

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

***“AXIS OF ABUSE:
U.S. HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY TOWARD IRAN
AND SYRIA, PART II”***

A Statement by

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Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Ackerman, members of the Committee. Syria and Iran have a big problem. On the one hand, they have crafted strategies that cast themselves as the voice of the common man in the Middle East, standing up against Western oppression and protecting Palestinians. On the other, they are emerging as the oppressors of their own people, cynical authoritarian holdouts in a world increasingly inspired by popular protest against oppressors.

Syrian and Iranian strategy is not casual in this regard. Syria's entire foreign policy is premised on its being the beating heart of Arab nationalism, a front line state against Israel that refuses to accept the status quo, and the supporter of Hezbollah, which it touts as the only military force able to defeat Israel in battle. Drawing from a history of Ba'athism, the Syrian government's defiant Arabism is part of its defining myth, its touchstone and its *raison d'être*. Arabism is at the heart of the Syrian regime's legitimacy. And yet, the Syrian government is killing Arabs.

For Iran, opposition to the United States and Israel are two of the only remaining pillars of the 1979 Islamic revolution (the *chador* being another). Iran has strategically used its position on Israel, in particular, to make it a mainstream Middle Eastern state rather than a marginal, Shia, Persian one. President Ahmedinejad's and Ayatollah Khamenei's statements on Israel are often calculated to catch the attention of Arab audiences at least as much as Iranian ones. They are an appeal to the street, and an implicit criticism of the accommodation of other regional governments toward Israel and the United States. The Iranian goal has been to portray these governments as somehow illegitimate, with Iran standing up for the sentiments of the man in the street.

The repression currently underway in Syria and Iran makes plain that reality is much different. Tens of thousands of peaceful Syrian demonstrators regularly take to the streets, only to be attacked by the security forces. Thousands have died, yet the government has shown little sign of relenting. Iran's burst of protest peaked two years ago, with a similar result—blood in the streets and no change in the halls of power. Conditions in Syria have become so dire that the Iranian government has sought to distance itself from them, appealing to President Assad to use a restraint that eluded Iran's own leadership during a wave of public protest two years ago.

What is becoming abundantly clear is that these regimes are merely about power, not the causes they espouse or the slogans they trumpet. Full of corruption, sweetheart deals and a disdain for the views of their own populations, these governments' cynical approach to governing is becoming increasingly clear to their own populations as well as to the regional audiences whose support they covet.

Their treatment of their own citizens demonstrates their insularity from popular demands; the callousness with which they spill the blood of their own people illustrates their disdain for the calls of the street they purport to represent.

Under their feet, the Middle East is changing. The caricatures they drew of other regional leaders are dissolving as those leaders either lead efforts toward reform or are swept away by a tide of protest. Meanwhile, the leaderships of Syria and Iran themselves have come to typify a rotten status quo that manipulates public emotions but does not serve them.

Shifting circumstances in the Middle East beg the question of what the United States should do about it. There is an understandable instinct to revel in their difficulties, to capitalize on their weaknesses and to exploit their contradictions. Few in these populations would mourn the fall of their governments, and the United States should do nothing to prop them up.

At the same time, the greatest favor the United States could do for these regimes is to somehow make their problems into a confrontation with the United States, rather than ones that arise out of the internal contradictions of these countries' own governance. An ability to concentrate attention on the United States would be a lifeline to these governments, shifting the focus from their own repression and allowing them to sound nationalist themes and boost their popular support. An overt U.S. embrace of opposition groups would surely lead to accusations that these groups are agents of the United States, or that their success somehow serves Israel's interests, thereby reducing their influence and credibility.

I believe the administration was justified in not rushing to call for Bashar al-Asad's resignation, not because such a resignation was not desirable, but because it was important that the call not be a distraction from the fundamental processes underway in Syria. Similarly, I have been impressed by the statements of Ambassador Robert Ford, which have been admirably firm but also in concert with other diplomatic missions in Damascus.

Iran is a harder case, in part because we have no official presence in Iran, in part because the United States remains such a politicized factor in Iranian politics, and in part because the Iranian government's list of objectionable behaviors—from human rights abuses to nuclear proliferation to promotion of regional instability—is so long. The Obama Administration's ability to marshal an international consensus on Iran is an important achievement. Iranians should have no doubt where the United States stands on these issues, but we should avoid turning this into a battle of wills between two equal rivals. Iran is neither our equal nor our rival.

To be clear, the United States should not remain passive or mute in the face of sustained repression. Our history and our values call for us to do more. Yet, no government looks anxiously at finely honed U.S. statements when its very survival is at risk, nor do protestors look to Washington for a sign when deciding to risk their

lives on the street. Ultimately, it is not about us, it is about them, and we do a disservice to them when we act as if it is all about us.

Instead, we need to do what we do in the company of other governments, especially from the Middle East, which are distressed by events in Syria and Iran and have sounded the alarm. The key strategic asset that these governments have tried to nurture is their legitimacy. Regional voices have far more credibility with the targeted populations than governments halfway around the world. This is not abdicating leadership nor “leading from behind.” Rather, it is a quiet and confident leadership that arises from the understanding that these governments’ repression has stripped them of their legitimacy, and that in today’s world, it is increasingly hard to maintain control merely through repression.

The governments of Syria and Iran clearly fear becoming more isolated, and they are less confident in the mutual support that has given each succor in recent decades. Further, rather than being able to portray themselves with popular opposition to Israel, they are increasingly seen as being on the wrong side of repression. Should one of the governments falter, it would send shock waves through the other, not only because the remaining country would feel isolated, but also because it would feel exposed to the same forces that doomed its ally.

None of this is to say that anti-Americanism or anti-Israel sentiment in the Middle East is about to go away. What we have seen in Egypt and elsewhere is an important indicator that many of these trends will be with us for some time. But it does signal trouble for the particularly murderous and vociferous forms of anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment that these governments have tried to nurture through proxies in the Levant and elsewhere.

I would be the last to forecast the date and manner of a change in government in Syria and Iran. The government of Egypt, which was a more robust government than that of either Syria or Iran, fell in 18 days, but dislodging Muammar Gadhafi took 6 months and considerable NATO airpower.

Even so, these systems are increasingly frayed. Regional trends are clearly moving against them, and the demands of their own populations are rising. The contradictions of their rule are apparent, and protestations in favor of the oppressed ring increasingly hollow as it becomes apparent that they oppress their own people.

A dictum of politics is, “If your opponent is shooting himself, don’t stop him.” We would do ourselves a disservice if we threw all the instruments of our national power into hastening the demise of these regimes. Such an effort would be more likely to have an opposite effect. Because we have been so appalled by the actions of these regimes over the last several decades, we have only a few ties with them, and there is little else of value to them that we can jeopardize on our own.

Our instinct is surely to trumpet our disapproval, our interests require a different strategy. The quiet and difficult work of building broad coalitions is likely to yield much better results than noisy condemnations that can be easily tuned out. There is little we can achieve immediately, but much we must accomplish in the longer term.