure applied by the United States and the Gulf

states. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Syria lost its patron. A dalliance with Saddam Hussein ended with his fall, leaving Syria literally with nowhere to turn but Tehran.

Yet, when unknown assailants assassinated the Hezbollah killer Imad Mughniyah in Damascus in February, Iran swiftly announced that Iranian, Syrian and Hezbollah representatives would jointly investigate his death. The announcement was a recognition of his Iranian ties. Yet, within days, Syria announced that no such joint investigation would occur. Whether Syria's rejection was due to a nationalist impulse, a reflection of having something to hide, or some other reason, we don't know and may never know.

In Iraq, Syria and Iran—by acts of omission and commission—have each supported armed groups whose greatest enemies are the other state's clients. Another sign of differing regional strategies are recent revelations that Syria is indirectly negotiating with Israel. Protestations of closeness in the last week seem to me to confirm the fact that there are serious rifts in this relationship.

While Syria is Iran's principal state ally, Hezbollah appears to be its most intimate ally. Linked to Lebanon's Shia plurality, Hezbollah was an Iranian creation that fights for Shia rights at the same time that it fights against Israel. Hezbollah set the mold for modern religious opposition parties, since copied by Hamas and others. It combines robust services with political agitation and armed struggle, all relying on local fundraising and substantial subsidy by foreign patrons. Iranian-Hezbollah ties seem as effortless as Iranian-Syrian ties seem forced. Iran does not feel an existential threat lurking in Lebanon, as Syria does, and it appears free to give Hezbollah considerably more leeway on tactical issues. In some ways, if fact, Iran seems to be using its own influence in Lebanon as a way to build Syrian dependence on Iran itself.

Overall, the Iranian bid in Lebanon seems to be one for influence rather than control over the country. A weak Lebanon with a virtually independent Shia region does

Iran more good than an actual client state. Hezbollah gives Iran a stick with which it can poke Israel, Gulf Arab countries close to Lebanon, and the United States. At the same time, as a sub-national actor, it is harder to defeat in a conventional military conflict in which it would be badly outmatched by Israel and the United States. The 2006 war with Israel made this point perfectly, as Hezbollah hid behind Lebanese sovereignty to attack Israel. The Lebanese army cannot defeat Israel, but Hezbollah fighters on Lebanese soil can certainly damage Israel.

For its part, the current government of Lebanon is not capable of ending Iranian influence in the country and finds itself seeking to manage it instead. Iran has emerged as a foreign patron of a sectarian group, much as France has had a traditionally strong relationship with the Maronites and Saudi Arabia has been close to the Sunni community. Seen this way, Iran is not so much breaking the rules of Lebanese politics as reinventing them, especially since Hezbollah has been able to use the conflict with Israel as an excuse to remain armed. Just two weeks ago, we saw the effects of this on Lebanese internal politics.

Iran's support for Hamas is a different kind of relationship, as Hamas represents no sectarian group or other natural base that is logically sympathetic to Iran. Instead, Iran's support for Hamas – which appears to be a combination of cash and weapons – gives Iran ideological credibility in the Middle East at relatively low cost. While people in a classified setting can give you better numbers, Iran's investment in Hamas is likely in the tens of millions of dollars per year, a mere fraction of its spending on Hezbollah, and also a fraction of international support for the government of Mahmoud Abbas.

Iran also supports Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a smaller and weaker group than Hamas with no ambitions for political engagement or social service provision. In the current climate, PIJ seems to have left center stage as Fatah and Hamas struggle for

power. Should Iran seek to disrupt peace moves in the future, however, Iran would likely use PIJ as an additional pawn with which it can further its own interests.

Like the government of Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority is hamstrung in its efforts to limit Iranian influence. Western patronage comes through the front door, but it often comes with restrictions and safeguards that hamstring the recipient bureaucrats. Iranian support for Hamas and PIJ comes through the back door in wads of cash and boxes of weapons and ammunition that are delivered to motivated and committed partisans. While Arab governments are generally alarmed at the prospect of Hamas coming to power in the Palestinian Authority – the prospect of a religiously inspired revolutionary movement seizing power makes every single regime in the region quake – they are generally sympathetic to the idea that less of a disparity in forces between Israel and the Palestinians would help draw Israel to the negotiating table. Their opposition to Iran's support for Palestinian militant groups, therefore, is often muted.

Still, most of the states in the region are deeply troubled by Iran's actions. King Abdullah of Jordan captured this disquiet most clearly in 2004 when he talked of a "Shia Crescent" emerging in the Middle East, a clear mark of concern about Iranian influence, but the concern is by no means limited to Jordan. The government of Egypt sees Iran as a key rival for regional influence and a proliferation threat for the entire Middle East, and the governments of both Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority see Iran pushing their populations toward extremism and division. Indeed, while one can make a case for some Iranian good works for the Shia in Lebanon, it's hard to point to anything outside that arena where the Iranians are playing a constructive role in the region.

Even so, these governments seem to be drifting away from the U.S. embrace, partly as a consequence of Iran's actions. U.S. standing in the Middle East grew at a time when governments felt their greatest threats came from beyond their borders. U.S. military support helped protect them and was welcomed. Now, the United States is able

to offer far fewer protections from the things that governments most fear—internal threats against which a close U.S. relationship is more of a mixed blessing. Governments welcome the tools of U.S. counterterrorism—the communications intercepts, the paramilitary training, and the equipment—but they doubt the wisdom of the U.S. prescription of more open politics, respect for human rights, and the like. Instead, many have the sense that the United States is dangerously naïve; they see U.S. insistence pushing forward with Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006 despite the disarray of Fatah and the gathering strength of Hamas as a prime example of that naïveté.

Iran not only profits from this split, but helps drive it. Iran does not threaten any of the Levantine Arab governments in a conventional military sense, but the growing feelings of anomie and disaffection that Iran helps fan drive a wedge between regional governments and the United States. The United States no longer leads the Free World, because there is no more Iron Curtain; the age in which the United States could act as if it enjoyed a monopoly on virtue is over. Governments and their citizens have a wider array of relationships to choose from—China, Europe, and even Iran are all carving out their own niches—and those relationships are increasingly complex. In addition, the apparent intimacy of the Information Age projects the United States into people's lives as never before and sharpens the focus on blemishes and positive attributes alike.

What we are trying to do in the Levant is infinitely more difficult than what Iran is trying to do, but that does not account for all of our difficulties. Our inability to execute policy effectively, and some quixotic efforts to impose our own notion of moral clarity on the region, have taken their toll.

The core of countering Iranian malfeasance needs to be better execution of policy by the United States. Rather than advertise our desire to remake the region in our image, pursue maximalist goals or loudly trumpet our sympathy toward Islam, we need

to pursue our interests with quiet effectiveness. It is hard to imagine how this might be done without more direct U.S. government engagement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking and greater success in Iraq. I am somewhat more encouraged by the trendlines in the latter than the former, and even minimal progress on both fronts is both tenuous and easily reversible, but we need to be much more successful than we've been. To do that, we have to set more modest goals and be more effective achieving them. Put another way, we need to restore our position as a country that is not only predictable, but also reliable. When we say we will do things, we must deliver. We have lost that reputation, and it colors everything else we do in the Middle East and beyond.

Some might call this prescription European-style defeatism, but I view it as healthy American pragmatism. We have badly misjudged our influence over local events in the Middle East, and our influence has diminished as a consequence. We should neither abandon our ideals nor our friends, but we need to recognize that we serve neither when we over-promise and under-deliver. Some of our allies may be alarmed by a more modest American approach to the region and fear that rather than a recalibration it represents the beginning of an abandonment. Our response to their fears principally should be one of deeds rather than words.

There is a school of thought that suggests that much of our problem in the Middle East is one of messaging. If we can talk about ourselves in the right way and inspire the right people, this thinking goes, we can regain our previous position of influence. While it is vitally important that we better understand regional audiences, we cannot delude ourselves. Our problem in the Middle East is what we have done, what we have said we will do and not done, and what we have not committed to do. We have ceded ground to Iran – by seeking to defend unsustainable positions and letting spoilers derail peaceful progress – and thus played right into the hands of those who seek to cripple our policies.

None of this is to underestimate the fact that the United States is playing a difficult game in the Levant. We are seeking to build more effective governments and more robust societies, in part out of an expectation that they will emerge with some affection for the United States. I agree that that should remain an objective of U.S. policy.

Iran is playing a somewhat simpler game, seeking to undermine a status quo that few find desirable. Iran is not positioned to win, and I do not believe that it can win. Yet, Iran is certainly positioned to gain, especially as it seeks to slip from the cordon that the United States is seeking to place around the Islamic Republic. Iran is beset by internal problems, and it is hardly a model that many in the Middle East would seek to emulate. Still, its proxies will not soon go away, nor will our allies swiftly resolve their own internal challenges. We will be facing this challenge for some time to come, but with skill and patience, we can turn the tide.