



Center for a
New American
Security

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Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Coons, Members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you today about this important and difficult issue. The purpose of my testimony today will be to place some of the policies the United States pursues in the Middle East in a broader context by examining how U.S. interests sometimes lead to difficult and vexing choices in the region. This is particularly true at a time when the Middle East is racked with unprecedented change, instability, and violence. In this environment, American policymakers are unfortunately often faced with choosing from a series of bad options that leave no one satisfied. When trying to make such decisions we must resist doing what might feel good and satisfy our need for a clean and easy answer, but that might come with broader dangerous and unintended consequences. The U.S. government's decisionmaking must be driven by the best judgment of policymakers and national leaders of what is most likely to protect the American people and the interests of the United States. This is not easy and certainly American leaders do not always get things right, but that is the nature of trying to make decisions in a chaotic and difficult environment with imperfect information.

In my testimony, I will first review American interests in the Middle East and the challenges facing our leaders. I will then examine a number of specific cases, including U.S. support for the Palestinian Authority, the recently agreed upon Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, and some of our complicated relationships with key regional players in which we often balance difficult and conflicting interests.

U.S. Interests in the Middle East

Any discussion of U.S. strategy in the Middle East must begin with an assessment of our interests in the region. These numerous interests often come into direct conflict with one another, creating challenges for American policymakers who need to carefully weigh tradeoffs.

First, we have an interest in countering terrorism. Most importantly, this means preventing a mass casualty attack on the U.S. homeland similar in scale to the 9/11 attacks. This type of attack requires significant central planning and most likely can only be executed by a well-funded organization, which is why we put so much effort into countering al Qaeda or the self proclaimed "Islamic State" or Daesh. However, it also means preventing smaller scale attacks on the homeland by so-called "lone wolves" who have been inspired by the online presence of these organizations.

Bold.

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A second significant interest is preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. The Middle East is already the world's most unstable and violent region, and the last thing it needs is the introduction of a nuclear arms race. If Iran were to obtain a nuclear weapon, the country would pursue a more aggressive strategy in the region in terms of its support for its proxies and surrogates such as Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia Militias, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Moreover, it could lead to increased proliferation in the region in which other states, such as Saudi Arabia, would consider pursuing nuclear weapons. The region would also see significant instability as a result of the unstable nuclear competition that would arise between Iran and Israel.

A third interest in the region is the security of America's allies – most importantly Israel. Despite recent disagreement between Israel and the United States on the Iran nuclear deal, we continue to share many common interests with Israel including regional stability and countering terrorism. Israel is a reliable partner who brings significant military and intelligence capabilities to the table in helping pursue our common objectives. And of course, there is also a long and deep relationship between Israel and the United States based on a set of common values and ideals.

A fourth U.S. interest in the region is preserving some semblance of regional stability. This has not been easy with the breakout of civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. But these crises, especially in Syria, have created massive refugee displacement that is putting tremendous pressure on the governments of Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. The migration crisis has also put new pressures on the transatlantic partnership, as everyday thousands of Middle Eastern refugees fleeing war reach European shores, sparking an intensive debate and European disunity about how to respond. It is also important to note that regional stability does not translate into simply supporting authoritarian regimes that keep the peace by suppressing their people, but instead requires pushing for gradual reform and sustainable forms of government that are responsive to their people.

Finally, securing the flow of energy resources out of the Middle East remains an important American interest. Though the United States is not a major consumer of Middle Eastern oil, approximately 30 percent of the world's global oil supply comes from this region.¹ Since the world's oil markets are driven by one global price, major disruptions of Middle Eastern oil supplies would have profound global economic effects, including on the American economy.

Tough Choices in U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

The considerations presented above have driven American foreign policymaking in the Middle East for a generation, and despite the growing challenges and uncertainties in the region, they should remain the basis on which American policy be judged. These interests do not necessarily always translate into easy and clear cut policy decisions. I will now outline how they effect some of the issues pertaining to U.S. approaches on difficult and controversial issues, including U.S. support for the Palestinian Authority, its nuclear negotiations with Iran, and its relations with some Middle Eastern states that often take steps that conflict with U.S. interests.

¹ BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2015: The Middle East Energy Market in 2014”
<http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/energy-economics/statistical-review-2015/bp-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2015-middle-east-insights1.pdf>

Supporting the Palestinian Authority

The United States has provided more than \$4 billion in foreign assistance to the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority (PA) since 2008.² The PA is far from our most reliable or desirable partner. But continuing to support the PA, even as we push for reform, improved governance, and leadership is a far better option than abandoning it or putting pressure on it that may lead to its financial collapse. At the end of the day, such an approach is highly dissatisfying and frustrating, but is the best option for pursuing U.S. interests to support our Israeli ally, maintain regional stability, and prevent further terrorist attacks.

The Palestinian Authority is in a delicate financial situation and a major economic shock could lead to its complete collapse. As we have learned from our experiences in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, it is incredibly dangerous to destabilize a sitting government unless you have some plan for what comes next. If the international community were to cut off aid to the Palestinians or if the United States aggressively pursued financial settlements for previous support for terrorism that occurred under a different leadership and thus bankrupted the Palestinian Authority, the end result would likely be a Hamas-run government in the West Bank that would much more directly threaten Israel and the thousands of American citizens who live in and visit Israel every year.

The current Palestinian government is far superior to this alternative. Despite incredible pressure from within his society, President Abbas has stood by his commitment to nonviolence – a strong contrast with his predecessor Yasser Arafat. Moreover, in the last 10 years, we have also seen the development of the highly effective Palestinian Security Forces, which have played a major role in keeping the peace in the West Bank. Indeed, Israeli security officials continue to emphasize that security cooperation remains strong and has played an important role in containing the recent violence, which has been primarily centered in Jerusalem – an area where the Palestinian Security Forces do not operate.³

This does not mean that we should not hold the Palestinian Authority accountable or not use American leverage to change its behavior. President Abbas is a weak and indecisive leader, who on a number of occasions has been too politically cautious and failed to take the risks necessary to lead his people to peace. During the current round of violence, he made a number of provocative public statements that threw more fuel on the fire, and he has also failed to control some of the more provocative elements within his government. His attempt to use international institutions such as the International Criminal Court to pressure Israel is unhelpful and unlikely to lead to an improvement of the situation on the ground for Israelis or Palestinians. But despite these shortcomings, unless the United States has a clear plan for how it would handle the aftermath and what a credible alternative for Abbas looks like, it should be very reticent of supporting steps that could lead to the fall of a Palestinian leader who remains committed to non-violence. Such a step could create a major new threat to our Israeli partners and to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

² Jim Zanotti, “U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians,” (Congressional Research Service), July 3, 2014. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22967.pdf>

³ “Netanyahu Moves to Lower Tensions Over Jerusalem Holy Site,” *Thompson Reuters Foundation*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.trust.org/item/20151008082554-xg720>

Negotiating a Nuclear Agreement with Iran

The Nuclear agreement with Iran represents another example where the United States was forced to choose among a difficult set of unappealing options. Negotiating with a regime that strongly opposes U.S. interests and has a history of supporting Bashar al Assad, Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas is unappealing. However, the first imperative was ensuring that Iran does not obtain nuclear weapons and threaten America's broader global interests.

In my analysis, the agreement should prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. The limitations on Iran's uranium enrichment capacity and the plutonium pathway will put it at least a year away from a bomb using its known facilities. This will create a situation in which Iran will be deterred from ever pursuing a bomb, because it knows that if started to dash it would be caught quickly and attacked. This fear of being caught is what deterred Iran for the past 20 years from pursuing the bomb, even as it got closer and closer.

The agreement should successfully deter Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon using secret facilities. The inspections regime gives the IAEA visibility into every element of Iran's supply chain, making it exceedingly difficult for Iran to establish an entirely new secret pathway. Even with less stringent inspections in the past, we caught Iran at both Natanz and Fordow years before those facilities became operational.

The agreement also puts in place the right incentives for Iran to comply. It receives no sanctions relief until "Implementation Day" by which point it will have already implemented most of the key nuclear concessions. And the snapback mechanism does give the United States an option to re-trigger sanctions without the possibility of a Russian veto.

The biggest weakness of the agreement is that the restrictions, particularly on uranium enrichment, start to be lifted in years 10 and 15. I would have preferred for this time to be longer. But because the covert sneak-out is the most likely pathway to a bomb, the most important elements of the agreement are inspections and intrusive monitoring. Those stay in place forever.

Moreover, no other option buys 13 to 15 years with a breakout time that is longer than today – not even military action. I am quite confident of this fact, having spent a number of years working this issue at the Pentagon. Fifteen years is a long time in the Middle East, and even after 15 years the other options available today will still exist.

The biggest downside is that Iran will receive significant sanctions relief after it implements the key provisions of the agreement. Certainly some of these funds will go toward terrorism, but most will go toward repairing its economy. After all, it was the threat of economic and regime collapse from these devastating sanctions that brought Iran's leadership to the table. It would be irrational for them to now spend all of that money not addressing these core problems but instead funding adventures abroad.

The extra funds going to Iranian terrorism can be countered through a more aggressive policy of training partner special operations forces, intelligence sharing, joint covert action, and interdiction

policies. The United States should do all of that and push back more forcefully on Iran's support for terrorism than the Obama administration has done. It would be much more difficult to counter an Iran capable of providing a nuclear umbrella to its terrorist proxies, which is why we need to focus on the nuclear question first.

Ultimately, the success or failure of the nuclear agreement will depend on the policies we now pursue, both in implementing the deal and in approaching the Middle East. Congress should play an active oversight role and try to use Congressional legislation to improve implementation. It can pursue legislation that creates additional snapback sanction options for intermediate violations. It can establish a committee to ensure long-term implementation and oversight. It can provide more funding to the IAEA to make sure it has the inspectors and resources it needs. Whether one opposed the agreement or supported it, now that it is being implemented there should be a bipartisan effort to do so as vigorously as possible to ensure Iran is prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Managing Other Difficult Partner Relationships in the Middle East

Another challenge is how to manage relations with regional partners such as Qatar and Turkey. On the one hand, these countries are useful partners for the United States in the Middle East. On the other, they all have taken problematic steps that go against U.S. interests and fuel extremism.

The Qataris and the Turks have played an important role in conducting military strikes against ISIS with U.S. operations being based out of U.S. CENTCOM's permanent theater forward operating base, which is hosted at Al-Udeid air base in Qatar, and from the Incirlik air base in Turkey. Qatar has long hosted U.S.-led training camps for moderate Syrian rebels.⁴ Further, Turkey is a site of strategic depth for moderate rebel forces; Turkish military and intelligence assets, working with the United States and other regional partners, provide an important coordinating function for the lines of communication and supply that sustain many moderate opposition groups.⁵ U.S. coordination with Turkey is essential in the current counter-ISIS campaign in northern Syria and to stabilize that region of the country once ISIS has been removed.

The Turks are also a NATO ally, have contributed to operations in Afghanistan, and have taken in roughly 2 million Syrian refugees since the conflict started, significantly straining state services. Notable examples of Turkey's significant contributions to NATO are in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and in the alliance's global maritime operations. The Turkish military has frequently taken a leadership role in ISAF, and Turkey is one of three NATO allies that recently agreed to sustain its military deployment in Afghanistan next year, an important contribution to the future stability and security of Afghanistan.⁶ Meanwhile, the Qataris are also working quietly with Israeli acquiescence to

⁴ Nancy A. Youssef, "Syrian Rebels Describe U.S.-Backed Training in Qatar," McClatchy and PBS Frontline, May 26, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/syria-arming-the-rebels/syrian-rebels-describe-u-s-backed-training-in-qatar/>.

⁵ Tom Perry and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian Rebels Say They Receive More Weapons for Aleppo Battle," Reuters, October 19, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/19/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0SD16O20151019>.

⁶ Robin Emmott, "NATO Nations to Keep Presence in Afghanistan, Officials Say," Reuters, October 19, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/19/us-afghanistan-nato-exclusive-idUSKCN0SD1SS20151019>.

get aid into Gaza and attempt to improve the economic and humanitarian situation, and thus preventing a new breakout in hostilities between Israel and Hamas.⁷

At the same time, both Qatar and Turkey have a highly problematic relationship with Hamas. Moreover, in their efforts to topple Bashar al Assad they have been all too willing to provide arms and funds to extremist groups such as the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra and its parallel organization Ahrar al-Sham. Such support weakens the position of moderate rebel groups and makes it more difficult to reach a negotiated conclusion to the civil war.⁸ This once again creates a challenge for the United States as we try to balance our relationships with countries that simultaneously support our key interests even as they work against others. The answer is not to view the world in black and white, but instead to hold these countries accountable and apply American pressure and leverage to try and change their behavior when we disagree, even as we work with them on areas of common interest.

Conclusion

The Middle East remains the world's most turbulent region and one in which American interests are deeply engaged. Trying to protect U.S. interests and the security of the American people in this difficult environment is no easy task and one that often requires dissatisfying choices. The best that policymakers can do is pursue approaches and strategies that: (1) limit the threat of terrorism; (2) prevent the spread of nuclear weapons; (3) protect our regional allies; (4) maintain regional stability; and (5) ensure access to energy resources. These guideposts do not always lead to easy answers or necessarily translate into the right results. But they should remain the basis of our policy in the Middle East.

⁷ Emily Harris, "Why Israel Lets Qatar Give Millions to HAMAS," NPR, June 18, 2015,

<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/18/414693807/why-israel-lets-qatar-give-millions-to-hamas>.

⁸ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "U.S. Allies in Middle East Ramping Up Support for Rebel Forces in Syria," The Washington Post, April 29, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-allies-in-middle-east-ramping-up-support-for-rebel-forces-in-syria/2015/04/29/07b1d82c-edc8-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html.