

U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East

Prepared statement by

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today about U.S. strategy and policy in the greater Middle East. I shared in advance with the Committee several recent articles that address some of these issues in some detail and respectfully request that they be submitted for the record. In my opening statement I would simply like to make three broad points about the region.

First, *the Middle East today is going through a period of powerful, tectonic change* that the United States did not create and cannot fully control. In the wake of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, state institutions have crumbled in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere, and those institutions will not be put back together again. In addition, sectarian tensions across the region are now deeper than they have been for decades. Just last month, these tensions were enflamed by Saudi Arabia’s execution of a prominent Shi’a cleric and Iran’s violent response. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a geopolitical conflict on top of a sectarian conflict, and as long as it persists, the biggest conflicts in the region—In Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—will be enormously difficult to resolve. We should also remember that the Sunni population across the Middle East is itself deeply divided. Sunni terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS are aligned against Sunni regimes, and the Sunni regimes themselves are deeply divided between those who embrace political Islam such as Turkey and Qatar, and those threatened by it, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt under President al-Sisi. Thus even though most Sunni majority states stand together in sectarian conflicts such as Iraq, Syria,

and Yemen, they are at loggerheads in Sunni-majority countries such as Libya and Egypt.

I mention all these points at the start not to suggest that the region is so complex and unstable that there is nothing we can do, but to underscore the enormity of the challenge we face and the need for humility as we consider our policy options. We should be extraordinarily careful about assuming there are any quick fixes to the region's problems, and very cognizant of the potential for unintended consequences of any actions that we do take.

My second main point is that in this context of regional turmoil, *the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal last week buys valuable time and presents a real opportunity if that time is used wisely.*

When the United States initiated the secret nuclear talks with Iran in early 2013, Iran was essentially on the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability. Now, with the mothballing of two-thirds of its centrifuges, the shipping out of 97 percent of its low-enriched uranium stockpile, the wholesale redesign of its heavy-water reactor (that could have produced enough weapon-grade plutonium for one to two bombs per year), and the setting-up of an unprecedented inspections regime, we are no longer faced with the terrible choice between using military force to set back the program for a couple of years or effectively acquiescing to its further development.

This is certainly not to say that the nuclear deal somehow “solves” the Iran problem, and even proponents should admit that in some ways it makes that problem worse. An Iran that gains access to more than \$50 billion of its frozen assets abroad and starts to increase oil sales will be an Iran that can devote more resources to nefarious activities in the region. But the right response to this reality is not to scrap the nuclear deal—which would only isolate the United States, impede our ability to apply effective sanctions, and leave us with no good options for stopping the Iranian nuclear program (much like the situation with North Korea)—but instead to rigorously enforce that deal, use all the tools at our disposal to confront and contain Iran in the region, and use the valuable time bought by the nuclear deal to cautiously explore whether a better relationship with Iran is possible over the longer term.

My third and final point concerns the war in Syria. And the bottom line is that we have an enormous national interest in prioritizing a de-escalation of the conflict. The conflict in Syria is killing or maiming hundreds of thousands of innocents, forcing millions of Syrians to flee their homes, destabilizing neighboring states, radicalizing an entire generation of young Muslims, provoking a far-right backlash in Europe, and fostering religious intolerance in the United States and elsewhere. Given these enormous costs, almost any peace in Syria would be better than the current war.

To reach this objective, I believe it is necessary to de-couple our attempts to reach a comprehensive political settlement in Syria—one that includes Assad's departure—from our objective of negotiating a nation-wide ceasefire. While we would all like to see the immediate departure of Assad and his cronies, who should face justice for their atrocities, and the installation of an inclusive, moderate regime, there is almost no prospect for near-term agreement on new detailed institutional arrangements in Syria, let alone new leadership. The cancellation of the planned Syria talks later this week was thus disappointing, but not surprising.

I know many, including some members of this committee, argue that we can produce that political transition in Syria by providing more military support to the opposition, or even by intervening militarily ourselves. However, given the strong commitments by Russia and Iran to support the regime, which also maintains significant support among Syria's minorities and even many majority Sunnis, I fear such an escalation would not lead to the regime's capitulation but rather a new counter-escalation, which, after all, has been the pattern for the past nearly five years.

As an alternative, I have put forward a plan along with two colleagues from the RAND Corporation, Jim Dobbins and Jeff Martini, to seek a negotiated, nation-wide ceasefire-in-place that would include deferring the ultimate disposition of political power in Syria, including the question of Assad's fate, and the creation of regional safe zones based roughly on current areas of control within the country, the resumption of humanitarian deliveries, prisoner releases, and a collective focus on destroying ISIS. I'll be the first to admit that even this outcome would be enormously difficult to negotiate and not without downsides and risks. But I believe it is far more realistic than the current objective of a comprehensive political agreement, far better than the status quo, and more practical than any of the available alternatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas with you and I look forward to the discussion.